

# Crafting Research that Contributes to Theological Education

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*ABSTRACT: With homage to writers and poets, even in the form of the article, the author explores the rationale for theological research and characterizes it as a conversation that pairs dancing minds from a variety of contexts as they explore the depths of their identities through epistemology. Focusing on the black experience in particular, the author contends that research is not merely an individual intellectual quest, with its attendant hubris, but rather an interdisciplinary and communal quest that is tethered to humanity, both rooted in the traditions of real people in the public sphere and profoundly impacting them.*

Throughout my life, I have always learned a great deal from writers and poets. I speak, primarily, of those who do not deal with dense theoethical discourse and reflection but of writers like Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Tina McElroy Ansa, Alice Walker, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Ayn Rand, Carson McCullers, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Amado, Chinua Achebe, Sonia Sanchez, Nikky Finney . . . the list goes on and on. Their ability to turn the world at a tilt, just so, to explore our humanity and inhumanity, challenges me in ways that theories and concepts do not. As a child, I was transported to Troy by Homer and devoured all I could about Greek and Roman mythology. The idea of gods seemed quite novel to one who was growing up to "Jesus loves me this I know . . ." Apollo and Athena took me out of my daily musing on Jesse Helms and fire hoses. I could enter, through Homer's prompting, a different time and place where I learned that maybe the holy could be capricious and not always stern.

The gift and challenge of being an avid reader is that I love to read fine writers at work. They help me "see" things in tangible ways and "feel" things through intangible means. My most recent major research project is on theodicy and produced my latest book *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. When I turned to looking at evil, I realized that I would be bound by untenable, unproductive, and ultimately boring ways if I approached such a study solely through the realm of concepts and theories. Instead, I thought, "What has the writing life taught me?" Good writers teach me that there is a world in our eye, but it is not the only one. We can and must consider the eyes and worlds of others. Allowing these worlds to dance or collide with one another has always caused me to grow and to change my angle of vision from the straight and narrow to akimbo.

I will begin this essay in a more self-reflective manner because I believe that crafting research that will contribute to theological education is a conversation about head *and* heart. To ask you to consider doing this, it's only fair that I be candid with you about where my biases, beliefs, and great faiths are in this enterprise.

So, I want to begin with an image that I hope you will be able to use in your own way to think through your research, teaching, writing, and how you see yourself as a scholar and as a human being. First, a quotation from Toni Morrison:

There is a certain kind of peace that is not merely the absence of war. It is larger than that. The peace I am thinking of is not at the mercy of history's rule, nor is it a passive surrender to the status quo. The peace I am thinking of is the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one—an activity that occurs most naturally, most often in the reading/writing world we live in. Accessible as it is, this particular kind of peace warrants vigilance. The peril it faces comes not from the computers and information highways that raise alarm among book readers, but from unrecognized, more sinister quarters.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation from Morrison's acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation's Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Award in 1996, focuses on the dangers, the necessities, and the pleasures of the reading/writing life in the late twentieth century. She captures the dangers in two anecdotes she tells. In one, it is the danger that, in her words, "our busied-up, education-as-horse-race, trophy-driven culture poses even to the entitled." In the second, she teases out, again in her words, "the physical danger to writing suffered by persons with enviable educations who live in countries where the practice of modern art is illegal and subject to official vigilantism and murder."<sup>2</sup>

Morrison's essay is instructive for us. Most of us have learned to survive (and some to thrive) in the realm of her first anecdote. Many of us may have colleagues who work in countries that represent the latter. I suspect that all of us are watching where academic freedom is going in the United States.

But regardless of where we sit and in how many places, it is in the dancing mind that many of us meet one another more often than not. It is in our research—our books and essays and lectures and papers that we often meet for the first, if not the only, time and way. It is in this dancing mind, where we tease through the possibilities and the realities, the hopes, the dreams, the nightmares, the terrors, the critique, the analysis, the plea, the witness—that is done in the academy, in the classroom, in the religious gatherings of our various communities, in those quiet and not so quiet times in which we try to reflect on the ways in which we know and see and feel and do.

For me, this dancing mind is more than an attempt to make sense of the worlds surrounding us—sometimes enveloping us, sometimes smothering us, sometimes holding us, sometimes birthing us. It is more than my desire to reconfigure the world and then invite others to come and inspect the textures, the colors, the patterns, the shapes, the sizes of this new order, this new set of promises and horrors that unfold in my own research.

The dancing mind, in my case, comes from a particular community of communities yearning for a common fire banked by the billows of justice and hope. As such, this particularity marks me with indelible ink. My task is to

explore the twists and turns of the communities from which I spring and have my very life and breath. It is to be very particular about the particular—and explore the vastness of it.

This dancing mind weaves in and out of Africa, the Caribbean, Brazil; the US South, North, East, and West; the Christian, the Jewish, the Muslim, the Candomblé; the Native American; caste of color; sexuality; sexual orientation; socio-economic class; age; body image; the environment; pedagogies; the academy. It has before it an enormous intracommunal task, one in which I am trying to understand the assortments of African American life—sociocultural and religious. If I do this task well, I will realize the ways in which black life (religious, social, cultural) is not my life alone but a compendium of conscious and unconscious coalitions with others whose lives are not lived solely in the black faces of US life.

This is an important quest for research because I believe that *one* key way to understand how research can and should contribute to theological education is to concentrate on particularities rather than universals. I am interested in exploring the *depths* of African American life—female and male. For it is in exploring these depths, in taking seriously my particularity—not as a form of essentialism, but as epistemology—where I can meet and greet others, for we are intricately and intimately interwoven in our postmodern culture.

In this particularity, I explore the ways in which human lives and cultures have become commodities that are marketed and consumed in the global marketplace. I must stand toe-to-toe with the damaging and destroying effects of the made-in-America color caste hierarchy that remains largely unacknowledged and unexplored. I explore connections between empire and reparations as linked phenomena that spew genderized and racialized moralizations into the global marketplace. I explore the need for recognizing women's moral autonomy within communities as an important factor in developing public policy in the United States. I fret over my own discipline of Christian ethics and the ways in which it does and does not help folk find meaning and purpose in the great drama of existence.

Because I sit in the academy, the church, the classroom, and the community, I must explore socioeconomic class and globalization as it moves in and out of black life with blazing speed—taking the poor *and* the wealthy out of sight. Because we all have to live somewhere, the environment is something I cannot forget to call continually back into my consciousness and work—to broaden the black community's understanding of what is at stake in the atmosphere we breathe beyond the pristine and irrelevant images of Sierra Club calendars that rarely, if ever, put people in nature. I want to help us understand that postmodern culture and the air it spawns will kill us if we do not start paying attention to and then strategizing for a more healthy environment for all of us to live in.

It is this focus on particularity that invites a more expansive awareness and vision for my research. I am challenged to deromanticize the African continent by coming to know its peoples on their terms, not from my own. I am compelled to search out and recover Brazilian streams of consciousness and memory to understand the different ways in which black folk have survived and not survived our own diaspora and the different manifestations of the latent Middle Passage in our historic and contemporary lives.

I must listen to the different rhythms of blackness that come from the different geographies that shape people's bodies and health. I am drawn, sometimes with enormous reservation and circumspection, to understand the different ways in which the religious, beyond my own Christian identity, has shaped my communities and me, and drawn to understand what is at stake when we have lost, forgotten, or been stolen away from the rich medleys of the religious in black life. As I reach further into my particularity, I am brought face-to-face with the tremendous loss of touch with Native American peoples.

I believe that it is through the particularity of the dancing mind that I craft research that can meet and greet those parts of myself that have been lost through neglect, ignorance, well-practiced amnesia, or malicious separation. I am challenged to look at those places that the "isms" that I impose on others are turned back at me, and I am asked to see myself through the eyes of those whom I would and do reject. It does not matter that this rejection is neither intentional nor malevolent. What does matter is that if I say that I am engaged in an integrated and interstructured analysis, then I must face those places within myself and within my work that ignore the ways in which that interstructuring takes place.

## I.

i have begun confessionally and self-critically

because i have found in my own life and work that when i launch into an attempt to be rational, critical, analytical, precise, and rigorous in my research

i usually crash and burn if i fail to think first: why am i doing this?

and that is the question i want to begin with

not the crafting of the research (and i will get to that)

but why do any of us do the research we do

here, i am talking about more than "we do the research we do because we are interested in it, or care about it, or are passionate about it, or think it is necessary"

these are more than appropriate personal scholarly benchmarks for our research

and they should and must be a part of what we do when we engage in trying to understand, defend, debunk, question, cajole, illuminate in our research and writing

i am focusing more on what, for me, is the important first step of the dancing mind: why the research in the first place

because i believe that what should drive our research in large measure is that we are exploring traditions that have driven people to incredible heights of valor and despicable lows of violence

in other words, the research we do is not a free-floating solitary intellectual quest

it is profoundly tethered to people's lives—the fullness and the incompleteness of them

and i use the image of tethering intentionally because i do not want to suggest that our work is *circumscribed* by the traditions we explore or not

but rather that we are consciously

and perhaps at times unconsciously

responding to the drama of history lived in creation and we cannot or we should not proceed as if we are engaged in ideas as if there are not people related to them

another way to say this is that i don't believe that research is or should be an objective enterprise

here, i am not equating objective with rigorous

they aren't the same thing at all

and i will always argue for deep-walking rigorous research and scholarship

what i am arguing against is the kind of disinterested research tact that doesn't figure in that our work is going to have a profound impact on someone's life in some way and some how

i worry when we think that we are *only* dealing with ideas and concepts as if they have no heart and soul behind them

if they matter to us, they will matter to others

and we should do our work with passion and precision and realize that we should not aspire to be the dipsticks for intellectual hubris

i am well aware that i am arguing against some of the foundational assumptions in my training and yours

## *Crafting Research that Contributes to Theological Education*

where the scientific research model and its attendant view of reality give us a solid grasp of disciplinary content and methodologies

i do appreciate and actually enjoy the ways in which both chicago and northwestern formed me as a scholar and researcher to explore ideas with gusto and to trust the trail my research leads me in rather than to steer it into the lanes i'd rather travel

but the one thing i am very well aware of is that this training did not teach me how to be teacher and researcher in the schools where i have been on the faculty

as bill myers said in an email exchange with me, our training hopes that we are smart enough to fit our disciplinary work with, as he said, "contexts as different as the religious studies department of a major university or the ministry concerns of a small roman catholic diocesan seminary"

this is a tall order, and working our way through this is one of those vocational challenges that we may not speak of often or choose to suffer through on our own and in silence unwisely

how do we, then, connect our vocational interests with the common vocation of our school

a good place to begin is with the mission statement or description of the aims of the department or any statements like these that set a benchmark for our institutions

the one at yale is new england succinct: To foster the knowledge and love of God through critical engagement with the traditions of the Christian churches in the context of the contemporary world

or its logo version: faith and intellect: preparing leaders for church and world

this provides a marvelous opportunity to use the skills we spend years building—critical engagement

with the overarching educational goal of the school—fostering knowledge, love of god, exploring the tradition, engagement with the world and the piece of creation it represents

how would it be if we spent some time talking about our various mission statements

and then how we see our work relating to it

we may find delightful links that can push our research deeper or in more fruitful directions

we may find that there's a bit of work to do to put them in conversation, but the attempt to do so may reap huge dividends for our work and for our schools

we may even find that we don't know what those statements are

or that our school has one so ancient and unused that only methu-selah and his running buddies know it

in short, the possibilities are numerous

and because those of us in this room are at different points in this journey

we should not let the important resources we are for each other slip away during our time together

here is where the dancing mind can be at its best

## **II.**

i am passionate about this because we live in times where our country needs those of us trained in the theological disciplines to speak up and into and with the public square

and we can do so, in part, through and with our schools

and the research we do and share directly with the public

with our students

with our trustees or boards, or boards of advisors

we have amassed an incredible amount of information—yes some of it is arcane

but much more of it is about some things that can actually help folk come to know other peoples and cultures

other forms of the religious

other ways to make meaning out of faith stances

other understandings of the social and moral order of life

other ways to understand sacred texts

and the list goes on and on

in other words, i believe that it is increasingly imperative that we engage religious discourses in the public realm—both in the united states and in international contexts

because we live in an increasingly polarized world and larger academic environment that can often be hostile to things religious

we cannot, as scholars and teachers of religion

absent ourselves from the public conversations we now have about religion

many of us shudder at the simplistic and cartoonish characterizations we see and hear about religious worlds we know to be complex and nuanced

the work we do in our research and in our teaching can and must provide ongoing resources and support for those of us who comment on the religious events of our day in the public sphere

it enriches us as scholars

and it strengthens the ability of our various schools to provide pertinent, informed, accessible, and (when appropriate) faithful information and resources to our students, the communities in which we sit, and the various religious institutions our schools may be representative of and responsible to

why this research?

because people need it to help make sense out of the chaos and spinning top of wars we now live in as part of the mundane and everyday in far too many people's lives

why this research?

because we have some gifts and we should use them

### III.

although i am heartened by much of what i see happening in theological education across this country

there is a side that is troubling and a challenge



particularly that which is done in the united states

that can morph into intellectual hubris as global export

and is didactic detritus from sanctifying protestations that true knowledge is universal

as the old black women who raised me used to say about such things:  
ummmph . . . ummmph . . . ummmph

and i think it's important that i be clear about what i mean by theological education

it includes not only the education of clergy, but it is practiced in undergraduate and terminal master's degree programs

it is often found in departments of religious studies and in research university doctoral programs

the locations of theological education make it clear that there is a great variety of ways that we get at it—because it represents an epistemology of knowledge<sup>3</sup>

for some of us, it is education that is specifically about theology

about God or the experience of God

for others, we focus on the development of character and skills in life and holiness

method is the focus for some

we explore the nature of the process—is it focused on academic research or is it a personal search to find the ultimate good

still others focus on ethos and the importance of individual and community spirituality permeating the educational process

context is important for others as the focus is on the academy, the religious body, or the society

others focus on the people involved and does the faith of those involved define some education as being theological even if the content may not be overtly so

the list goes on and on

but whether it is modeled after David Kelsey's Athens and Berlin typology, Robert Bank's Jerusalem model, or Brian Edgar's Geneva model

the common thread is theology

and there are many, many possibilities about what can be seen as central theologically

this ethics of knowing

has extraordinary relevance as we unfold into a troubling twenty-first century

with contested political races

massive voter registration drives that were countered with massive disenfranchisement

a war on terror that is going horribly wrong

blazing internal conflicts in countries like afghanistan, colombia, darfur, iraq, the ivory coast, georgia, haiti, kashmir, kyrgyzstan, nepal, the philippines, somalia, sri lanka, and uganda

broken levees, broken promises, broken economy

this list goes on and on as well

as troubling as this century is already, there are also profound signs of humanity as well

after an alarming decline, charitable giving is on the rise in the united states

the response to the december 2004 tsunami that devastated the regions surrounding the indian ocean

the outpouring of private and corporate support to the victims of hurricane katrina and the devastation wreaked by broken and poorly designed and built levees

giving for research in medicine and the social sciences

endowing scholarships

support for museums and orchestras

are a large part of this

and we should not miss that it is individual giving by living people that accounts for three-quarters of total charitable giving in the united states

the epistemology of knowledge that is represented in theological education is always contextual

always fraught with our best and worst impulses

it is never objective

it is never disinterested

no matter how many rational proofs we come up with to argue to the contrary

research that contributes to theological education recognizes this

embraces this

does not seek to obfuscate this

and recognizes the utter humanity of this

and then begins with the concreteness of our humanity rather than solely in esoteric concepts abstracted from life

that teach us or lure us into believing that it is better to live in an unrelenting ontological suicide watch

rather than a celebration of the richness and responsibilities of what it means to be created in the image of god

for dancing minds, the challenges become integrity, consistency, and stubbornness—not objectivity

these do not displace objectivity

no, they become part of our methodological toolkit as well and are as valued as the call for objectivity

because there is much to be said for holding ourselves accountable

which is, i think, ultimately what these calls for objectivity in the theological disciplines is all about

we just forget that a serious *and* capricious god has a hand in creation

and our intellectual musings often forget god's laughing side

and this can make too much of what we do humorless and inept in our educational homes

when recognizing these things, we can do relevant research

excellent teaching

*and* learning

with dancing minds that point to that vital triumvirate of love, justice, and hope

we are then moving from *concepts* in hermeneutical, historical, pastoral, theological, discourses

to *tools* that demystify and deconstruct

and turn to building and enlightening

part of what is involved in crafting research that will contribute to theological education and the lives of people beyond the library or our studies or our offices

is that we must think in more expansive ways than our disciplinary homes have often trained us to think with our intellect focused primarily on our scholarly navels

this is tricky business because in doing so, we may also be challenging the holy of holies in many of our disciplines

and reconfiguring the standards of excellence in them

i am aware that this is hard for many younger scholars and junior faculty to do as you are also casting a concerned eye to tenure and advancement issues and the very real concerns of family and survival

but i have come to that place in my career where i think that too many of the standards of excellence in many of our disciplines in theological education are not only too low, they may well be irrelevant

so part of what i am asking you to consider today is how your research figures into this

and how can we, together, think through the ways to juggle both the academy and the folks we face in the classroom each day and the many folks that they bring in the classroom with them who are not

seen, not heard, but intensely affected by what we say based on the research we do

perhaps strategic schizophrenia is one answer

that we see our research running on at least two parallel tracks

one that tries to continually call our disciplines into excellence and revelation

the other that has both feet firmly planted in the everydayness of living

in doing so, i think we learn to actually value the messiness of the earth's groaning to survive what we do to it as an active and engaging theological dialogue partner

and as the chief guide for the kinds of questions that should fuel what we do as theological intellectuals

who must—absolutely must—become public intellectuals engaged in justice seeking, justice making, and justice living through what we do

as well as how we think about it and research it

to do any less casts me back in time

to that 60s cocktail party in which ralph ellison

the author of *invisible man*

spoke in “clipped, deliberate syllables” to his peers

Show me the poem, tell me the names of the opera/the symphony that will stop one man from killing another man and then maybe—he gestured toward the elegant bejeweled assembly with his hand that held a cut-crystal glass of scotch—just maybe some of this can be justified.<sup>4</sup>

i am relieved to say that i am not left in ellison's condemnatory despair

perhaps it is because i rather like coming from a signifying and unsettling population

that i am left with a frustrating hope that does not immobilize, but strategizes

however, i am incandescently clear that signification is arbitrary and frustrating

but i think that the critical engagement of dancing minds, that signification can evoke, can lead us into fruitful interdisciplinary conversations in our research that helps us turn to the other side of hegemony

because signifying is a tool that can confuse, redirect, or reformulate the discourses of domination that are often at the heart of what we inherit in far too much religious scholarship

each of our disciplines represented in this room

baptist studies  
canon law  
christian education  
christian social ethics  
history: american church, church, liturgical, music, of christianity  
hebrew bible/old testament  
historical theology  
homilectics  
music: liturgical, gregorian chant  
new testament/early christian studies  
patristics  
spirituality  
theology: liturgical, practical, systematic

has its own hegemonic edge

and when working well, makes tremendous contributions to the work of our schools

but we are so much better at our research when we begin to talk with colleagues in other disciplines and begin to explore questions, ideas, concepts, situations informed by another set of lenses that give us new vistas to explore

we then value and incorporate the ideas, insights, and experiences of folks who are in ministry

not as illustrations to make a hard wrought point

but integrated fully into how we shape that point, insight, idea, possibility

what arrogance we commit when we allow the inadequacies of our training

to determine what can come to know

and how

to tackle this, is not a condemnatory judgment

but a challenge to keep growing our scholarship large

interdisciplinary work is only now being taken seriously in some graduate programs

some think that this is faddish or inept scholarship

but having been raised in two interdisciplinary programs—one that was up front about it with northwestern and one that was more covert about it with chicago

and having spent my early years immersed in interdisciplinary team teaching at saint paul school of theology

i learned quickly that you can't do interdisciplinary work without a main discipline as your intellectual home

so i am not arguing for an interdisciplinary toga party for our research and scholarship

i *am* suggesting that interdisciplinary work is crucial for those of us who are trying to open up the stuffy kitchens in our disciplines and invite all manner of folk to sit around the table

and to do so we can use signifying as more than a clever language game

for in the hands of rigorous dancing minds, signification can debunk narrow and restricted scholarship masquerading as immaculate theological conceptions

like the gramscian chess moves of hegemony

it is very important just *who* is doing the signifying and *why*

allowing our minds, our scholarship to dance we can come to welcome new conversation partners be they disciplinary or representative

not to control or dominate

but to allow the richness of insights and experiences beyond what we know and don't know

to fill our scholarship with deeper meaning

to beget more piercing analysis

to offer more trenchant critique

to be more relevant to the schools in which we work and the folks that are influenced by what we do in theological education

and we develop skills and scholarship that help mitigate bravura spells of ignorance and arrogance that can be found even within the work of some of us trying to deconstruct and reconstruct our disciplines if not our religious households and schools

#### IV.

according to Morrison, the dancing mind requires "an intimate, sustained surrender to the company of my own mind as it touches another."

she encourages us "to offer the fruits of [our] imaginative intelligence to another without fear of anything more deadly than disdain."<sup>5</sup>

this is the how we begin to take the first steps toward crafting research that will contribute to theological education

it is to dance into a new future that is more vibrant, more life bringing and giving, more welcoming, more humane

more alive with possibilities that engage others and ourselves

it is serious work

it is important work

it is necessary work

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Toni Morrison, *The Dancing Mind* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 7–8.
2. Toni Morrison acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation's Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Award, November 6, 1996, [http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech\\_tmorrison.html](http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_tmorrison.html).
3. Brian Edgar, "The Theology of Theological Education," in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29, no. 3 (2005): 208–217.
4. Quoted in June Jordan, "Of Those So Close Beside Me, Which Are You?" in *Technical Difficulties: African-American Notes on the State of the Union* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 28.
5. Morrison, *The Dancing Mind*.





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