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Sandra Richards Mayo  
*Azusa Pacific University*

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Sandra Richards Mayo, Azusa Pacific University

### **Abstract**

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### **Prologue: A Personal Reflection**

The year is 2013. The day is Sunday, July 14, just 10 days after our nation gathered to celebrate its independence and the ideals of liberty and justice that day represents. I wake up in the middle of the night as I often do when something leaves me uneasy. I reach over to my computer and check the news to see if the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case has been called. It has. The man who shot Martin is found not guilty on charges of murder and manslaughter. My heart drops and I return to bed. Eventually I fall back asleep, but awake again in

just a few hours to an email from my sister: “Have you seen the news yet? Can you believe the verdict?” I had a response, but could not bring myself to communicate right away. I needed time to make sense of the events that had taken place five months prior in Sanford, Florida, leaving a 17-year-old African American male dead.

I wanted my sister to know that I understood her surprise and shared in her abhorrence, yet, I did not want to express any kind of disbelief. Adopting a posture of shock in that moment would have left me feeling too vulnerable—the sense of being caught in a tornado that comes without warning. I did not want to succumb to the devastation that results from natural and unstoppable processes of the earth. After all, there was nothing natural or unstoppable about Martin’s shooting, and so, I refused to relegate the Zimmerman verdict to the same panic, disorientation, and despair that might come about after a brutal storm. I wanted to respond to my sister in a way that would remind us both that we did not have to run for cover and inventory our losses.

Just weeks before the Zimmerman trial I read Howard Thurman’s (1976) seminal book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. As I started to reflect on the Martin tragedy and court case, I found myself returning to the teachings of Thurman, which reveal that there is no true defense when power is unbalanced, that is, when there is no genuine protection of the weak against the strong. According to Thurman, those who are dispossessed by unjust social systems must discover that their strength is not found in any external conditions, but in the core of their being—a soul intact. I felt a quietness in my heart guided by Thurman’s words. I would like to say that it was a deep spiritual response. However, I believe more accurately it was an emotional response and rational decision, the balance of which I cannot fully calculate, but that in its final analysis brought me to a place of critical reflection and new insight into both the acts of racialized violence and

racial reconciliation. It is this insight that I hope to share in the following pages.

### **Introduction: Purpose of the Essay**

The current essay explores the meaning of race in education through the lens of the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Even though in the 21st century most reject the idea of biologically distinctive groups that can be categorized by race, one cannot deny that race still operates as a powerful social construct and provides visual cues to which individuals attribute meaning. Likewise, although many argue that the Trayvon Martin incident is not centrally about race, it would be misguided to believe that a concept that has operated in the Western imagination for so long has little bearing on social outcomes today.

It is with the assumption that race continues to function as an important category in social arrangements that this essay seeks to address the following questions: What is the role of race and racial stereotyping in educational disparities? How can educators work purposely toward a curriculum of racial justice and reconciliation? Although I respond to these questions within a framework of social justice education and Christian theology, this work has implications for all educators concerned with racial justice and educational equity. It is not the purpose of this essay to detail a step-by-step guide for fostering meaningful racial engagement that leads to more equitable outcomes. Instead, this work seeks to illuminate theoretical insights that will challenge dominant racial ideology.

Drawing on the work of African American theologian and civil rights leader Thurman, this essay argues that new approaches to social justice education should address both the extrapersonal and intrapersonal aspects of antiracist and antioppressive work, with a goal not only toward structural changes in society, but also toward structural changes in the human spirit. Thurman spoke of a compulsion towards love that overcomes the “three hounds of hell,” which he names as fear, deception, and hatred—mechanisms that destroy the interior of one’s being. As Thurman (1976) pointed out, in Jesus’ life we find that love is the only suitable response to suffering. Jesus’ ministry was about the inner life of man: “He recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external force... can at long last destroy a people if

it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them” (p. 21).

Informed by Thurman’s (1976) guidance, this essay advocates for the development of educational paradigms that incorporate both a critical consciousness and a curriculum of reconciliation as a way to more effectively address complex social issues. Such an approach might, for example, prepare future educators to understand the Trayvon Martin case not as a single isolated incident, but as part of a much more insidious cycle that reinforces and normalizes racism as a pattern of American life. At the same time, such a program might prepare teachers who can nurture within students a full recognition and appreciation of humanity. In this way, educators can be better prepared to foster classrooms as sites of both social change and reconciliation—classrooms that will result in more equitable and just outcomes for all who are represented in our nation’s diverse tapestry.

The essay begins with a brief overview of the current state of African Americans in education and cites recent data on the Black–White achievement gap. These data are included to provide a context in which race can be understood as socially, if not biologically, real, recognizing that it is only in the history of social relations and practices of domination that race still holds any explanatory power. As Hanchard (1994) explained this dynamic,

“Race” operates as a shuttle between socially constructed meanings and practices, between subjective and lived, material reality. It has a paradoxical, simultaneous importance, for it is and is not about skin color. Race does not, and could not, have any social significance by itself. (p. 4)

It is with this orientation that the essay moves into a discussion of historic and contemporary theories used to explain racial differences in educational outcomes. In the third section, the essay characterizes social justice education as an approach to redressing the enduring consequences of racial and other forms of oppression. In the fourth and final section, I share lessons from Thurman’s (1976) *Jesus and the Disinherited* as a way to provide an analytic framework through which teachers can enact social justice education toward a more racially just and peaceable society.

## **Part 1: The Educational State of Black Americans**

As a Black woman and educator, I feel an immense responsibility to my young brothers and sisters. Even though my concern is for all young people, my soul reaches out in unique quality to Thurman's (1976) disinherited, those who live "with their backs against the wall" (p. 108). As a faculty member who engages in the teaching and preparation of future educators, and as one who is concerned with issues of racial disparity in the classroom, I am repeatedly assailed by statistics that share an account of manifest gaps. On every measure of academic achievement, Black males trail their White peers; this is a statistical fact and an enduring reminder of the social significance of race.

*The Urgency of Now: The 2012 Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males* provided one of the most comprehensive of these accounts, revealing a national trend of Black male underachievement and educational exclusion. The report indicated that Black male graduation rates from high school were on the rise, but at a much slower pace than is necessary to achieve parity with other groups. Using data from the 2009–10 academic year, the report revealed that only 52% of Black males graduated in four years compared to 78% for White non-Latino males. When the data were disaggregated by state, the difference became even more glaring: New York and the District of Columbia charted the lowest graduation rates of Black males at 37% and 38%, respectively. In 11 other states, fewer than 50% of Black males graduated from high school within four years.

The data on other common performance measures are equally disconcerting. When looking at distribution for academic placement, the gaps are even wider, with more than eight times the number of Black males in Atlanta designated as intellectually disabled when compared to their White counterparts. When looking at the inverse, we see comparable imbalances: In Atlanta, only 5% of Black males were represented in Gifted and Talented programs in 2009–10 compared to 32% of White males. The rate of Black males in Advanced Placement mathematics courses, relative to Whites, revealed a similar pattern of unevenness, with some of the largest gaps occurring in Southern regions. For example, in East Baton Rouge Parish, only 0.17% of Black males were in advanced placement

mathematics courses compared to 10.9% of White males—nearly an 11-fold difference. The *Schott Report* (2012) also documented racial disparity in school disciplinary practices, with as many as 8.5 times the number of Black students (male and female) being at risk for suspension compared to White students in states such as Connecticut.

## **Part 2: Theories on the Racial Achievement Gap**

The root causes of these racial disparities have been and will likely continue to be debated. Over time, a number of explanations have been posed to account for what is now an enduring trend. Some of the earliest theories, rooted in scientific racism, focused on genetic differences between Blacks and Whites. Enlightenment scholars such as Immanuel Kant (1775) typified Black people as incapable of "ascending to the experience of the higher moral delights" or to the mental capacities of the White race (as cited in Eze, 1997, p. 45). In contrast, Whites were associated with beauty, intellect, and morality. During the 19th century, Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution further advanced the notion of a hierarchical order of the descendancy of man and sought to prove scientifically the inferiority of Blacks (see, for example, Darwin, 1874).

Following World War I, the field of intelligence testing emerged as a way to both sort and classify students deemed incapable of learning. Building primarily on the early work of French psychologist Alfred Binet, in 1916 Stanford psychologist Lewis Terman developed a revised and English-translated version of the test, known as the Stanford-Binet. In the accompanying test guide, Binet explained what he saw as clear race differences in intelligence that were heritable and immutable. His comments on the performance of two boys of Portuguese descent reflect these racist presuppositions:

It is interesting to note that ... [these cases] represent the level of intelligence which is very, very common among Spanish-Indian and Mexican families of the Southwest and also among [N]egroes. Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come. ... The writer predicts that when this is done there will be discovered enormously significant racial differences in general intelligence, differences which cannot be wiped out by

any scheme of mental culture. (Terman, 1916, pp. 91–92)

Among the leading contemporary proponents of this viewpoint was Richard Jensen (1969), a University of California, Berkeley psychologist and hereditarian who argued that genetic factors are involved in the IQ score differences between Blacks and Whites. The genetic inferiority argument received renewed interest in 1994 with the publication of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. In this work, the authors purported that intelligence is genetically determined and therefore relatively unchangeable, and it can be used to explain group differences in social achievement.

More recently, the notion of race-based differences in intelligence has been challenged by opponents of genetic determinism (Gould, 1981; Graves, 2001; Graves & Johnson, 1995). In the last several decades, researchers have also posited new theories, reframing the issue of the achievement gap not from a deficit perspective, but through a critical awareness of the racialized educational milieu Black students must navigate. Theorists such as Claude Steele have argued that African American student performance is often undermined by what he calls stereotype threat. Steele (2003) posited that the pervading beliefs about Black inferiority can take a toll on African American students who are continuously faced with “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that might inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (p. 111).

Other scholars—particularly theorists of multicultural education (Banks, 2004; Gay, 2004; Grant, 2003)—have argued that schooling practices are structured around the norms, values, and orientation of White, middle class society. Proponents of this view have argued that to understand the differential outcomes of schooling, educators must be attuned to the cultural incongruence or discontinuities that exist for racial and language minority students and those from economically disadvantaged circumstances. This incongruence can occur in a number of ways: when the demographics of school staff do not reflect the diversity of the children in classrooms; when the curriculum comes from a Eurocentric paradigm; and when instructional strategies and pedagogical approaches do not consider the diverse and varied

ways in which students come to acquire information and demonstrate their competency. Altogether, these factors contribute to a growing divide between students' own understanding of the world and what is presented to them in the canonized curriculum.

Another counternarrative has been presented by educators such as Herbert Kohl, who explained Black student underachievement as a process of creative maladjustment. Although this term had earlier been used by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it was Kohl's (1991) book, *I Won't Learn from You: The Role of Assent in Learning*, that brought this concept into the educational expanse. According to Kohl, the choice that confronts members of a marginalized group is either to become well adjusted within an educational setting that often denigrates its history and devalues its unique contributions or to become creatively maladjusted to function in a way that protects against further marginalization. Kohl, like King, described creative maladjustment as a legitimate strategy when individuals are forced to participate in institutional practices or live in a society that invalidates their own experiences. Kohl traces the origins of the term creative maladjustment to a speech given by Dr. King at the University of Berkeley in May 1958. Citing the work of King (1958) in his book, Kohl wrote:

Now we should all seek to live a well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call upon you to be maladjusted to such things. (as cited in Kohl, 1991, p. 129)

In like manner, Kohl might have argued, teachers should not expect students to adjust themselves to such practices as ability grouping, which leave a disproportionate number of racial minority and poor students in the lower rungs of the educational process.

Additional explanations for the achievement gap have been brought by scholars who focus on the

ways in which structural inequalities are created and re-created in schools. Researchers such as Jeanie Oakes (1985) and John Diamond (2006) are among the leading voices in this dialogue. These researchers pointed to inherent biases and uneven practices embedded in the structure and practices of schooling. Oakes, for instance, looked at the divide created in student access to knowledge through the practice of ability tracking. We know from research that students in high-ability tracks not only are introduced to more engaging content but also have the opportunity to develop higher order skills such as critical thinking, creative problem solving, and analytical writing. Groups of students disproportionately tracked into lower level classes never gain access to the types of knowledge most valued in society, thereby limiting their access to higher education and occupational mobility.

In related manner, Diamond's (2006) work purported that race has symbolic meaning, which plays out in every aspect of institutional life. This symbolic aspect of race cannot be readily observed, yet its effects are often quite profound. As students of color navigate a racialized education terrain, they often confront intractable differences in terms of what types of classes they will be placed in, whether they will be introduced to challenging coursework, and the extent to which teachers will anticipate and foster their success. Unfortunately, the symbolic nature of race functions in such a subtle way that it remains an almost invisible and embedded feature of our schools.

Theorists of structural inequality recognize that without intentional effort toward unearthing these inherent biases, schools will remain decisively unequal, with educational outcomes divided along lines of racial and class difference. They call for a program of social justice education that seeks to create more equitable outcomes.

As I begin Part 3 of this essay, I seek to contribute to this project by defining social justice education, and, in doing so, demonstrate its centrality to the work of racial equity and reconciliation.

### **Part 3: Defining Social Justice Education**

When I speak of social justice education, I am talking about a commitment to eliminating oppressive practices in schools. Here, I am not referring to the most extreme and overt forms of oppression as in modern-day slavery, gender-based

violence, or acts of religious persecution. Even though these remain persistent and widespread throughout the world, I am concerned in this moment with a form of oppression that is much more obscure but commonly operates in our schooling systems and practices. It is Iris Marion Young's (1990) definition of the term that best characterizes this type of oppression:

The deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structure features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life. (p. 41)

Because of the covert nature of this form of oppression, it can be more difficult for its victims to combat the unjust conditions of living they experience. After all, there is no visible oppressor to fight, and there are no legally sanctioned actions to battle in court. Additionally, this form of oppression becomes so normalized in society that it functions as part of the routine way in which social groups relate to each other. To shift this seemingly natural order would appear too disruptive, and so oppressor and oppressed alike learn to navigate their rightful place in society, contributing further to a deepening of unequal relations of power. Yet to not disrupt the tide of oppression is to accept a much more devastating and costly outcome.

Ultimately, oppressive practices result in the denial of opportunities and limiting of life chances for affected groups, often manifesting in the deprivation of basic material resources and an inability to reach parity with other groups in society.

Let us take a moment to examine what this cycle of oppression looks like in the context of schooling. One such example is what has been described in the literature as the “school-to-prison” pipeline—that is, practices that systematically push students out of school and increase the risk for future placement in juvenile detention facilities or prisons.

Research has indicated that both racial minorities and children with disabilities are disproportionately referred to punitive disciplinary practices that often lead to the criminalization of behavior (Arcia, 2007; Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2005; Eitle & Eitle,

2004; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Townsend, 2000; Wald & Losen, 2007; Watts & Erevelles, 2004). Although rates of referral for discipline are comparable across social groups in cases where there are clear violations of school codes of conduct, Black students are more likely to be disciplined for discretionary offenses, such as defiance or classroom disruption (Fabelo et al., 2011). Because suspension and expulsion increase a student's likelihood of dropping out of school and entering the criminal justice system, these disciplinary practices have far-reaching implications well beyond the context of classrooms. Research indicates that students prosecuted in the criminal justice system are less likely to graduate from high school and are more likely to commit serious offenses in the future, thereby decreasing their opportunity to reintegrate into society and transition successfully and productively into the workforce (Aizer & Doyle, 2013).

It is time that we recognize the high cost of these and other practices, which limit the trajectory of students' lives. Justice would necessitate that we become attentive to the "inequality-generating mechanism[s]" that shape social outcomes (Tilly, 2000, p. 782). The aims of social justice education must be to eradicate all forms of differential treatment that result from unquestioned assumptions underlying the practices and policies of institutions, at a structural level, and from the cultural stereotypes supported by and reinforced in everyday interactions, at an individual level. In the aforementioned example, social justice education would require that schools examine their data on disciplinary actions and look at rates of referral by race, gender, and ability, and work toward eliminating practices that may be contributing to disproportionality in punitive disciplinary actions (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Such a strategy would likely begin at the classroom level, examining the ways in which teachers respond to students, and through staff training and ongoing support, moving teachers from a paradigm of punishment to more culturally responsive and positive behavioral supports.

Why does this discussion become important for educators following the verdict in the Martin–Zimmerman case? The death of Trayvon Martin and the categorization of his shooting as legal allude to

the fact that we have yet to determine how to preserve the lives of our nation's youth. Furthermore, this incident plays out as one more scene in our nation's history of racialized violence. Although schools cannot be held solely responsible for the safekeeping of young people, or for ending race-based acts of oppression and violence, educators have an opportunity to rewrite the ending to this tragic saga. Schools are a microcosm of society. As such, the patterns of racial inequality in classrooms will be replicated and reinforced in other social institutions, unless those patterns are shaped by educators. Likewise, the ways in which teachers formulate opinions about students' behavior shape the extent to which some students, Black males in particular, will continue to become discounted in classrooms and criminalized in society. After all, as Delpit (1988) reminded us, "We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs" (p. 296).

My goal here is not to prescribe a particular strategy for school and social reform but rather to raise awareness about the role of race in schools and society through a lens of social justice education.

I now move to Part 4, in which I seek to strengthen the theoretical framing of social justice education through Thurman's (1976) *Jesus and the Disinherited*, which lends itself to the development of a constructive curriculum of racial justice and reconciliation by addressing some of the intrapersonal aspects of antioppressive approaches.

#### **Part 4: Toward a Curriculum of Racial Justice and Reconciliation**

On July 14, 2013, when America and the world learned of the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case, reactions varied widely—a feeling of relief from the Zimmerman family, a resolute expression of faith from the Martin family, and frustration among Sanford community members who were reminded, once again, of the need to shield their young from the careless bullets of those who continue to view Black males through the lens of criminality. Many agreed that even though the actions of Zimmerman may have been legal under the "Stand Your Ground" law, the verdict certainly was not just. It is this dichotomy that has served as a clarion call to many to seek more socially-just outcomes.

In the aftermath of the Trayvon Martin tragedy, some educators are reaffirming their commitment to



antioppressive paradigms that can address the complex dilemmas of race playing out in today's classrooms and communities. As President Barack Obama serves his second term in office, the suggestion that we live in a postracial society will continue to draw strength. At the same time, many communities like Sanford, Florida will be left to make sense of the meaning of race in a society that no longer claims race as a legitimate construct but continues to relegate Black and Brown children to a palpably racialized existence. As the construct of race becomes more elusive, while at the same time maintaining its power, social justice educators must rethink their strategy toward antiracist and antioppressive outcomes.

In the final section of this essay, I extend an invitation to educators to seek new approaches to social justice education that will address both the extrapersonal and intrapersonal aspects of antioppressive work. In the following pages, I share lessons from one of the most influential civil rights leaders and theologians of the 20th century, Thurman. It was Thurman's (1976) work that first prompted Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, commitment to a philosophy of nonviolent resistance. I urge educators to revisit some of the lessons of the 1960s as we usher in a new era in the civil rights movement.

As I read Thurman's (1976) *Jesus and the Disinherited* just weeks before the Zimmerman verdict, I was struck by the complementarity of the author's work to contemporary social justice paradigms. Both social justice educators, from a sociological perspective, and Thurman, from a theological perspective, can inform our understanding of antioppressive frameworks. Yet they approach this work with different goals in mind. For social justice educators, the goal is toward structural changes in society, with a primary focus on the extrapersonal aspects of social change. Social justice educators use as their analytical framework an understanding of the anatomy of oppression and propose as the antidote an approach to education that fosters critical consciousness—that is, an awareness of the embedded practices and norms that function to maintain systems of oppression. For Thurman, the goal was toward structural change in the human spirit, with a focus on the intrapersonal aspects of social change efforts. Thurman used as his analytical framework an

understanding of the anatomy of fear, hatred, and hypocrisy—what he described as “the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited” (p. 29)—and recommended a theology of fellowship and reconciliation that restores human beings to right relationship (i.e., justice).

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman (1976) investigated as his central question, how are we to respond in the face of systems of dehumanization? Through an exploration of the ministry of Jesus, Thurman identified love as the key to maintaining our common humanity in the midst of human atrocity. Originally published in 1949, in a historical moment when resistance and retaliation would seem a suitable response to the lynchings and terror that characterized so much of life in the segregated South, Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* offered a response to suffering that protects against the destruction of one's soul.

Thurman (1976) challenged those “who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall” (p. 11) to maintain courage, integrity, and dignity in the face of atrocities rather than resorting to fear, deception, and hatred. All too often, Thurman argued, these techniques have been used by the poor, dispossessed, and disinherited to protect themselves against the strong. While these might seem like appropriate responses to human atrocities, the tragic consequence, he argued, is one of moral degradation. For Thurman, there was no excuse for disintegrating into destructive forces. Yet he offered more than mere admonishment. Thurman's text is a battle cry for those whose lives have been little valued to fight—not for revenge—but to wrest their souls from the stranglehold of iniquity. Thurman argued that the life of man is in his spirit, what he referred to as the “inward center” (p. 21). It is there that his thoughts and motives are formed; it is from the heart of man that actions flow. As such, it is in the spiritual realm that the real battle for freedom must be fought.

With love and forgiveness as spiritual guideposts, Thurman (1976) urged readers toward reconciliation and fellowship. Yet the kind of fellowship Thurman referred to cannot be a distant understanding established through third person accounts, nor can it be established on superficial interactions that do not challenge existing patterns of separation. Rather, it must “be rooted in concrete experience” (Thurman, 1976, p. 106). As Thurman

pointed out, “No amount of good feeling for people in general, no amount of simple desiring, is an adequate substitute” (p. 106).

Thurman (1976) described racial segregation as a “complete ethical and moral evil” (p. 98) because it obliterates any possibility of genuine fellowship through which individuals can come to understand their common humanity:

Whatever it may do for those who dwell on either side of the wall, one thing is certain: it poisons all normal contacts of those persons involved. The first step toward love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value. This cannot be discovered in a vacuum or in a series of artificial or hypothetical relationships. It has to be in a real situation, natural, free. (p. 98)

Segregation, he argued, provides a moral justification that ultimately leads to hatred. Once unleashed, hatred cannot be contained and runs the risk of moving from a singular subject to a more general contempt (i.e., racialized stereotypes).

Thurman (1976) determined that hatred often develops when there is contact without fellowship. Without genuine fellowship, he pointed out, interactions often take place on the terms of those in power. Since relations of power are always imbalanced and based on a sense that the other is inferior, there is little opportunity for empathy or understanding. In this context, the outcome is almost certain: lives distanced by both geography and familiarity. The result is occasional interaction across difference informed by racialized stereotypes that function as a poor proxy for reality.

Today, we face many of the same challenges of segregation in our schools and communities that Thurman (1976) spoke of more than 70 years ago. A 2012 report revealed that “Fully 15% of [B]lack students, and 14% of Latino students, attend ‘apartheid schools’ across the nation, where [W]hites make up 0 to 1% of the enrollment” (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012, p. 9). In citing data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Dorsey (2013) also indicated, “In 2009–10 ... more than 40% of Black and Latino students were attending schools that were 90% to 100% minority” (p. 535).

Although these statistics are illuminating, the image of racial segregation in America is perhaps best characterized by Dustin Cable, a demographic researcher at the University of Virginia, who has produced a comprehensive map of ethnic distribution in America. The racial dot map, as it is being called, features 308,745,538 colored dots—one for each person counted in the 2010 census data, with each racial group represented by a different color. The map tells the story of each city—some show clear lines of demarcation between races; others show more of an overlapping between ethnic groups; and still others show almost complete racial homogeneity and isolation (Vanhemert, 2013). Yet across all the maps, one thing is clear: although we are not as segregated as we were in the Jim Crow era, we are far from integrated.

Cable’s map provides a powerful visual representation of our nation’s racial isolation. Yet it cannot tell the story of lives impacted by segregation and racialized violence. In the city of Sanford, Florida, where Trayvon Martin was killed, the occurrence of other racial acts of violence has not faded from memory. In 2005, two White security guards killed Black teenager Tavares McGill in what was described as a self-defense shooting. In 2010, Justin Collison, the White son of a Sanford police lieutenant, punched a Black homeless man in the head, killing him on scene. In 2012, a 50-year-old White man was brutally beaten with a hammer by two Black males.

Sanford, Florida is not unlike other cities throughout the nation that have experienced large demographic shifts characterized by increasing racial diversity and enduring patterns of segregation. A 2011 report, *The Persistence of Segregation in the Metropolis: New Findings from the 2010 Census*, provided rates of racial segregation throughout the nation’s largest metropolitan areas. Using a scale called the index of dissimilarity, which measures the degree of segregation between different groups, the Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford, Florida region earned a score of 49.3%. Although considerably less segregated than cities such as Detroit, Milwaukee, and New York, which have a dissimilarity index of nearly 80%, racial segregation in the Sanford, Florida, area is still considerable. Even more dangerous is the fortress mentality created and reinforced in gated

communities like the one where Martin was shot (Benjamin, 2012, p. A27). Although it may never be possible to determine the true racial motivations in the Martin shooting, the pattern of racial isolation that characterizes our nation, along with the mentality that gates must be erected to maintain safety and separation from those who simply do not belong, may be part of the deadly combination that we continue to witness.

The antidote, Thurman (1976) reminded us, must be fellowship. Only when we share a common dignity and humanity are we freed from the bondage of oppression. Genuine fellowship, as described by Thurman, must entail several elements. First, it must be joined in risk taking. This is Thurman's charge: "Take the initiative in seeking ways by which you can have the experience of a common sharing of mutual worth and value. It may be hazardous, but you must do it" (p. 100). Second, fellowship must establish equality of status, where both parties are adorned with the same rights of citizenship under a banner of common humanity and freed from the constraints of social categories. It is the point in an interaction where two parties are willing to put aside the "pride of race and status, making all race and class distinctions impertinent" (p. 104). It is here, Thurman said, that "each person meets the other where he is and treats him as if he were where he ought to be" (p. 105). Third, fellowship requires that individuals establish a general rule or attitude of respect for personhood that can be applied to all human interactions, one that is founded upon an ethical obligation to our neighbors with an understanding of each other as fully human. According to Thurman,

Once the mutual discovery is made that the privileged is a man and the underprivileged is a man, or that the Negro is a man and the [W]hite man is a man, then the normal desire to make this discovery inclusive of all brings one to grips with the necessity for working out a technique of implementation. (p. 101)

Such a technique, Thurman (1976) believed, can be found in an attitude or "reverence for personality" (p. 101)—that is, an absolute regard for personhood and a respect for God's creation in each person.

If we are to prepare young people through a curriculum of racial justice and reconciliation, one

of our aims must be to ensure the possibility of fellowship through community. Thurman's (1976) work is instructive here, as it causes us to re-evaluate the centrality of community to education and to all of human interaction. In the teaching of Thurman, the focus of community is not just about how pedagogy, classroom structure, and curricular design serve in the interest of fostering deep engagement, but instead is directed toward the creation of human fellowship. Thurman described the imperative for human fellowship in this way: "Every man is potentially every other man's neighbor. Neighborliness is spatial; it is qualitative. A man must love his neighbor directly, clearly, permitting no barriers between" (p. 89).

The real power of Thurman's (1976) work is that it set forth an emancipatory way of living, one that calls for all individuals to seek a common humanity. It also provides critical insight to the inner working of systems of domination and oppression, and a faith response that leads to genuine transformation of the individual. According to Thurman, those who live with their "backs against the wall" (p. 11) must understand "the anatomy of the issues facing them" (p. 108) and recognize how fear, deception, and hatred are complicit in maintaining systems of oppression. Furthermore, they must learn how to destroy the power of those destructive forces by pursuing an intentional love that seeks reconciliation.

Although Thurman (1976) wrote this book as both a caution and hope for those who are disinherited, this book is for everyone who wants to learn about fellowship and reconciliation—antidotes to the "hounds of hell" (p. 29). Although Thurman spoke largely from the context of the segregated South, his primary concern was not for the physical condition of Blacks, but for the spiritual condition of all humankind; in this sense, the dispossessed to which he refers is all of humanity. Thurman's message is universal.

### **Epilogue: A New Civil Rights Era**

In 2014, our nation sits in the midst of a new civil rights era marked by a growing sentiment that race does not matter while at the same time racial disparities remain pervasive. It may be years to come before we fully understand the impact of the Martin-Zimmerman case and its imprint on the American racial imagination. Yet one thing can be certain: we will not be unchanged.

As a teacher-educator, I cannot help but wonder what the future of public education will look like. Will we continue to be confined by the category of race and the limiting expectations that are often tied to this social category, or will we, in the words of urban sociologist Pedro Noguera, become “guardians of equity” (as cited in Reborá, 2012)? This is not merely an educational issue, but one of social and spiritual significance. Our response to the challenges of racial discrimination and oppression will not only reveal our social conscience as a nation but also shape the lives of our youth, many of whom, like Trayvon Martin, have faced a profoundly racialized existence.

This essay has attempted to draw connections between the function of racial categories and unequal social outcomes and to make the case for an intentional effort toward antioppressive frameworks in education. Although this work does not provide a prescriptive formula for achieving more equitable outcomes, it offers a beginning framework toward a curriculum of racial justice and reconciliation. In so doing, this essay demonstrates the ways in which the tenets of social justice education and a theology of reconciliation and fellowship can act simultaneously to address both the metastructures that create inequity in society and the inward nature of humankind that serves to reinforce those inequities. In its final analysis, this essay suggests that educators must be concerned for both the intrapersonal and extrapersonal aspects of antioppressive work.

Both social justice theory and Thurman’s (1976) teachings have something to contribute to this effort. In the years following the Trayvon Martin shooting, nothing could be more valuable in education than reclaiming our commitment to responsible citizenship, moral courage, and a concern for human dignity—principles espoused by social justice educators and Thurman alike.

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