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Confronting Confederate Monuments: Place-Based Pedagogy for Anti-Racist Preaching

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Abstract: “Space wins” is a long-held homiletical maxim. Usually, this means that architecture and pulpit style influence how sermons are delivered and heard. What is less frequently considered is how monuments and memorials affect proclamation in space. Among other things, Confederate monuments make claims on space, communicate idealized aesthetics, and preach about hopes for a particular eschatological community. This essay examines pedagogical approaches to preaching that confronts Confederate monuments. It is based upon courses I offered in 2022 at The University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, and through the Association of Chicago Theological Schools D.Min. program in Chicago, Illinois. After articulating a pedagogy drawn from the work of Leonora Tubbs Tisdale and Willie James Jennings, I examine three approaches to place-based pedagogy that serve anti-racist preaching by (1) analyzing monuments within the teaching location, (2) fostering reflective participation in pilgrimage to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and (3) inviting students to research monuments in their home community and confront them through preaching. These approaches can foster preaching that is better attuned to addressing localized histories, better able to identify and confront specific aspects of white supremacy that are concretized in a community, and more adept at offering a gospel proclamation that is finely tuned to the transformative needs of a particular place.

Keywords: pedagogy; preaching; place; anti-racism; lynching; Confederacy; white supremacy



Citation: Stark, David M. 2024.

Confronting Confederate Monuments: Place-Based Pedagogy for Anti-Racist Preaching. *Religions* 15: 224. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020224>

Academic Editor: Carolyn J. Sharp

Received: 4 January 2024

Revised: 10 February 2024

Accepted: 11 February 2024

Published: 16 February 2024



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1. Introduction

In 2022, I taught two versions of a course on preaching that confronts Confederate monuments. During the spring semester, I taught M.Div. students at a predominantly white institution, The University of the South. And, that summer, I taught another version of the course online at the more racially and denominationally diverse Association of Chicago Theological Schools D.Min. program in Chicago, Illinois.¹ On the face of it, this course might sound simply like an exploration of place² or a novel take on anti-racist preaching. But this pedagogical experiment had far-ranging implications, guided as it was by the following questions: How does one’s teaching location influence one’s pedagogical responsibility?³ How might one teach concepts like critical race theory, post-colonialism, and confronting white supremacy in a way that best helps students integrate and apply their theoretical learning in concrete situations? What might we learn about preaching if we paid attention not only to congregational architecture and symbols but to the ways monuments—and especially Confederate monuments—have demarked and defined place in communities? How does attention to localized instantiations of racist and colonialist ideologies, carved in stone and cast in bronze, help preachers and congregations more precisely articulate the gospel and more effectively do the work of anti-racism?

The following essay narrates some of my responses to these questions. The first section details ways in which Confederate monuments affect my own understanding of pedagogy, preaching, and place. Then, I highlight three approaches to place-based pedagogy that serve anti-racist preaching by (1) analyzing monuments within my teaching

location, (2) fostering reflective participation through a pilgrimage to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and (3) inviting students to research monuments in their home community and confront them through preaching. What I found is that these approaches can foster preaching that is better attuned to addressing the needs of a specific location with a fitting gospel message.

2. Pedagogical Reflections

Homileticians and preachers have long been thinking about the impact of place on sermons. From Martin Luther's decision in Torgau, Germany to elevate the pulpit and place it in the midst of the people, to John Wesley (Wesley 1990), who "submitted to be more vile" by preaching outside (journal entry, 2 April 1739), to Martin Luther King, Jr., who made good use of the Alabama State House and the Lincoln Memorial as illustrations in his sermons, preaching is always influenced by its place. In her book, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces*, Roxane Mountford claims that the material spaces of preaching—the "architecture, pulpits, and church communities—anticipate and reinforce" the status quo. She writes that buildings "have a history written in stone and the social imagination that reminds even a casual passerby of the . . . authorities who dwell within" (Mountford 2005, p. 3). In other words, while place can be a support for preaching, it can also be a tremendously controlling and hindering force. The same can be said for the role of place in the teaching of preaching in theological schools.

In her now-classic book on preaching as local theology, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale advises preachers to envision their work as local theology and folk art. The aim is not simply proclamation of the gospel, but preaching that is "more fitting, seriously imaginable, and transformative for local congregations" (Tisdale 1997, p. 55). Tisdale offers a long and multifaceted list of contextual-exegetical questions for preachers to ask and answer. For years, when I taught from this book, I focused on helping preachers to be more intentionally pastoral—especially during their first six months in a new position. I encouraged them to ask for stories, read the archives, visit neighbors, and get to know the elders of the community. What I missed was how Tisdale also invited reflection on the impact of place. She asks, "What artifacts . . . have been preserved by the congregation?... What symbolic texts have caused the most controversy in the congregational life?... What do the visual texts say about the church" as regards, for example, "the spatial arrangement of chancel furniture, the location and presentation of the church building and grounds"? (Tisdale 1997, pp. 62–63). If these questions about place are important for newly located preachers, what might they mean for those who teach preaching? These questions about location and architecture do more than illuminate insights for pastoral leadership. For instance, later in the book, Tisdale asks about spaces "'owned' by one group" or "off limits to others" (Tisdale 1997, p. 71). Such questions hold potential to uncover powers at work in the preaching—and teaching—community. We might ask, what does our teaching space tell us about who (and whose homiletic) is in control?

When Eunjo Mary Kim critiques and expands Tisdale's work, she focuses on the ways power affects place. She argues that globalization has changed every local context's perception of itself and its need for gospel news (Kim 2010, p. 9). In this "glocal" context, culture is not self-contained (p. 7), semiotics are not dictated unilaterally (p. 8), and theology "must engage all aspects of public life beyond its local [and congregational] horizon" (p. 44). Thus, Kim's proposed transcontextual homiletic not only seeks "interdependent relationships" among contexts but aims to "participate in the politics of God by guiding the congregation toward humanization" (p. 54). Here, Kim invites preachers and homileticians to pay particular attention to how cultures and forces in and beyond the congregation influence the mode, content, and reception of a preached message. In this light, many of her recommended preaching strategies also function as pedagogical advice: Use indicative and descriptive language to inspire understanding without being controlling (p. 60). Offer more than technical advice and homiletical aphorisms; instead, proclaim eschatological hope for a transformed world (p. 62). And, rather than following the rhetorician-centered,

old Augustinian/Ciceronian aim to teach, delight, and persuade, seek instead to build community and to share the speaking space with others (pp. 62–63).

While Kim addresses globalization and the need for transcontextual homiletics, the work of Willie James Jennings looks explicitly at addressing whiteness and anti-racist pedagogies of place. Jennings' book, *The Christian Imagination*, lays out two important critiques of Western European pedagogical models. First, he narrates how European colonizers rejected place—and indigenous valuing of place—as something that influences teaching (Jennings 2010, pp. 65–116). As Jennings describes, it was easier for Western teachers and for the Western colonizing project if epistemologies and bodies of knowledge could simply be transported from one place, or one continent, to another. Refusing to acknowledge the pedagogical significance of indigenous places also facilitated the rejection of indigenous wisdom. Thus, European masters of their fields could remain masters in a new land without having to adapt or learn from new peoples and places. In order to counter this pedagogical momentum in our own teaching, Collin Cornell rightly asserts that “the very first and preliminary step towards assuming a posture of learning (rather than of imperialistic and decontextualized teaching) is: acknowledging land—whose it was and rightfully is, who its nonhuman denizens are, and in what its histories consist” (Cornell 2023, p. 156).

Jennings' second critique of Western European pedagogical models is implied in the first: rejecting the pedagogical significance of place leads to rejecting the pedagogical significance of embodied theology. He asserts that “how one imagines space is inseparably bound to how one imagines peoples and their places in the world” (Jennings 2010, p. 250). In chapters five and six, Jennings offers a narrative arc of European theologies of election replacing Israel in scripture, ignoring indigenous experience, rejecting Jewish bodies, and supporting the enslavement of Black people. These theological choices are in service to what Christopher Baker calls “strategic ignorance”, citing Alison Bailey's essay in the 2007 (Bailey 2007) edited collection *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Baker 2022, p. 114). In short, ignoring the lived experience of non-white racialized people further enables narratives of white supremacy to stand in place of the gospel as God's desired operating system for the world.

In his book, *After Whiteness*, Jennings sees this strategic ignorance within theological education of the West as the distortion between an idealized image of a “white, self-sufficient man, his self-sufficiency defined by possession, control, and mastery” and “a homogeneity that aims toward a cultural nationalism” (Jennings 2020, p. 6). One of the ways Jennings addresses this ignorance is to invite reflection on a particular place. “Family Worship in a Plantation in South Carolina” was drawn by Frank Vizetelly in 1863 as pro-Confederacy propaganda in the *London News*. For Jennings, however, this is a place that uncovers the haunting power of whiteness and its strategic ignorance. Jennings includes several images of the drawing, focusing our attention on the white master who oversees and controls Black preaching to those who are enslaved. Baker asserts that preaching the gospel “is always a site of narrative contestation” (Baker 2022, p. 118). Jennings' repeated focus on this plantation scene contests white supremacist propagandistic narratives with the gospel, calling out the plantation mentality of institutions and calling for pedagogies that (1) actively center multiple people(s) and their experiences, (2) foster open spaces for mutual learning and openness to the other, and (3) develop a communion rooted in *eros*, which Jennings understands as a free *desire* for interrelatedness and learning with others. As Jennings advises teachers with their students, “The question is not what they should know. . . The question is, what should be the shape of the journey to know? What should be the character of the search?” (Jennings 2020, p. 120).

With these questions and insights about place and pedagogy, I turned to developing a course on Confronting Confederate Monuments. I was concerned about the power of place at the University of the South, in the South, in the United States, and in the Western world. I was concerned about strategic ignorance and fostering a broader community of learning. I was concerned about the erasure of place in my students' and my theological inheritance.

And I was concerned to shape a journey of learning that opened up my students and me to the ways in which the gospel influenced the lived experience of people in—but often also far from—our pews.

It was a pedagogical experiment. I do not pretend to have any expertise. I can say, however, that this pursuit was transformative for my work as a homiletician and for my students' preaching.

3. Using Monuments Pedagogically

In their "National Monument Audit" from 2021, Laurie Allen, Paul Farber, and Sue Mobley present some striking findings about U.S. monument culture. Of the over 48,000 monuments they catalogued in the United States, the vast majority have been erected to honor white men. Further, fifty percent of the monuments honor people who enslaved others, while only ten percent honor Black or indigenous people (Allen et al. 2021, pp. 8, 17). With these data in mind, it is hardly surprising that Allen, Farber, and Mobley would define a monument as "a statement of power and presence in public" (p. 4).

Such monuments function as a sort of troubled preaching presence in U.S. communities. And, Confederate monuments proclaim an even more troubling presence and power. While a full accounting of the number and types of Confederate monuments is not currently available, the Southern Poverty Law Center has identified their presence in more than half of U.S. states (SPLC 2022). Often these monuments are located in front of courthouses, next to state capitol buildings, at busy thoroughfares, on university quadrangles, and even within church sanctuaries. Ryan Andrew Newson documents well how the second wave of Confederate monuments, built after 1885, were part of a coordinated strategy from groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), founded in 1894, to shape space and change education in support of the Lost Cause narrative, a white supremacist ideological myth that profoundly distorts the historical causes of the Civil War and argues that despite losing the war, the "cause" of a white supremacist society may still be achieved in the future (Newson 2020, p. 24). This movement also coincided with the rise of Jim Crow legislation and anti-Black lynchings. In this light, Confederate monuments seek to present white supremacy as the natural order. As Karen Guth asserts, these monuments "reveal who possesses power; they reveal who and what those in power view as worthy of recognition; and they impose a grand narrative on multivalent events" (Guth 2019, p. 378). Confederate monuments literally prop up white power at the heart of institutions that are most vital to society.

In both my bricks-and-mortar Sewanee classroom and my Chicago online learning context, the Confronting Monuments course endeavored to grapple with the power and presence of these monuments. The course objectives included the following:

- Develop skills for critical and theological examination of monuments and memorials.
- Expand understanding and practice of preaching through preaching exercises and through reflection on ways the markers of space/place impact preaching.
- Gain resources for preaching that tell a fuller truth about our history and about the hope of the gospel.

To accomplish these goals, the course offered facilitator training in structured dialogue around monuments and race, based upon an expansion of Leah Schade's suggestions in *Preaching in the Purple Zone* (Schade 2018). Students were presented with case studies of clergy leadership and preaching in three locations: Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Richmond, Virginia; and Lexington, Virginia. The course in Sewanee also benefitted from conversations with scholars who engage monuments in their work for social transformation. These included Woody Register, Francis S. Houghteling Professor of American History and Director of the Roberson Project on Slavery, Race, and Reconciliation, Gayle Fisher-Stewart (Fisher-Stewart 2022), editor of *Preaching Black Lives (Matter)* and author of *Black and Episcopalian: The Struggle for Inclusion*, and Thorsten Wagner, Executive Director for Strategy and Academics for the Fellowships at Auschwitz for the Study of Professional Ethics (FASPE). In addition to these resources, the course offered three formative exercises for students that

drew on place-based pedagogy to support anti-racist preaching by (1) analyzing monuments within the teaching/learning environment, (2) fostering reflective participation in pilgrimage to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, and (3) inviting students to research monuments in their home community and confront them through preaching.

3.1. Analyzing Monuments within the Teaching/Learning Environment

The Confronting Monuments course began with a consideration of architectural features of the University of the South's most prominent and central worship space, All Saints Chapel. In the reredos, we see Christ in the center surrounded by statues of Peter and Mary and many other smaller statuettes. Some of these figures, such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, are familiar from any church history course. But, several other statuettes are unique to the university. Leonidas Polk is honored. He was one of the founders of the University, an Episcopal bishop of Louisiana, a founder of the Episcopal Church of the Confederacy, a general in the Confederate Army, and an enslaver of at least four hundred people. James Otey is also honored with a statue. He was a founder of the University, an Episcopal bishop of Tennessee, and an enslaver of several people. William Porcher DuBose also receives a statuette. He was a Confederate soldier, the first notable School of Theology faculty member, a strong supporter of the Lost Cause, and possibly a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Imagine preaching in this space, with these "saints" standing watch, tacitly signaling to the congregation who has authority in this community.

For D.Min. students online, this exercise was the entry point for their exploration of their learning environments. These explorations supported sermons that I will discuss below. For students in Sewanee, the All Saints Chapel exercise served as introduction to a larger research project on preaching and the chapel. Students knew All Saints Chapel had been the focus of controversy back in October 2018, when a pane of glass displaying the Confederate seal in a narthex window had been removed quietly, on the authority of three leaders—the university vice-chancellor, the chaplain, and the chair of the Board of Regents—without consulting other School of Theology constituents. Now, under the direction of Prof. Register and with support of the University chaplain, students researched the chapel's carillon, an architectural bay behind the lectern known as the Confederate Bay, a chancel window depicting missionaries evangelizing Africans, a window in the nave memorializing Confederate Army major George Rainsford Fairbanks, and a lancet window memorializing scientist Louis Agassiz. Students discovered, among other things, that the voice of the Leonidas Polk bell rang out every day over campus, the Confederate Bay loomed behind the lectern where scripture is read, the chancel window broadcast a portrait of colonialist aspirations for the university's educational mission, the Fairbanks window celebrated a figure who made space for rebels to rest, and the Agassiz window added a biologist who preached polygenesis—a racist theory of human origins—to the "saints" standing watch.

While the University of the South is a unique institution with regard to its historical support of the Lost Cause, it is certainly not alone in commemorating Confederate and white supremacist figures in its places of learning and worship. Recent changes have been made at Yale University (John C. Calhoun College was renamed Grace Hopper College in 2017), Duke University (a statue of Robert E. Lee was removed from Duke Chapel in 2017 and the Julian Carr building was renamed the Classroom Building in 2018), and Princeton Theological Seminary (Samuel Miller Chapel was renamed Seminary Chapel in 2022). The need for these changes speaks to the prevalence of this particular commemorative impulse at theological institutions across the United States.

In his work with the Congressional Naming Commission on Confederate commemorations at U.S. military installations, historian Connor Williams clearly articulates the vastly different aims of commemoration:

History describes the people and places of the past. . . . Commemoration elevates an act, event, or individual. . . . [History presents] humans and their choices in

the context of the complex and complicated days they lived through. . . . [Commemoration highlights] individuals, movements and moments that epitomize the highest values of our present and motivate us as we shape our societies of the future. History recounts, explains, and examines. Commemoration celebrates, affirms, and extols. History is about who we were. Commemoration is about who we strive to be. (Naming Commission 2022, p. 4)

That Williams first addresses the conflation of history and commemoration illustrates just how important this tactic is to the function of Confederate monuments. These monuments present white supremacist values and aspirations. However, their commemorative vision is cloaked with a veil of history in order to preserve the stones and the false histories that they proclaim.

Such historical cloaking was certainly at work at All Saints Chapel. Researchers recently uncovered that many of the timeless-looking statuettes and windows in the chapel were installed in the 1960's—just as the University was acquiescing to pressures to integrate the campus.

For my students, these discoveries about our place of learning changed their engagement with the work of anti-racism. Concepts such as critical race theory, whiteness, and postcolonialism were no longer amorphous concepts, but concretized everyday encounters. Further, the focus of students' anti-racist work became more immediate and self-reflective. Questions like "How did we miss that?" and "Why didn't someone tell us this before?" led quickly to "What might we do about this?" While this shift led some students to become more involved in advocacy groups, it affected every student's homiletical imagination. The sermons that arose from this exercise were delivered in and far beyond a traditional pulpit, made use of diverse communication mediums, explored a wider array of genres and sources, and offered a more pointed and practical articulation of the gospel for our community. Beginning with an analysis of monuments in our learning space enabled students to internalize and apply complicated and sometimes controversial concepts in a learning environment where their work mattered far beyond a course grade.

3.2. *Fostering Reflective Participation through Pilgrimage*

A second pedagogical strategy that the Confronting Monuments course employed was that of pilgrimage to The Legacy Museum and The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. The Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Sites invite visitors to reckon with our history of racial injustice in places where that history had been lived. They offer visitors a powerful opportunity to engage with history, and they hope to inspire truth-telling in communities. This pilgrimage helped students to think about several important aspects of preaching:

- Telling a fuller story of our local and national history.
- Interpreting legal decisions, news reports, and scriptural texts in light of the experience of marginalized and oppressed peoples.
- Reflecting on how a museum on the grounds of a former slave warehouse and a memorial to victims of lynching located in the first capital of the Confederacy draw on place to supplement their communication.
- Drawing lessons on communication from the museum's use of history, art, video, imagery, and text, among other media, to inform, convict, inspire, and move a participant to action.
- Experiencing how viewing a monument to Black victims of lynching from one's own county affects one's relationship to racial terror today, one's commitment to work for racial justice, and one's hope for the people and place they serve.

The trip, which was funded by a mini-grant from the University of the South's Center for Teaching and by the School of Theology, enabled students to grow in their understanding of how slavery, Jim Crow, white supremacy, and mass incarceration continue to influence church and society. The Legacy Museum, as well as other sites within Montgomery such

as Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and the Rosa Parks Museum, also highlighted Black resistance and excellence, which was helpful for the students' learning.

We called this trip a pilgrimage. It was designed to influence the spiritual lives of participants as much as their intellectual lives. The pilgrimage language comes from Gayle Fisher-Stewart, who argues in her essay, "Travel for Black Lives", that seminaries need to broaden their theological and cultural immersion trips for students in ways that form leaders by connecting them with the lives of Black people in America (Fisher-Stewart 2020, p. 240). Kelly Brown Douglas calls this kind of formation seminaries acting as "'seedbeds,' planting the seeds to do the work of God in the world" (Douglas 2020, p. 235). Douglas argues that this planting involves moral dialogue, moral memory, moral proximity, and moral participation. Especially important for the pilgrimage to Montgomery is moral memory. As Douglas explains, "The truth-telling that is moral memory is not for the purpose of exonerating ourselves from the past. Rather, it is about recognizing the past we carry within us, the past we want to carry within us, and the past we need to make right" (p. 237).

For our class, perhaps the most impactful "moral memory" moment was walking under the hanging, rusted iron monuments to the victims of lynching at The National Memorial for Peace and Justice. One student from a northern state reflected the following:

To see the name of my home state cut into metal with nothing to distinguish it from all of those southern counties made it crystal clear just how powerful the false narrative is that the northern states have been better than the South when it comes to racial equity. No book, no case report, no newspaper clipping could make me feel that in the way that seeing those metal corpses hanging above my head has done. The memory of this field trip will fuel my commitment to preach the Gospel for a long time to come. My communities will know our history, will know the names of those who were lynched in our state, and they will hear the call to fight for justice welling up from the place in me that was touched by this experience. That commitment doesn't come from reading about this history; it comes from feeling the weight of what hangs over our entire society, so chillingly represented by those etched metal memorials.

Other students reported similar experiences of transformation in the way they thought about history, engaged the news, proclaimed the gospel, and committed themselves and the communities they lead to action for change. Those who went on pilgrimage to Montgomery with Gayle Fisher-Stewart reported similar transformative experiences (Fisher-Stewart 2020, pp. 240–55). Witnessing the power and presence of a memorial to victims of lynching does something that dialogue, class readings, and class discussion cannot. This memorial transforms, inspires, and charges preachers with a gospel word that can no longer be shut up in a text book, limited to a class exercise, or held as simply an idea to ponder. Encountering this memorial changed the energy and urgency of my students' preaching.

3.3. Preaching the Confronts Monuments In Situ

A third pedagogical tactic that the Confronting Monuments course employed was to ask students to research and preach on a monument in their home community. Given the focus of the class and the location of many of the students at the University of the South, many chose to confront Confederate monuments or Confederate cemeteries. Some students, however, chose monuments that contributed to addressing the problem of racism or white supremacy. For instance, one student preached about a museum to African American education that sits opposite a Confederate cemetery. Another student preached with a monument celebrating a Black musician that stands opposite the theater Black musicians were not allowed to patronize during their lifetime. Yet another student preached about a plantation chapel built by enslaved laborers.

In both the university and online courses, students reached far beyond the bounds of Confederate monuments in the South. One student preached on the building where they worship, which is the second oldest African American Church in a Northern state—a church built by formerly enslaved people. Others addressed monuments of a colonizing missionary in a Western city, of caricatured indigenous people in a Midwestern city park, of a Holocaust memorial in a southern city that has just banned Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus* due to its vivid depiction of Nazi horrors, of a monument to Queen Victoria in a Caribbean country colonized by England, and of a vandalized display of Martin Luther King Jr. papers at a Northern library. A student grappled with the mixed legacy of a chapel in the Southwest that was designed by a known Nazi sympathizer for an LGBTQ+ worshipping community. Another student preached about a miners’ monument that excluded women and marginalized indigenous land and people in the Plains states. Each of these projects recognized that the problem of whiteness is not limited to the South or even to Confederate monuments. Rather, students applied their learning about Confederate monuments to colonizing, supremacist, and fascist artifacts in their own communities.

More than applying learning, however, the students used monuments to expand their preaching approaches. One student used the lyrics of Nina Simone as a co-preaching voice. Another imagined with the congregation what the children who raised money to preserve and remember a train car from Auschwitz as a Holocaust memorial might say today about banning books on the Holocaust. One student preached in the voice of enslaved laborers who built their worship space. Students began to experiment with images, audio—video clips, atypical genres, and genre-bending. Scriptural texts about idols, such as Daniel 3, became sites of solidarity for people who were learning to stand up to statues. The gospel became more tangible and more pressing as students called listeners to address matters in their own lives and back yards.

What Donyelle McCray observed in her genre-bending preaching course at Yale Divinity School, “Is it a Sermon?”, I witnessed in the place-shifting Confronting monuments course: when students are invited to explore and stretch the bounds of traditional preaching, something transformative can occur. Sermons arise that can “crack the armor of authority” (McCray 2021, p. 13). In these sermons and in the student reflections that followed, I saw leaders who became more committed to a kind of preaching that cracked the authority of colonialism, splintered the power of white supremacy, and shook the powers that be with the shared witness of gospel-led communities.

4. Conclusions

I developed the course on Confronting Confederate Monuments as a pedagogical experiment to explore how monuments could help me respond to the obligations of my teaching location, the needs of turning theory into practical theology, and the desire to expand students’ proficiencies in preaching the gospel. What I found was that using monuments to engage place-based pedagogy has a great deal to offer in the service of anti-racist preaching. Analyzing monuments within the teaching location enabled students to internalize and apply complicated and sometimes controversial concepts in a learning environment where their work mattered far beyond a course grade. Fostering reflective participation in pilgrimage to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice develops moral memory in a way that transforms classroom ideas into committed participation for change. Inviting students to research monuments in their home community and confront them through preaching encourages concrete exploration that can crack the armor of (white supremacist) authority.

The approaches I describe in this paper can foster preaching that is better attuned to addressing localized histories, better able to identify and confront specific aspects of white supremacy that are concretized in a community, and more adept at offering a gospel proclamation that is finely tuned to the transformative needs of a particular place. To be sure, there is much that I still need to learn, especially about how these approaches can better inform week-to-week preaching over a longer arc in the life of a worshipping

community. I offer this essay as a way to facilitate and participate in a conversation from which I hope to learn much more.

Funding: This research was funded in part by a William S. Conant grant from the Episcopal Church.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ These courses are, “Memory and Preaching: Engaging Place with Eucharistic Hope”, School of Theology at the University of the South, Spring 2022, and “Confronting Monuments and Memorials: (Re)Shaping Space Through Anti-Racist Preaching”, Association of Chicago Theological Schools, Doctor of Ministry Program, June 2022.
- ² My own pedagogical approaches have been informed and inspired by the work of some of my colleagues. Rebecca Abts Wright requires students in her Old Testament survey course to observe and reflect on the same plot of land over the course of the semester. This prayerful attentiveness exercise opens students to the sacred in nature while also attuning their ears to the role of nature in sacred scriptures. Collin Cornell adapted a similar exercise for his New Testament survey course, but he added further place-based instruction by drawing on the part of the Bell Route of the Trail of Tears that runs through campus to help students reflect on the gospels’ passion narratives. For details, see (Cornell 2023).
- ³ The university where I teach was originally founded to support and promote an enslaving white supremacist society. Many buildings, streets, parks, and wilderness sites still bear the names of those who either enslaved others or supported the propagation of the Lost Cause. In fact, one of the university’s leading historians called out the campus as “a Confederate memorial” (Rogers 2017).

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