

2020

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### Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Hughes, Krista (2020) "Radical Hospitality on Haunted Grounds: Anti-Racism in Lutheran Higher Education," *Intersections*: Vol. 2020 : No. 52 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2020/iss52/6>

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KRISTA HUGHES

# Radical Hospitality on Haunted Grounds: Anti-Racism in Lutheran Higher Education



Selma, Charlottesville, and Louisville are all within an easy day's drive of the Newberry College campus where I work.

Only a couple of hours down the road stands Mother Emmanuel A.M.E. Church, where in July 2015 a young white man murdered nine Black worshipers during their

evening Bible Study. That same young white man was raised in an ELCA congregation located within commuting distance of our campus.

The founder of our college, the Rev. Dr. John Bachman, was a Lutheran pastor who wrote eloquent theological defenses of slavery and white supremacy and offered the opening prayer of the South Carolina Secession Convention in 1860, four years after the college's founding.

Our campus sits on land that once was home to the Cherokee people before German and Scots-Irish immigrants moved in and cotton was made king.

We at Newberry live, work, teach, mentor, and coach on haunted grounds in a haunted land.

While bearing a distinct racist and colonial past, the Southeastern United States is, of course, not alone in being haunted land. What does it mean to engage in anti-racist work on haunted ground? This is the question I put before all of us in the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU), especially those of us who are white.<sup>1</sup> My original assignment for this essay was to reflect upon anti-racism and Lutheran Higher Education (hereafter LHE). Other scholars and practitioners have already begun the crucial work of such reflection in a range of places, including in

"What does it mean to engage in anti-racist work on haunted ground?"

a recent issue of *Intersections* (Fall 2019). Likewise, NECU institutions are engaging in the active work of anti-racism on their campuses, strategically revising policies, piloting programs, allocating resources, revisiting history, shifting curricula, and searching souls. These efforts and their fruits are to be celebrated and, where appropriate, duplicated. It is also the case that, like Newberry, all NECU

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institutions struggle to balance our Lutheran institutional mission “to serve the neighbor that all may flourish” (NECU 3) with the realities of stressed resources, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Yet more fundamentally, all NECU institutions are historically, predominately, and persistently white. To acknowledge this is more than a statement of fact. We must embrace it as a confession: that we have been and we still are, despite our missional intentions, institutional instruments of white supremacy. Even having written that statement, I find that my stomach clinches and my mouth goes dry every time I read it. If you experience something similar, I encourage you to take a deep breath and to keep reading, for in the words of James Baldwin, we cannot fix what we will not face. If we seek to become robustly anti-racist, we must find ways to dwell in the discomfort and to face the white supremacy that has indelibly shaped our institutions.

Wherever we are located, the question of anti-racism and LHE is haunted. In this piece, I want to reflect on the possibilities of opening ourselves to such hauntings as a means of better attuning ourselves to the transformative work of anti-racism. I specifically want to link the LHE value of *radical hospitality* to the potentially productive value of allowing ourselves to be haunted. This may strike the reader as an attempt at seasonal playfulness. It is not. Rather, I offer that hauntings can become callings, so that we may imagine and embody more equitable ways of being in the world.

## Institutional Anti-Racism: Limits and Possibilities

If the heritage of Lutheran higher education is steeped in whiteness, is anti-racist LHE even possible? I appeal to historian of race Ibram X. Kendi, who suggests that while it is not possible for white people to be *non-racist*, it is possible for white people to do *anti-racist* work. If

this is true of persons, it can also be true of institutions, including NECU institutions, which fall into the category of “predominately white colleges and universities” (PWCUs). Martin Luther’s notion that Christians are “simultaneously saint and sinner” may help us to understand this paradox through a more dialectical understanding of how we can both perpetuate racism (as persons and organizations trapped in larger inequitable systems) *and* actively strive toward racial equity and justice.

People, of course, make up institutions. This means that individual persons within an institution have their own work to do. It is also the case that racial injustice and oppression persist largely by means of policies and structures that transcend individual persons. In *Understanding and Dismantling Racism*, antiracism trainer and pastor Joseph Barndt offers a “continuum on becoming an anti-racist multicultural institution.” The continuum ranges from stage 1, the segregated institution (common prior to the 1960s), to stage 6, an “anti-racist, multicultural institution” that is fully committed to “the struggle to dismantle racism in the wider community” and where “clear lines of mutual accountability are built between the institution and racially oppressed people in the larger society” (234-35). Most NECU institutions would fall on the continuum around stages 3 and 4, with a handful of institutions showing some nascent characteristics of stage 5. Barndt describes those stages as follows:

*Stage 3: A Multicultural Institution* intentionally pursues diversity and inclusion through policies and practices and considers itself non-racist by opening its doors to people of color. But there is also a lack of institutional awareness about persistent patterns of white privilege and little effort to change power structures, decision-making processes, policies, and the culture as a whole.

*Stage 4: An Antiracist Institution* demonstrates among its constituencies a growing awareness of systemic racism as a barrier to diversity, equity, and inclusion and an increasing commitment to eliminate inherent white privilege. Likewise, a critical mass of leadership and other constituencies claim an anti-racist institutional identity and vision.

*Stage 5: A Transforming Institution* translates this identity and vision into actual structural changes that guarantee the full participation of persons of color in decision-making and power-sharing at all institutional levels; that foster genuine openness to a wide range of cultural world views; and that establish mutually accountable anti-racist relationships. (234-35)

Regardless of stage, the institutional work of anti-racism is never complete, of course. Rather than viewing this perpetual work as a burden, I encourage us to see it as a promise. This means we can simultaneously and without contradiction continue to confess and repent from the white supremacist heritage of our LHE institutions *and* celebrate the work of anti-racism on NECU campuses. NECU institutions are doing tremendous work across the United States. We have appointed vice presidents for diversity, equity, and inclusion; targeted strategic plans; supported student vigils, protests, and movements; organized faculty and staff reading groups; planned athletics initiatives; established institutes serving their surrounding communities; won grants that equip congregations to do the work of anti-racism; shifted toward inclusive pedagogy and de-colonial curricula; revised wide-ranging campus policies; introduced new student scholarships focused on social justice; redesigned first-year experience programs centered around intercultural competency—and more. We can and should celebrate the anti-racist work of NECU institutions.

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We also are called to confess: This work has only just begun. This work is happening unevenly across the network. This work, done even adequately, requires resources that are scarce in the current climate of higher education and even scarcer in the age of Covid-19. This work pushes

against centuries of history. This work may alienate certain donors. This work may or may not be “good business.”

“There is no vaccine or easy cure for white supremacy.”

What might motivate persistence as we strive to meet the ethical imperative of our missions while contending with the forces of history and capitalism? Notice I am not asking what will solve the problem. There is no vaccine or easy cure for white supremacy. My question is modest yet vital: What might motivate us to continue doing the steady, careful work of anti-racism?

## Radical Hospitality

There are many possible motivators, and here I suggest just one among others. I call us to consider the LHE value of “radical hospitality.” *Rooted and Open* articulates a common mission for the colleges and universities of the ELCA. Part of that mission, the document states, is to “practice radical hospitality,” that is, to “welcome all and learn from all” by valuing the unique gifts of each student who steps onto campus. Modeled on God’s hospitality to humanity, “human hospitality to others overcomes the fear of exclusion (‘Do I belong here?’), the feeling of unworthiness (‘Am I good enough?’), and the burden of self-justification (‘I’m the expert—and you’re not!’). Hospitality makes deep learning possible” (7-8).

This is a beautiful vision—and a real challenge to make real for PWCUs. It takes us right to the heart of the question of anti-racism in LHE. The key is the difference between welcome and belonging. Hospitality for many of us brings to mind a host welcoming a guest into one’s home or to one’s table. The hyperbole of the Spanish greeting, *Mi casa es su casa*, reveals the limits of hospitality. You may welcome me warmly into your home, but you do not literally mean, “Please move in. Feel free to leave your shoes wherever you like, eat everything in the fridge, and stay as long as you want.” We need to distinguish welcome and belonging. *Radical* hospitality exceeds “welcome.” We are not simply welcoming students to our table. While our students may

not stay forever, for many of them campus becomes their home for four or so years. At a certain point, ideally sooner rather than later, they should not expect to be welcomed. They should expect to *belong*, to be such a part of the community that they become agents of welcome for others.

This includes our Black and Brown students. Dr. Monica Smith, Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Augustana College (Illinois), puts the notion of radical hospitality to the equity and inclusion test when she says:

Students of color at PWCUs [expect] that *the institution will transform to meet their needs* so that they can thrive, so that they can embrace the academic experience without the distractions and damage that microaggressions can cause... They hunger for their identities to be affirmed so that they can consider their vocations, rather than merely *surviving* their college experience. (Smith 8)

That many NECU institutions are *not* accomplishing this is a reality we must name with courage and humility. In our efforts to provide a quality education, to widen vocational vistas, and to increase the social mobility of our Black and Brown students (all good and worthy things), we still inevitably do harm because white supremacy is woven into our institutional DNA. Too often “success” on our campuses requires Black and Brown students to become “more white”—to suppress modes of relation, language and speech, habits and practices, and self-expressions that bear their unique cultures. This is an acute loss for them but also a loss for the PWCUs they attend. As Smith notes, “diversity will happen.... Inclusion is a *choice*” (7).

What Smith commends is an institutional culture that, on Barndt’s continuum, is a stage 5 heading toward stage 6. Moreover, what Smith is calling our NECU institutions to is a form of hospitality so radical that we must open ourselves to being fundamentally changed. Are we ready for that? Are we willing? This would be, after all, a hospitality so genuinely radical that it may lead to a complete unraveling of institutional identity, to the point we might even have to ask if anything “Lutheran” would remain.

The theological concept of *kenosis* may point the way forward. The doctrine of *kenosis*, based on Philippians 2, refers to Jesus’s “self-emptying” of his own will and divine

status in order to become human and an instrument of God’s will. This becomes definitive for Jesus in his life, ministry, and death—namely, his own self-giving for the sake of others’ flourishing. It is precisely in decentering himself that he becomes most characteristically himself. It may be that the most “Lutheran” thing a NECU institution could do is strive to empty itself of its white supremacist ways by centering the perspectives, practices, and agency of our non-white students and constituencies. This is, of course, easier said than done. Consider it we must.

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Anti-racism is active work. It is something we *do*. But for white people and for persistently white institutions, we must also attend to the transformative *receptivity* that anti-racism requires. Hospitality is about receiving the other. Radical hospitality is about receiving the other in such a way that we open ourselves to being changed—and indeed being changed in ways we cannot predict or control. Opening ourselves to that which might disturb us is a practice that is at once active and receptive. Which brings me back to hauntings.

## Haunted and Called

The specters of both racism and anti-racism are haunting. It is not only the manifestations of systemic racism that can haunt. So can the call to anti-racist work: the magnitude of the call, our sense that we are not up to the task, the dire implications for Black and Brown lives of our falling short. It can be enough to immobilize us. But I offer that the work of anti-racism *should* haunt us, as individuals and as institutions, and that part of genuinely radical hospitality is opening ourselves to that which haunts or disturbs us. In this sense, that which haunts us may be what ultimately calls us.

Inspired by the work of theorist Gayatri Spivak, theologian Mayra Rivera reflects on a positive sense of haunting, something unusual in the Christian tradition. Rivera observes that the one called the *Holy Ghost* is also called the *Spirit of Truth* and the *Advocate*, implicitly suggesting that in some cases there may be little that distinguishes being haunted from being inspired—or, we might say, called (125). In addition to being called by our missional commitments to equity and justice, we as individuals and institutions may also be called by that which haunts us. Aspirations can be too easily ignored in the day-to-day hustle. That which troubles us, not so much. In Rivera’s words, “May we pray to be haunted” (135). Being haunted can keep us from slipping into either complacency or despair. It can keep us curious and committed. It can also point individuals to their unique piece of anti-racism work.

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Just as we may pursue callings, there are many and varied means to pursue hauntings, to go in search of that which might lure us or goad us or shake us toward our most faithful next steps. We can explore *history*, distant and recent, to better understand the forces that shape our contexts near and far. We can educate ourselves about broader *social realities* that may seem far from our own lives. Diving deep into a specific issue—for example, mass incarceration, redlining, voter suppression, or disproportionate maternal mortality rates for Black women—makes it more real and more urgent, transforming the “issue” from an abstract idea to a lived reality. We can train our gaze to notice *institutional dynamics* on our campus that perpetuate inequities and marginalization. We can attune our ears to *personal stories*, told by our students, colleagues, and neighbors.

We can look to *the arts*: from essays, novels, music, and television to street murals and poetry slams. Any one of these avenues promises to disturb our equilibrium.

All of our NECU institutions are marked by the deep histories and current realities of systemic racism. Still, Newberry’s particular story is not St. Olaf’s story or Grand View’s story or California Lutheran’s story. I invite you to ask yourself and to engage in conversation with your campus colleagues: What haunts *your* institutions, the wider communities in which they are located, and the persons who walk the halls and sidewalks of *your* campuses? May each NECU campus, in its own unique place, listen for the wisdom in such hauntings—for what they might tell us about how to create genuine communities of belonging, communities of such radical hospitality that “all may flourish” both within and beyond our campus boundaries.

## Endnote

1. Throughout this essay, I use the word “we” in potentially slippery and problematic ways. I use it primarily to refer to white people at the predominately white institutions of the ELCA colleges and universities because that is my primary audience for this essay. My intent is not to diminish or exclude the contributions of Black and other POC members of these institutions, but rather to call white people like me to account in the work of anti-racism.

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