



Reimagining Africa-Diaspora Religious Connections: Global-Local Intersections of Immersive-Reflexive Praxis

R. Drew Smith*

*Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, USA.

Abstract

This article explores prospects for the formation of black community frameworks and consciousness that draw deeply and organically from black struggles and strivings and from principles and practices authentic to their experiences and hopes. While this emphasizes the importance of local contextualization, forming black community and consciousness across trans-local geographies requires deep engagement across the diversities and differences that distance black communities from one another. Cross-cultural immersive and reflexive methodologies are proving beneficial in this regard, and this article examines examples of such approaches within faith-related, academically centered formation. The immersive and reflexive approaches discussed here draw inspiration in part from educational theorists, including Paulo Freire and bell hooks, who emphasize the “conscientization” of both teacher and student as the goal of the learning process, and pedagogies that proceed from points of deep immersion and engagement with the context being served and that accord value and agency to the knowledge resident within those contexts. The significance of Africa to America’s racialized historical constructions (and to African American and Pan-Africanist identities) will be shown as informing a distinctive emphasis among segments of African Americans on connecting to Africa, including through immersive-reflexive models of cross-cultural engagement.

Keywords: Black Religion, Community Immersion, Reflexive Dialogue, Applied Scholarship, Indigenous Knowledge, Africa, Pedagogies.

INTRODUCTION

Black life within Africa and the Diaspora has been forged within a crucible of racial and colonial oppression, distorting the socially constructed institutional landscapes African-descended people have inhabited along the way. Even where historic racial oppression and colonialism have given way to greater expressions and embodiments of black agency and control, black institutional life has struggled to break free of its colonial moorings. One of the tragic ironies is that even institutional sectors founded upon free-thinking pursuits and socially critical purposes have not escaped colonial captivities—with this being especially disappointing within religious and higher education sectors ostensibly championing the existential priorities and principles aspired to within the context. Postcolonial scholars have provided important analytical frameworks for holding these sectors to account, ranging from Carter G Woodson’s 20th-century black miseducation thesis to Mahmood Mamdani’s 21st-century dissections of African neo-colonialism and to liberationist theologies and postcolonial missiologies calling for repositioning’s of faith sector life (Cone, 1984; Mamdani, 2018; Woodson, 1933).

Combined, these sectoral critiques converge around the need for formations of black community and consciousness that draw deeply and organically from black struggles and strivings and from principles and practices authentic to their experiences and hopes. While this emphasizes the importance of local contextualization, forming black community and consciousness across trans-local geographies requires deep engagement across the diversities and difference that distance black communities from one another. As contemporary educational theorists such as Marcus Grant and Susan Thompson point out, there has been a failure within the “academic research industry” to “generate the multiple knowledge required to sustain an ongoing evolution of well-being.” What is

needed, they contend, is knowledge production that more fully embraces “the wide array of societal knowledge systems” including “locally embedded information and under-standings” that “gives voice to” and is responsive to local experiences and “locally appropriate agenda[s]” (Grant & Thompson, 2018, pp. 92–93).

Cross-cultural immersive and reflexive methodologies are proving beneficial in this regard, and this article examines examples of such approaches within faith-related, academically centered formation. The immersive and reflexive approaches discussed here draw inspiration in part from educational theorists, including Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and others who emphasize the “conscientization” of both teacher and student as the goal of the learning process and pedagogies that proceed from points of deep immersion and engagement with the context being served and that accord value and agency to the knowledge resident within those contexts (Freire, 2000; Grant & Thompson 2018; hooks, 1994; Lyle & Caissie, 2021).

Freire’s (2000) teachings on critical pedagogies in examining intersectional capacities of knowledge production and community formation within and between educational venues and their broader constituencies are highly instructive. Central to Freire’s analysis is the matter of reflexivity, a simultaneously two-directional learning process:

*Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators (Freire, 2000, p. 51).

Freire emphasizes that leaders “must act dialogically with the people” in order for both to “come to know the why and the how of their adhesion to reality” (Freire, 2000, pp. 121, 174). Similarly, educational theorists Elyn Lyle and Chantelle Caissie argue for knowledge production and promotion through “fluid and reflexive” dialogic approaches that facilitate a “co-construction of meaning.” They stress a growing recognition of “the impermanence of knowledge” that has chipped away at presumptions of teacher figures and thought leaders as primary experts, emphasizing people’s “authority” instead within their own lives as “agents of [their] negotiated understandings” (Lyle & Caissie, 2021).

Attention to alternative mappings of knowledge production and promotion is crucial to establishing an analytical and praxiological basis for resisting colonized African and diasporic knowledge worlds that have shaped life within and between African-descended contexts (see Mbembe, 2001). The analytical aim would be the centering of perspectives and experiences organic to black life and peoples, while the praxiological aim is for reflexive and immersive practices that build connections across diverse black vantage points and locations (Adi, 2018).

This article focuses on African American bridge-building overtures toward Africa, tracking key shifts and progressions, starting from 19th-century Christian nationalistic missions into Africa up through the more Pan-African solidarities of latter-20th and early-21st century cross-cultural engagement. These interactions across black distance and diversities are examined on the basis of their reflexive intentionalities. The impacts of greater reflexivity are mostly inferred but point to the importance of more systematic applications and analysis.

Imperial Religious Reach and the Evolution toward Immersive Cross-Culturalism

America’s exceptionalist view of itself as the primary catalyst and guardian of global rights and freedom has always suffered from glaring contradictions, both related to its treatment of other nations and its treatment of oppressed populations within its own borders (Lipset, 1997). European colonial powers, while perhaps less boisterous about their presumed promotions of rights and freedoms, were also given to moral self-assuredness. These Global North international expansions and conquests were facilitated through ideologies but also through the advance forces of its military and its missionaries—with the latter contributing systematically to the certitudes and superiority that justified Global North exploitative encounters with Global South peoples (Hobsbawm, 1989; Rodney, 1972).

Although the social impact of American missionaries was complex, consisting of both tragic and progressive features, missionary organizations such as the American Board of Commissioners went into mission contexts such as the South Pacific islands with a stated intention of “raising up the whole people to an elevated state of Christian civilization” and turning them “from their barbarous courses and habits” (American Board of Commissioners, 1918, pp. x-x1). The mass conversions and decimations of native cultures that occurred as a result were given a fairly positive spin by classical missiologists such as Kenneth Latourette, whose assessment of the impact of South Pacific mission activities was that “Christianity nourished a type of character for which there can be only admiration” (Latourette, 1943, p. 262).

African Americans were also involved in overseas missionary activities, primarily in Africa, beginning with the settlement of freed American slaves in Sierra Leone in 1792 and settlements of freed American slaves in Liberia during the early 1800s (Sanneh, 1999). These African American settlers were animated by a commitment to black empowerment, in which they viewed their deliverance from American enslavement and their relocation to West Africa as potentially resulting in the empowerment of settlers and African hosts alike. While motivated by strong black solidarities and religious concerns, there were also dimensions that centered far more in African American interests and inclinations than on African ones. For example, as black historian St. Clair Drake points out, some of these African American settlers bore the imprint of the “providential design” thinking of their white evangelical mentors. Their perspective was that: “God ... had allowed Africans to be carried off into slavery so that they could be Christianized and civilized and return to uplift their kinsmen in Africa” (, 1970, p. 41).

Nonetheless, the early African American missionary presence paved the way for some of the initial American and Caribbean proponents of an unapologetic African nationalist independency. Persons such as Alexander Crummell (a black Episcopal priest in the U.S.), and Edward Wilmot Blyden (a scholar from the West Indies who arrived in Liberia in 1851 after a period in the US) celebrated the idea of black reconnection with the land of their ancestors— viewing Africa as key to a global black future (Sanneh, 1999). Blyden and Crummell’s nascent Black Nationalism in West Africa, and the similar Black Nationalist, anti-colonial emphases of AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and other AME ministers in South Africa during the late-19th and early-20th centuries set the stage for the 20th-century Black Nationalist, anti-colonial fervor that would culminate in African independence by the mid-1900s. Although many of these early African American missionaries often operated in ways reflecting Euro-American cultural sensibilities, some such as Blyden, Crummell, and Turner were also among the early champions of African independence that cut away at the racial and political chauvinism in America’s relationship with Africa (Sanneh, 1999).

By the 1950s through the 1970s, a second wave of American church involvement in Africa would unfold, vocally and visibly aligned with nation-building and social development priorities within Africa. Through various denominational mission boards located in the U.S. and their mission initiatives within African nations, mission activities by American mainline churches concerned themselves with contributing to such things as the educational and health care infrastructure of African nations and solidifying American church support among African populations and among the newly independent African governments (see Campbell, 1998; Duignan & Gann, 1987).

It was during the second wave of American church outreach to Africa that the foundations were laid for a promising new trans-African interaction and community formation. As Global South nations began ridding themselves of colonial rule by the mid-1900s, new approaches to international community building seemed needful and possible. Some Americans were beginning to sense possibilities for building bridges across longstanding barriers through non-ideological, service-based global interactions. A leading visionary in this regard was an African American Presbyterian clergyman, James H. Robinson (Plimpton, 1962).

Robinson was the pastor of Church of the Master in Harlem, a congregation that grew from a handful of members to over 3,000 during his tenure. He was an ambassador globally (Europe, Asia,

the Middle East) and domestically for the Presbyterian denomination on race matters. As Robinson traveled the US during the mid-1950s, his speeches would often focus on Africa, a continent he had toured twice by 1954. His speeches in the US, especially on college campuses, centered on an idea he began formulating while touring Africa: short-term voluntary service projects in Africa. College students expressed interest, and in 1958 Operation Crossroads Africa (OCA) was officially initiated with “fifty-nine Americans and one Canadian [traveling] to French Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone” (Plimpton, 1962, p. 18). A few years later, President John F. Kennedy launched the US Peace Corps, which he acknowledged was modeled after OCA, and the two organizations sent thousands of US volunteers abroad over the next five decades.

OCA never conveyed an explicit religiosity; although it is likely Robinson viewed OCA, up through at least the early 1960s, as a special service-oriented extension of his ecclesiastical work. Robinson’s 1962 book, *Africa at the Crossroads*, is an historical summary and assessment of American Christian missions in Africa that outlines a series of reforms based upon his own interactions with Africa through OCA and otherwise. He explains how Western Christian missions reached a turning point as a result of Africa’s new independence and suggests the urgent need for American churches to rid themselves of “racial antagonism, snobbery, and superiority” (Robinson, 1962, p. 67). He also urged American churches to move beyond denominationalism and divisiveness to greater cooperation between denominations and partnership with African religious and social leaders who ultimately must be allowed to lead for themselves. Moreover, Robinson clearly asserted that the harmful historical associations between Christianity, racism, and colonialism placed churches at a severe disadvantage in competing with the expanding influence of nationalist, democratic-liberalist, and communist politics—especially among the growing numbers of secular youth. Although Robinson never announced any official break with religion-centered missionary paradigms, it is instructive that he resigned from his pastorate at the Church of the Master in 1961 to devote himself full-time to the non-sectarian global service work of OCA. Symbolically and practically, this may have signaled Robinson’s transition toward a greater emphasis on the kind of “fraternal work” represented by OCA and a shift away from the more self-serving activities of the American churches and mission agencies he critiqued in *Africa at the Crossroads* (Robinson, 1962).

Just as the shared trajectory between OCA and Peace Corps is intriguing, so too is the shared trajectory between Robinson and Samuel D. Proctor, a black Baptist clergyman recruited in 1962 by Peace Corps director Sargent Shriver (a Roman Catholic) to serve as associate director with responsibility for “launching” the Peace Corps program. Proctor outlines what that meant: “There was a Peace Corps on paper, in law, in embryo, but not yet kicking. There were 695 white middle-class teachers already in Africa ... but the grassroots [in Africa] had to be won to the idea” (Proctor, 1989, p. 128). Proctor, serving at the time as President of North Carolina A & T State University, relocated with his family to Nigeria (the heart of the Peace Corps program at that time) and directed Peace Corps operations from there for the next two years.

Proctor had previously been part of a three-person American Baptist delegation visiting foreign mission sites in Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Burma, India, and Western Europe in 1953, and he says that experience shifted his consciousness through exposure to cultural differences, cross-cultural mutualities, and American privilege (Proctor, 1989, pp. 88-89). Proctor recalls how this “microcosmic view of the family of humankind—Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Christian, Jewish; rich and poor, educated and illiterate ... was an experience of community with all of its breadth, depth, and diversity” (Proctor, 1992, p. 61). Proctor brought this consciousness, his scripturally informed social justice orientation, and his immersion in the “struggle of blacks in America” to his leadership responsibilities in a Peace Corps organization he believed could “create new openings for constructive relationships among the world’s most deprived and oppressed peoples” (Proctor, 1989, p. 129).

Like Robinson, Proctor was critical of Christian missionary efforts that “go among deprived people and preach Christ and baptize converts [but do not] equip them for changes that will bring

about relief from their long-term suffering” (Proctor, 1988, p. 101). The fact that Proctor walked away from his extensive involvements in the American religious community to spend two years in Nigeria lending his authority to a paradigm of non-sectarian community service, contributed significantly to shifting domestic and global impressions about American religion and race. Given how tragically American religion and race have combined historically in American global affairs, there is poetry in the fact that two African American clergymen, Robinson (1962) and Proctor (1988), played such pivotal roles in placing those two dynamics on such a different cross-cultural trajectory.

Academic Abstractions and Immersive-Reflexive Gradualism

For the most part, black academic institutions did not keep pace with the kind of integrative community-building processes taking place on the ground. Instead, critics have argued that there has tended to be very little difference between black and white higher education institutions with respect to their disempowering cultural and intellectual distance from black existential concerns (see Blyden, 1888; Cone, 1984; hooks, 1994; Mamdani, 2018).

One of the earliest and most eloquent critics of the education blacks were receiving in various Black Atlantic contexts was Caribbean-born educator, politician, and pan-Africanist Edward Wilmot Blyden. Writing in 1888 about the educational frameworks blacks encountered in his day, Blyden points to an “evil [that] lies in the system and method of European training to which Negroes are, everywhere in Christian lands, subjected, and which everywhere affects them unfavorably.” Building on this point Blyden (1888) remarks that blacks have been trained under influences in many respects adapted only to the Caucasian race. Nearly all the books they read, the very instruments of their culture, have been such as to force them from the groove, which is natural to them, where they would be strong and effective, without furnishing them with any avenue through which they may move naturally and free of obstruction. (p. 87)

Referring specifically to higher education in Liberia, where he lived and taught much of his life, Blyden states: “in countries like this, where [blacks] are free from the hampering surroundings of an alien race, they still read and study the books of foreigners, and form their idea of everything... according to the standard held up in those teachings” (87-88).

Another leading-edge critic of black educational trajectories was sociologist Carter G. Woodson, an early-20th-century critic of black education within the U.S. Writing in 1933, Woodson pointed out that black colleges and universities of his day tended to shy away from an intellectual focus on black life, regarding it as an inferior academic undertaking, and while holding fast instead to academic frameworks and intellectual reference points passed down from Eurocentric traditions (Woodson, 1933).

A concern with intellectual connections to black lived experience is at the heart of liberationist approaches to black education, spanning Black Atlantic contexts for more than a century. Woodson was on the cutting edge of this push toward black “elevation” by means of educational modalities rooted in “the thought and aspiration of the people thus served” (Woodson, 1933, p. 24). He made clear that black students’ “only hope to function efficiently in society is to know themselves and the generation which they are to serve,” requiring methodologies “based upon a scientific study of [black life] from within” (Woodson, 1933, pp. 139, 144). Woodson regarded early-20th-century theological education as prone in similar ways toward educational misdirection as other modalities of black higher education, noting that “educated” black ministers were “so trained as to drift away from the masses” (Woodson, 1933, p. 58). Both Blyden (1888) and Woodson advanced an incisive critique of black education, promoting in their respective ways what Woodson termed a “radical reconstruction” of black higher education institutions that centers “the point of view of the people to be served” (Woodson, 1933, p. 149).

Three-quarters of a century later and a continent away, influential postcolonial scholar Mahmood Mamdani levels a similar criticism at African universities, tracing the African university sector’s origins to “the European colonial mission” and noting (even within the postcolonial era) “how little the African university has to do with African institutions” and lived experiences

(Mamdani, 2018, p. 1).

Mamdani calls for African knowledge production and pedagogical processes that more effectively utilize African epistemological vantage points and positionings and that facilitate greater reflexivity between localizing and externalizing knowledge realms. He states that Africans must “theorise [their] own reality” while making sure this “local production of knowledge” with its alertness “to political boundaries” strikes “the right balance” with the global scholarly conversation that “takes no account of boundaries” (Mamdani, 2018, p. 7). Philosopher and theorist Achille Mbembe also stresses the importance of African intentionalities in embracing pluralities of co-existing knowledge realms that facilitate a decolonizing of epistemic and educational positionings that advance “only particular knowledge” traditions (Mbembe, 2001, p. 225).

Decolonial learning ecologies must be reflexive, but they also must be immersive. One connotation of this pertains to shortening the physical and cultural distance between learners and subjects. As Woodson (1933) stated, “You cannot see how [black life operates] by merely looking out of the windows of the schoolroom” (162). For Woodson, accuracy in observations of and about black life requires close proximity to what is being observed and systematic evidence sourcing from within that context (Woodson, 1933). Secondly, immersion connotes movement beyond observation to solidary engagement of the context whereby, says bell hooks, learners can be “active participants [who] link learning with practice” (Hooks, 1994, pp. 14–15). Social theorist Michael Walzer (1987) argues similarly, scholarly analysis and criticism must flow from a deep connectedness to the social context on which it is focusing. In Walzer’s view, this connectedness should stem from an “intimate knowledge” of “localized principles” and should evidence solidarities learners and subjects and “the success of their common enterprise” (Walzer, 1987, pp. 33–34). This is a kind of “organic intellectualism” (to draw on Antonio Gramsci’s famous characterization) that moves beyond mere “eloquence” and privileges instead an “active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, [and] ‘permanent persuader’” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 10). The disappointing alternative, according to Freire (2000), is “a word . . . deprived of its dimension of action” and that remains in the realm of “idle chatter,” “verbalism,” and “an alienated and alienating ‘blah’” (p. 68).

Theological education (including black theological education) has been seen as confined to the realms of disconnected and alienated/alienating knowledge production. Woodson’s (1933) assessment of black theological education was that it promoted a “theology” of “foreigners” and required greater attention to the study of black life “as determined by ideas [blacks brought with them] from Africa” (p. 147). Referring to Woodson’s assessment of black theological education, contemporary religion scholar Almeda Wright (2017) points to the persistence of black theological “mis-education . . . despite the efforts of many African American religious educators and womanist practical theologians to push for more cultural inclusion and reform in theological education and churches” (pp. 68–69).

Evidence of black theological education’s alienations is in its remoteness from both black socio-cultural content and contexts. Addressing Western theological distance across Global South contexts, Indian theologian K.C. Abraham (1997) states:

*We reject as irrelevant the type of theology that is divorced from action. We are prepared for a radical break in epistemology which makes commitment as the first act of theology and engages in critical reflection on the praxis of reality in the third world. (p. 148)

African American theologian Luke Powery (2020) also articulates a growing impatience with the socio-cultural distances and distortions persisting within Western theological education. He suggests American theological institutions, haunted as they are “by the ghosts of slavery,” need to be reimagined “through the lens of . . . black human wounds.” In the same way “theological education has dismembered blackness,” he argues, “theological education itself needs to be mutilated and torn apart in order to be reborn” (Powery, 2020, pp. 337, 340, 342).

Immersive-reflexive praxes may hold a key to this reimagining and rebirth of black religious knowledge and community formation—and to knowledge and community formation emanating

from black higher education in general (Evans et al., 2009; Evans & Evans, 2000; Shaw, 2014). Examples of immersive-reflexive dialogue and action-research within black theological education offer insights toward educational praxes that center and empower black worlds and worldviews. Important dimensions and trajectories of this dialogical and action-research work within black theological education include the creation of cross-cultural and transnational associations of black religion scholars and whose communities of discourse have been connected in strategic ways and instances to community life, formation, and action (Cone, 1979; Cone & Wilmore, 1979; Fiedler & Hofmeyr, 2011; Labeodan, 2016).

The transnational aspects of these initiatives represent a crucial and overdue aspect of these initiatives that extend analytical and activist attentiveness beyond localized and particularized black community struggles to their comparative and sometimes overlapping global parallels. This linkage was emphasized in a 1999 essay by black religion scholar Gayraud Wilmore (1999) pointing to “unmet needs” pertaining to “the future of African American religious thought and praxis,” particularly related to the global scope of that work. Among the needs Wilmore identified was “a renewed contact and bonding with African, Caribbean, and black Latin American churches, mosques, intellectuals and religious leaders” and with the “religiously oriented African Diaspora” in England, the European continent, and elsewhere. Wilmore’s 1999 observations left off with a challenge to African American religion scholars: “The time is ripe for our church people and theologians to forge new, mutually beneficial relationships with brothers and sisters abroad” (Wilmore, 1999, p. 236).

Important steps had been taken previously in the direction of these Black Atlantic religious dialogues. African American and African theologians began convening together by the late-1960s for scholarly dialogues on overlapping concerns, including as part of a 1969 All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) gathering in Cote d’Ivoire. Although transnational conversations among black theologians (and those with theologians focused on other Global South contexts) were “limited” throughout the 1970s, they were expanded in subsequent decades (Cone, 1979, p. 445). Theological convenings bringing black religion scholars together during the 1970s and subsequent decades emerged as well from efforts by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), which convened yearly meetings from 1976-1979 and every 4-6 years since, and meetings and mobilizations by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (CIRCLE) which was formally launched in 1989 (Fiedler & Hofmeyr, 2011; Labeodan, 2016).

Unlike black scholarly guilds and associations focusing more singularly on strengthening scholarly connections between academics (Wilmore, 1999), the networking and dialogues emanating from groups such as EATWOT and CIRCLE (while possessing strong commitments to advancing scholarship) also embraced the participation, voices, and concerns of many ecclesial leaders. These organizations also have been theoretically explicit and intentional about locating and situating their formal conference dialogues and ancillary sub-group work in a wide range of black-related geographic contexts. In these instances, an emphasis on engaging conference host communities in sustained partnership rather than as temporary event settings is what distinguished organizations like these that are committed to contextualized dialogue from most other scholarly associations highly attentive to black concerns (Fiedler & Hofmeyr, 2011; Labeodan, 2016).

Similarly, Transatlantic Roundtable on Religion and Race (TRRR) has facilitated cross-cultural, transnational black religion scholarship and dialogue between scholars, ecclesial leaders, and community leaders, but with a discernible commitment to immersive methodologies and action-research strategies. Since its founding in 2011, its annual and now biennial conferences have taken place in North America, Europe, and across Africa, with its initial conferences shaped by an awareness of sporadic progress across the Black Atlantic in mitigating racial and ethnic conflict decades beyond the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and the formal decolonization of most Global South nations (Ackah, 2018; Smith, 2015a; Smith & Ackah, 2014). TRRR’s work was also heavily influenced by the ongoing indignities faced by African descendent and Global Black Majority communities living in Europe under the guise of multiculturalism.

Although its co-founders, leadership ranks, and participants are from all three continents, South Africa has emerged as a context where some of TRRR's most systematic cross-cultural scholarly immersion work has occurred. Pretoria has been a center point for TRRR, beginning with a 2009 dialogue at the University of South Africa (UNISA) between its theology faculty and a guest delegation of Black Church Studies faculty and students from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. Two years later TRRR's initial transatlantic conference was hosted at UNISA (Smith, 2015a). Another primary South African partner in TRRR's work has been the School of Theology at University of Pretoria (UP). Both UP and UNISA are located in Sunnyside, a neighborhood adjacent to Pretoria's Central Business District, and a gateway location for South African migrants and for Sub-Saharan African immigrants in search of educational and economic opportunities (Kruger, 2004; Smith, 2015b).

Analysis of demographic transformation and community reformulation within Pretoria-area communities such as Sunnyside, Atteridgeville Township, and the Diepsloot informal settlement were undertaken by several TRRR scholars via collaborations with UP's Centre for Contextual Ministry and with UNISA's Voice and Voicelessness Project (VVP) (De Beer & Smith, 2019; Smith, 2015b). TRRR delegates from Global North contexts were involved in multiple reflexive immersions in Sunnyside, in several instances through collaborative hostings by Centre for Contextual Ministry, including its 2018 Urban Ministry Consultation in Sunnyside. Similarly, TRRR's reflexive-immersive activities through VVP included a 2014 dialogue and fact-finding visit by TRRR conference delegates in Diepsloot, during which local residents and community leaders detailed their community organizing efforts in response to environmentally and socially hazardous conditions faced within their context. The visit also served as an opportunity to outline collaborative strategies for bringing increased attention to Diepsloot's social challenges—attention often in short supply for a remote, squatter context such as this.

The stated objectives of these various TRRR immersions in Sunnyside, Atteridgeville, and Diepsloot were to contribute to local community empowerment in ways related to bridge-building across divides, including deepening relationships between constituencies operating outside and inside mainstream social spaces in the form of mutual learnings and familiarizations, amplifying local voices and concerns through TRRR dialogues, publications, and advocacy campaigns (Ackah, 2018; De Beer & Smith, 2019; De Beer et al., 2017; Smith, 2015b). Although intentionality existed around these objectives, which is an important step, further evidence is necessary to assess actual impact and outcomes.

Concluding Thoughts

The bridging of theory and practice and of local and trans-local perspectives common to these organizational embraces of immersive-reflexive practice discussed here has strengthened prospects for scholarship that resonates more effectively with black realities. Scholarship of this kind is crucial for navigating community-building obstacles and opportunities within and across Black Atlantic contexts.

Clearly, progress has been made toward repositioning intellectual and interactional connections across diverse black landscapes, particularly with respect to embracing and even privileging oftentimes subjugated knowledge from overlooked spectrums and spaces of black life. A vanguard of African Americans operating within higher education and faith-based realms have notably contributed to a movement beyond colonial framings of Black Atlantic relationality while affirming the value in-general of immersive and reflexive knowledge production and promotion along the way. This progress is important and models the steps needing to be incorporated more fully and systematically within normative institutions and processes informing and configuring black life.

REFERENCES

Abraham, K. C. A. (1997). A response. In J. Pobee (Ed.), *Towards viable theological education*:

- Ecumenical, imperative, catalyst of renewal. World Council of Churches, 147-150.
- Ackah, W. (2018). Religion and race in urban spaces across Africa and the diaspora. In R. D. Smith, S. C. Boddie, & R. E. Peters (Eds.), *Urban ministry reconsidered: Contexts and approaches*. Westminster John Knox Press, 62-69.
- Adi, H. (2018). *Pan Africanism: A history*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. (1918). *Instructions from the Prudential Committee of the ABCFM to members of the Mission to the Sandwich Islands*. Boston: Samuel Armstrong.
- Barrett, D. (2001). *World Christian encyclopedia*.
- Blyden, E. W. (1888). *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro*. W. B. Whittingham & Co.
- Campbell, J. (1998). *Songs of zion: The African methodist episcopal church in the United States and South Africa*, Univdrsy of North Carolina Press, 148-174.
- Clarke, J. H. (1995, August 23). The elder radical: John Henrik Clarke—bad boy of academe: Interview with Ja A. Jahannes. https://archive.org/stream/J.H.ClarkeCollectedWritings/J.%20H.%20Clarke%20-%20Collected-Writings_djvu.txt
- Cone, J. H. (1979). Introduction. In G. S. Wilmore & J. H. Cone (Eds.), *Black theology: A documentary history, 1966–1979*. Orbis Books, 1-14.
- Cone, J. H. (1984). *For my people: Black theology and the black church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Cone, J. H., & Wilmore, G. S. (1979). Black theology and African theology: Considerations for dialogue, critique, and integration. In G. S. Wilmore & J. H. Cone (Eds.), *Black theology: A documentary history, 1966–1979*. Orbis Books, 366-378.
- De Beer, S. F., & Smith, R. D. (2019). Religious innovation and competition amidst urban social change: Pretoria case study. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 5(1), 104–121.
- De Beer, S. F., Manyaka, J., & Smith, R. D. (2017). Trans-disciplinary research on religious formations in urban Africa: Toward liberative methodological approaches. *HTS Theological Studies*, 73(3), Article a4693. <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/4693/10718>
- Drake, S. C. (1970). *The redemption of Africa and black religion*. Third World Press.
- Duignan, P., & Gann, L. H. (1987). *The United States and Africa: A history*. Cambridge University Press.
- Evans, R. A., & Evans, A. F. (2000). *Pedagogies for the non-poor*. Wipf & Stock.
- Evans, S. Y., Taylor, C.M., Dunlap, M.R. & Miller, D.S. (eds.). (2009). *African Americans and community engagement in higher education: Community service, service-learning, and community-based research*. State University of New York Press.
- Fiedler, R. N., & Hofmeyr, J. W. (2011). The conception of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians: Is it African or Western? *Acta Theologica*, 31(1), 39–57. <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v31i1.3>
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Ramos, M. B., Trans.). Continuum.
- Gifford, P. (1990). Prosperity: A new foreign element in African Christianity. *Religion*, 20(4), 373–388. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0048-721X\(90\)90119-Q](https://doi.org/10.1016/0048-721X(90)90119-Q)
- Gifford, P. (1991). *The new crusaders: Christianity and the new right in Southern Africa*. Pluto Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. International Publishers.
- Grant, M., & Thompson, S. (2018). "Reflective praxis: Accelerating knowledge generation through

- reflecting on our research and practice. *Cities & Health*, 2(2), 91–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2019.1598711>
- Hobsbawm, E. (1987). *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914*. Vintage.
- Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Kruger, J. S. (2004). *Sweeping whirlwinds: A study of religious change - reformed religion and civil religion in the city of Pretoria (Tswane) (1855–2000)*. UNISA Press.
- Labeodan, H. A. (2016). Revisiting the legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians today: A lesson in strength and perseverance. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 37(2), Article a1586. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i2.1586>
- Latourette, K. S. (1943). *A history of the expansion of Christianity (Vol. 5)*. Zondervan Publishing House.
- Lipset, S. (1997). *American exceptionalism: A double-edged sword*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Lyle, E., & Caissie, C. (2021). Rehumanizing education: Teaching and learning as co-constructed reflexive praxis. *LEARNing Landscapes*, 14(1), 219–230. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v14i1.1034>
- Mamdani, M. (2018, July 19). *The African university*. London Review of Books, 40(14). <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n14/mahmood-mamdani/the-african-university>
- Mbembe, A. J. (2001). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.
- Mbembe, A. J. (2016). Decolonizing the university: New directions. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 15(1), 29–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022215618513>
- Mugambi, J. N. K. (1998). A fresh look at evangelism in Africa. *International Review of Mission*, 87(346).
- Plimpton, R. (1962). *Operation crossroads Africa*. Viking Press.
- Powery, L. A. (2020). ‘Do this in remembrance of me’: Black bodies and the future of theological education.” *Theology Today*, 76(4).
- Proctor, S. D. (1988). *Preaching about crisis in the community*. Westminster Press. Proctor, S. D. (1989). *Samuel Proctor: My moral odyssey*. Judson Press.
- Proctor, S. D. (1992). *How shall they hear: Effective preaching for vital faith*. Judson Press. Robinson, J. H. (1962). *Africa at the crossroads*. Westminster Press.
- Rodney, W. (1972). *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*. Howard University Press.
- Sanneh, L. (1999). *Abolitionists abroad: American blacks and the making of modern West Africa*. Harvard University Press.
- Shaw, P. (2014). *Transforming theological education: A practical handbook for integrative learning*. Langham Global Library.
- Smith, R. D. (1999). Missionaries, church movements, and the shifting religious significance of the state in Zambia. *Journal of Church and State*, 41(3), 525–550. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23919943>
- Smith, R. D. (2015a). Introduction. In R. D. Smith, W. Ackah, A.G. Reddie & R.S. Tshaka (Eds.), *Contesting post-racialism: Conflicted churches in the United States and South Africa*. University Press of Mississippi, 3-12.
- Smith, R. D. (2015b). Urban marginality, religious liminality, and the black poor. *HTS Theological Studies*, 71(3), Article 3029. <https://doi.org/10.4102/HTS.V71I3.3079>

Smith, R. D., & Ackah, W. (2014). Introduction. In R. D. Smith, W. Ackah & A.G. Reddie (Eds.), Churches, blackness, and contested multiculturalism: Europe, Africa, and North America. Palgrave Macmillan, 1-10.

Walzer, M. (1987). Interpretation and social criticism. Harvard University Press.

Wilmore, G. (1999). Black theology at the turn of the century: Some unmet needs and challenges. In D. N. Hopkins (Ed.), Black faith and public talk: Critical essays on James H. Cone's Black theology and black power. Orbis Books, 232-245.

Woodson, C. G. (1933). The miseducation of the negro, Associated Publishers.

Wright, A. M. (2017). Mis-Education, A recurring theme? Transforming black religious and theological education. Religious Education, 112(1), 66–79.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2016.1247327>