

Article

All Mixed up: Multi/Racial Liberation and Compassion-Based Activism

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Abstract: This paper seeks to identify pathways of liberation amidst contemporary challenges faced by those who identify as multiracial by re-imagining various approaches to confronting racial oppression through compassion-based activism. The primary question of this study focuses on how compassion (as broadly understood by and across the world's spiritual traditions) might sustain, invigorate, or be adapted to aid the struggle for racial justice in the United States. This paper begins with reviewing theories from critical mixed race studies and brings them into dialogue with the eight themes of compassion-based activism. The results of this interdisciplinary study provide both the promises and challenges to a compassion-based approach when it comes to multi/racial liberation and proposes a reinterpretation that centers multi/racial experiences.

Keywords: spiritual formation; practical theology; critical mixed race studies

1. Racial Oppression in the United States: Starting with Multi/Racial Experiences

The category of “race” has given rise to serious harm since the inception of the United States (US), and many people consider racism to be the original sin of the US. Scholars call it the toxic sludge that muddies the water at the table from which we all drink (Rogers et al. 2018; Wallis 2016; Coates 2015). Seemingly every day, there are countless stories in the US news of racially motivated violence, racially oppressive policies, and the constant ‘otherizing’ that makes it very difficult to imagine how—or if—healing is even possible. Race-based problems do not just affect those who are racially minoritized, as some might believe, but debilitate those who are racially privileged too, preventing them from authentic human participation in collective communal life (DiAngelo 2018). As a result, efforts to heal from racial oppression and the deformed living conditions it creates are both acts of unlearning and relearning and must be taken up by each person and at various levels of human experience (individual, interpersonal, and the social-structural, to name a few). For those who seek human flourishing in the US, race must be confronted on the many dimensions in which it exists and resistance to racial oppression lived out through imagination, creativity, and resilience. It is a long and tiring road of recovery for any who seek to overcome white normativity and internalized white supremacy (along with all other socially dominant and oppressive ways of being such as sexism or heteronormativity).¹

Critical race theory (CRT) is a prominent field of inquiry that began in critical legal studies through the works of Bell (1992) and Crenshaw (1996) that attempts to name the many violations that race and racism has caused (and continues to cause) within US life. CRT asserts that racism is endemic to US society and if justice is to be realized, the category of race must be analyzed and racial oppression dismantled (Delgado and Stefaniec 2005). CRT has continued to expand and be deepened by other

¹ See Merton (1963) reference to the Civil Rights Movement as an “Offering of Redemption” for white people in *Letters to a White Liberal*.

fields such as psychology, sociology, history, literature, and education, as it continues to uncover and name the many ways that race infiltrates and negatively impacts US civic relations.

Yet while race continues to be analyzed through structural and material lenses vis-à-vis critical theories, scholars of many backgrounds (including those from psychology, sociology, law, education, and religion) have argued that the proliferation of racism is not just an outward reality but something that is bred on the inside of people's lives through their own distorted perceptions of reality itself. These scholars have argued, in their own ways, that the problems of race are not solely material but spiritual in nature. Thus, race must be dealt with interiorly to ensure liberation (Magee 2019; Williams et al. 2016; Manuel 2015; Thurman 1949). In other words, naming race and critically analyzing it socio-culturally is not sufficient; for full freedom to occur, there must also be an internal change of consciousness. This sentiment is shared with Chicana queer feminist and antiracist advocate Anzaldúa (1987) who wrote about her own mixed racialized experience: "It was a foundational change of consciousness that helped me find peace. To be a *mestiza* (mixed) is to operate in pluralistic mode. Nothing is thrust out—the good, the bad, the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned" (p. 61).

Anzaldúa's assessment poignantly reveals how racial oppression limits our capacities to experience wholeness (internally and externally) and severs our connection from the realization that all life is precious and valuable. Racial oppression is insidious in nature because it not only causes physical harm but disconnects humanity from the natural wisdom located in our very bodies (this re-connection is urgently needed if we are to find any healing). We find that racial oppression not only distorts our societal relations with one another but reduces the personal loving connection we have within ourselves as sacred beings (Williams et al. 2016). When racialization is performed and accepted in our human relationships, we are tempted to diminish human experience to a monolith rather than embracing the multidimensional and intercultural experience of being human (Panikkar and Pavan 2018, p. xvii). Hence in the US context, if we are to reclaim our humanity, we must first recognize, and subsequently tactfully resist, patterns of racial oppression (whether categories are assigned or self-identified, as in my case, being a multiracial person) by challenging behaviors, social hierarchies, inequities, and ideologies that support racial oppression (Bell 1992). I contend that all this necessary work must be grounded in (and flows from) the personal and interior depths of humanity, where wisdom resides.

This predicament is especially pertinent for people who are multiracial. Critical mixed race scholar Harris (2016) writes about the deadly ways racial oppression specifically impacts the multiracial population in the United States. Harris writes about multiracial female students at universities and colleges: "[they] did not have much hope for the eradication of racism, monoracism, colorism, and other oppressive experiences and structures they faced on campus" (p. 810). Harris goes on to share that multiracial students are marginalized from both racial groups in which they belong due to the logic of monoracism. Harris borrows the term "monoracism" from the work of race scholars Kevin Johnston and Nadal who discuss how multiracial persons are constantly assigned into monoracial groups and how relative privilege is given to any multiracial person who will operate according to monoracial logic (Johnston and Nadal 2010). Because of this, many multiracial students suffer from self-esteem issues and other relational challenges without an ability to talk about how race impacts them.

Harris's work cuts through the Black/white binary often created within conversations in critical race analysis that renders multiracial experiences invisible and repeats the exclusionary experience of being *not enough*.² Harris's method and advocacy through centering multiracial narratives is not a rebuttal or attachment to other forms of racial oppression that are monoracial (such as anti-Black racism which I will speak to later) that continue to pervade US society, but helps to round out the many ways in which white supremacy operationalizes through creating tiers and layers of oppression. Harris's approach helps to make visible the sinister nature of racial oppression and how it often needs

² See (Graff 2019).

monoracism to exist, thus by her shedding light on those who cannot fit into a monoracial box, her work helps render the entire system of racial hierarchy defunct (Mills 1997).

With the multiracial population in the US having grown 1000 percent from 1970 to 2013 and expected to triple again by 2060 (an estimate of 30 million people), it is vital that racial justice efforts are inclusive of the multiracial experience and that more research is done to center and create space for multiracial stories to be told and cared about (Pew Research Center 2015; McKibbin 2019). It is in light of this contemporary shift that I am interested in how capacities to confront racial oppression (especially that of monoracism) might be deepened or transformed when starting with multi/racial experience(s) paired with spiritualities of resistance (broadly defined and spanning the world's spiritual traditions).

It should be noted that I use the "/" and the "(s)" in my writing of multi/racial experience(s) because I want to emphasize that there is not one definition of multiraciality.³ While for pragmatic and conversational purposes I have identified multiraciality through a few shared common denominators (namely, I define multiraciality as those whose personal racial self-identification is informed by having two biological parents who are socially viewed as members of separate monoracial groups such as in the example of a person like myself, whose father is identified as Asian and whose mother is identified as Hispanic). This differs from a person who has two parents of mixed racial ancestry or from a person whose parents are from different ethnic cultures but are viewed as sharing the same monoracial group (for example, a person could have a mixed parent who is Black and of white/Euro ancestry and another who is simply Black, but both parents are identified socially as monoracially Black) (Wann 2013; Morning 2000). Thus I want to stress the plurality of multi/racial experiences and continue to work towards more personal, contextual, and multidimensional approaches toward those who identify as multi/racial.⁴ Thus, for the remainder of this work, I will use the "/" and "(s)" when I am specifically illuminating the various nuances and intersections of multiraciality within individuals or highlighting the diversity of experiences within the multi/racial population and remove the "/" when speaking more broadly to similarities within multiraciality.

Critical mixed race studies have served to help provide the necessary understanding that for multi/racial justice to take place it must take up the task of resisting race in different ways than those who are monoracial and must call forth new modes of racial analysis in the contemporary US context.⁵ Yet, it is my overall bias that with the enormity of multi/racial oppression, approaches to healing must be holistic (including intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural awareness) and applicable to many kinds of multi/racial experiences, and so no one dimensional approach will suffice. While this paper cannot cover all approaches to multi/racial experiences, it assumes plurality and the need for further work that centers racialized experiences that do not fit the monoracial construction alongside other kinds of racial oppression.

1.1. Liberation from Racial Oppression: A Call to Spirituality

Howard Thurman, a mystic, mentor, and spiritual leader to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., believed that it is only through mystical experience that a person finds the power, source, and the possibility of overcoming the perils of racial oppression.⁶ In Thurman's major work *Jesus and the*

³ The resistance to the multi/racial population as a monolithic group continues to be problematized in multi/racial scholarship. See (Harris et al. 2018).

⁴ There is also scholarship written on the similarities between multiracial people and transracial adoptees (because of the absence of racial resemblance with parents) and so some findings I propose may carry over and find common ground; however, my specific emphasis on multi/racial experience(s) differs from transracial adoptees because for multi/racial folk, their parents are not only racially divergent from the child but also from each other. See "Being Raised by White People": Navigating Racial Difference among Adopted Multiracial Adults (Samuels 2009) by Samuels, G. M.

⁵ Molly McKibbin writes about how critical mixed race studies are helping to nuance conversations on race by challenging the assumptions of the Black/white binary.

⁶ For this work, I have specifically chosen mystical experience rather than spirituality because it refers to the very personal and unique events that unfold in the life a person wherein the person becomes aware of the interconnectedness of all of life

Disinherited (1949), he reflects on Jesus's path as a spirituality and "technique of survival" for those who are oppressed. Thurman reiterates that for social violence to cease, it must first be confronted and overcome within the soul of each person. For Thurman, mystical experience is both personal and political because it disrupts destructive ways of being human and simultaneously ushers in the recovery and reclamation of the divine value and cultural resources of those who have been racially oppressed. In this understanding, mystical experience is not just an ethereal individualized experience but a concrete path to societal transformation and sustained social engagement. Furthermore, true mystical experience is not satisfied with staying on the inside of someone's experience but compels us to bear witness to love and justice publicly. I will speak to this understanding of interiority later on which includes the inner life but always is tied to outer behaviors and material manifestations.

When Thurman was asked by those abroad how he could advocate for Christianity despite its historical use to justify African-American oppression and slavery, Thurman responded by insisting that Jesus's actual experience and spirituality stemmed from his own experience and solidarity with the lowly of society. James Cone, a generation younger and the founder of Black liberation theology, builds on this as he sees Jesus's execution on the cross as analogous to the lynching tree experience suffered by African Americans in the United States (Cone 2011). Thurman's mystical approach to racial justice and liberation provides us with a foundation to recover the divine life present within humanity by encouraging personal and collective empowerment, the reclamation of cultural heritage, and identifying creative actions that are restorative and lead to justice for all.

Scholars who research psychological healing from oppression also affirm that liberation must not be simply theoretical but must include the *actual* and personally embodied experience of love (which is the ideal interpersonal gift of a trauma therapist). This embodied experience of love is not just an emotional feeling but a state of holistically showing up in a relationship where a person is seen, heard, and cared for from the ground of unconditional love (by unconditional love, Finley talks about the love that does not invade or abandon someone when sharing his or her most vulnerable experiences) (Grier 2019; Finley 2010). Many mystics in the twentieth century also testified how it was the mystical experiences of being both the lover and the beloved that guided their commitments to social liberation (Nouwen 1992; Day 1976; Merton 1963). Mysticism offers a direct experience of love that is personal and connected to all of life. It is in these moments that the possibilities of a new narrative erupt within a person's soul that I believe can help to resist internalized oppression and accept one's infinite value and worth. The result of mystical experience can be revitalized courageous social action that is all inclusive, nonviolent, and transformational.

1.2. A Spiritual Approach to Confronting Oppression: Compassion-Based Activism

Contemporary practical theologian Rogers (2020) has recently offered a framework for spiritually rooted social action seeking to combat injustice and suffering in the world, a practice he names as "compassion-based activism." For Rogers, the foundation of this practice is the mystical experiences of the greatest wisdom teachers across spiritual traditions. It is Rogers's hope that compassion-based activism can also serve to help practitioners access their own mystical experiences as well. Rogers grounds his interdisciplinary approach through multiple fields including: Nonviolent Communication, Internal Family Systems theory, Restorative Justice, and contemplative spiritual practices from the world's spiritual traditions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Spiritual Psychology.⁷ Rogers provides many narratives and case studies of how compassion works to transform violence, particularly when it is used by members within groups who are marginalized

at a visceral level and is then inclined to move towards the margins of life with more openness, empathy, and compassion. Spirituality and spiritual practices on the other hand are the "path" or postures recommended that may lead into mystical experience, which I argue is at the heart of true transformation. For further discussion on this difference, see *Mysticism and Spirituality Part 1: Mysticism, Fullness of Life* (Panikkar and Pavan 2014) by Raimon Panikkar and Milena Carrera Pavan.

⁷ Influential resources include (Rogers 2015; Schwartz 1995; Rosenberg 2003; Zehr 2014).

within society. Rogers illustrates the practical implications of compassion-based activism by sharing narratives such as a woman who is both a member of the queer community and a rabbi, as well as in the example of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He argues that compassion is one of the highest spiritual powers that support, sustain, and replenish resources of vitality and resilience in those struggling for justice.

Rogers offers twelve core principles that guide his understanding of compassion and rather than prescribe particular actions or methods, Rogers instead describes eight qualities or spiritual energies that guide compassion-based activism and depicts them in what he calls the “Compass of Warrior Compassion” (illustrated in Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Compass of Compassion-Based Activism created by Frank Rogers, Jr.

1.3. Figure

In Rogers’s work, each spiritual energy is held in tension with another energy across the axis of the compass. These tension points create seemingly paradoxical values such as “firm limits around violation” and “universal inclusivity”. It takes the spiritual mind and practice of compassion to hold together the seemingly opposite energies in praxis. It is the essence of tension points where I find parallel and connections to the multi/racial experiences. For it is those who identify as multi/racial, who are always caught *in between* racial worlds and holding the tension of the *both/and* while rejecting the binary of *either/or*. In this way, I see Rogers’s compassion-based activism as a great starting point to support the dynamic multiplicity of experiences of multi/racial people and potentially serve to imagine new capacities of resistance to racialized oppression.

2. Possibilities of Compassion-Based Activism in the Struggle for Multi/Racial Liberation

One of the primary benefits of compassion-based activism for multi/racial people is that the approach understands the struggle against oppression to be sacred. The foundation of sacredness invites multi/racial people to go deeper into their own experiences and embrace their personal journeys as infinitely valuable and full of wisdom (even as confusing or oppressed as they might be due to systemic racial oppression). A compassion-based approach to activism and healing means that every experience (especially experiences of injustice) contains possibilities to guide us even further into a commitment to justice for all, but these insights must be tended to with patience and excavated with detailed attention and care.

In a world where multi/racial people are ostracized for not identifying with one monoracial group and discounted when sharing personal racialized experiences that do not fit into monoracial logic, this approach is a call to embrace the possibility of identifying as two or three racial groups and be totally credible in doing so. Compassion-based activism moves forward only when the invalidations and oppression that people experience are named, centered, reflected upon, and engaged with compassionately. This has implications for multi/racial people because it gives courage to those who identify as multi/racial to remember that no matter how insignificant or difficult experiences

may seem, they are definitely not meaningless. All experiences of suffering are indeed worthy of investigating and ultimately transforming (starting in one's own interior person and flowing into the larger society and world). Because the power of compassion-based activism is rooted within the interior life of a person, the practice calls for self-empowerment and the lifting up of internal wisdom that has been systemically oppressed by continually returning to what is going on within a person and inviting the person to engage with it compassionately.

A second major benefit to compassion-based activism is that responses to injustice are always discerned case by case. This affirmation aids multi/racial people to also recognize that resisting racial oppression differs in each situation and emphasizes the contextual nature of how race is operationalized. While multi/racial people have been criticized on multiple fronts and simultaneously by different monoracial groups (both white and communities of color) for trying to pass racially and at the expense of racially minoritized people (and in so doing fulfilling the myth of model minority), this again speaks to the "differential micro-racialization" inherent to MultiCrit and illuminates the inherent logic in the workings of white supremacy and essentialism (Harris et. al 2018). In other words, a compassion-based approach to racial oppression fits along with this reality because it assumes there are no one-for-all responses to racial injustice and that each circumstance must be evaluated carefully and with respect to the integrity of the person or community. Compassion-based activism admits that common responses to injustice are to seek retaliation, be overwhelmed and paralyzed by the weight of the injustice, or to (consciously or unconsciously) avoid confrontation at one's own demise; yet, Rogers contends that there is another way of engaging with issues of oppression that is innovative, creative, and outside the box.

Rogers assures that this method flows from personal spiritual empowerment and presence rather than prescribed or preconceived actions. This affirms the plurality of racialized experiences within the multi/racial population and helps provide the space for potentially very different responses to racialized encounters to emerge depending on the givens of various concrete situations and the people who are involved. This benefit is a call to embodiment and remembering the body as the carrier of resources to illumine the appropriate action. This helps to avoid the false monoracial binary that exists where to accept one's multi/racial identity is to be complicit in anti-Black racism and also helps to prevent anyone from making the case that all multi/racial people should act in certain ways at all times.

Finally, the third major gift I see in using a compassion-based approach to confront multi/racial oppression is that it assumes an interdependent approach to justice which I will name Inter-Justice. As Black activist Fannie Lou Hamer declared publicly in 1971, "nobody's free until everybody's free" (Hamer 1971). Inter-Justice calls for action that includes both personal agency and particularity but also collective solidarity and accountability. Compassion-based approaches to racial oppression seek novel ways to confront injustice and call humanity to its highest good. As the spiritual teacher Raimon Panikkar wrote: "The real criterion of true contemplation is that it leads to praxis, even if that praxis consists only in transforming one's own life and immediate environment" (Panikkar and Pavan 2018, p. 240). This statement speaks to both the internal and external factors that are required to do justice but calls the person to start and focus on the interior personal level, keeping close watch over inclinations to pride and/or self-righteousness. The overarching aspiration of a compassion-based approach is that practitioners will experience a profound connection to life and hence embody in the world a presence of peacemaking congruent with the spiritual principles of harmony (inclusion), liberation (freedom), and justice (nonviolence) amidst racially oppressive conditions. It is this interdependence where multi/racial people are also kept accountable and in solidarity with others who are racially oppressed, not falling for the trap of racial hierarchy that has plagued multi/racial people throughout history. Inter-Justice helps multi/racial people to hold the tension of personal reclamation of identity along with interracial solidarity. Liberation from racial oppression from a multi/racial perspective is the ability to claim the entirety of racial-ethnic heritage, identity, and culture and help to encourage every human being who faces systemic and structural oppression to do the same. If intergroup solidarity is

not present, multi/racial efforts can easily be misunderstood and sidetracked by individual identity politics or in-group bias above and over other groups that are struggling towards racial justice.

Challenges to a Compassion-Based Approach to Racial Oppression

There are three major critiques of contemplative methods to social transformation that could also pose a challenge for a compassion-based approach to multi/racial liberation and to which I therefore would like to respond. The first critique is that spiritually rooted activism does not produce real change in the concreteness of life because it is too focused on the individual rather than structural and systemic oppression. The second critique is that compassion-based activism can easily be misunderstood as a means of escapism, bypassing real world problems and dismissing the violence that accompanies resistance. The third critique is that a spiritually based approach to racial oppression could possibly minimize the effects of racial trauma through hyper-spirituality, thus rendering the approach ineffective (or perhaps even a hindrance) to holistic healing.

While the first challenge to compassion-based activism is the seemingly individualistic (rather than interpersonal or structural) nature of the approach, a true compassion-based approach measures itself based on the ability to live in solidarity with the suffering of the world. While a compassion-based approach would absolutely advocate that change starts (and is sustained) within the interior life a person this cannot be done in a vacuum and must be tested out by living in the real world. When Thomas Merton would teach about the spiritual life to his followers, he would often say, “You did not come here [the monastery] to breathe some rarified air, but to experience the suffering of the whole world in your heart. Otherwise there is no justification to living a place like this” (Finley 2010). Hence, while the interior aspect of liberation is where the empowerment resides, this is only true and good insofar as it sustains people in prolonged social engagement (even with a willingness to suffer for the sake of love) and does seek real, material, and tangible outcomes (however, these impacts may not be evident in the lifetime of those who go down this path). It is imperative, in my estimation, that any discussion of spiritually based activism must include and value socio-cultural and structural analysis of oppression(s) and not succumb to the disillusionment of idealist-only approaches to justice.⁸

The second major critique surrounds issues with taking a non-violent approach to justice. For it is common understanding in critical scholarship that any struggle towards justice inevitably results in violence from those in power. Postcolonial scholars have argued that when a person or group effectively interrogates and problematizes the ways of dominant consciousness, the price paid is ensuing and increasing violence. Postcolonial scholar, Edward Said wrote *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Said 1983) that postcolonial practice is formed through courageous criticism of the dominant culture and is opposed to tyranny, producing self-knowledge that is non-coercive and committed to human freedom. Said agrees with Frantz Fanon that this freedom to critique the dominant, will result in violence. Frantz Fanon goes on to emphasize that postcolonial analysis is about healing the loss of identity, history, and culture that have been stripped away through structural oppression and domination and when a person or group begins to pursue this healing, Fanon attests that it will provoke institutional powers of oppression to react and result in the criminalization of those seeking and in need of justice (Fanon 1952). While these critiques embrace the radical problem of racial oppression, and the need to affirm and welcome a pluralistic notion of truth in the pursuit of justice—truth that has multiple centers from embodied witness and human experience—the remaining question is what life “free from the gaze of the colonizer” actually looks like and when violence happens, what should the response be?

⁸ Richard Delgado discusses the problems with taking a psychological or “discourse”-only approach to combat racism and I agree with this assessment. See (Delgado 2008). However, I still contend that the ability to remain sustained in resistance to material oppression flows from a person’s interior life; for me the interior life includes but is not reducible to the psyche. Another way to put it would be that interiority speaks not only to individual choices, personality, temperament but also how the actions (or inactions) are taken to engage systemically and structurally, which is the key strength of critical analysis.

Some have argued that in order for power to concede anything, the oppressed must take matters into their own hands and do so by all means necessary. Black philosophers such as Tommy J. Curry have fervently advocated for “pre-emptive self-defense” as exemplified in the works of Robert F. Williams, who articulates the need for a willingness to use armed violence for the sole purpose of defending victims of oppression. My response to this position is similar to that of Gandhi who said that committing violence for the purposes of self-defense is admissible for those who cannot find it possible to be nonviolent (and even that self-defensive violence is greater than living in acquiescence of oppression due to fear); however, I stand by the belief that nonviolence is the strongest force of spirituality and social transformation when it comes to resisting oppression.⁹ In conclusion, while I affirm the need for oppression to be resisted and overcome, I differ in my approach as I would advocate that the struggle for justice is ultimately won on the interiority of a person, rather than over and against an “enemy” on the outside.¹⁰

I want to again be clear that my insistence on nonviolent compassion-based activism and spirituality is not the insistence of non-aggression or passive behaviors that sacrifice agency; on the contrary, it is a call to disruptive, radical, engaged struggle that happens within the embodiment of a person that enables them to overcome the temptation of demonizing or de(hu)manizing other human beings (which is the evil at the core of racism and all forms of social oppression).¹¹ For what is the highest good? Is the highest good to seek the preservation of my own individual life even if it means to murder another in retribution of evil? Or might it be that the highest good is to arrive at a transformed consciousness that authentically and honestly confronts evil head-on and yet offers mercy? Here is where compassion-based activism comes in. While critical theories speak to the potentialities of evil and oppression present in the human condition (and for this reason are urgently important), the spiritual perceptivity refuses to judge the value of humanity by their worst behaviors and is open to the possibility of transformation in people and in relationships and in the greater institutions that make up society. This openness to the possibility of transformation, of course, does not guarantee it will happen. This is particularly important to name and be sensitive to when it comes to the inevitability of Black death in US society. Black philosophers and critical thinkers have suggested that the US was created to terrorize Black bodies and that this behavior will continue in many insidious ways, and so what then can compassion-based activism offer Blacks and others amidst this reality? It is my sense that this posture of nonviolence and interrelatedness (or the human-izing of others) is that path that heals the spiritual sickness at the core of evil and oppression and this stance interrupts the cycles of violence and oppression, exposing them for the immaturity and ignorance they are. It is my opinion that compassion has the greatest potentiality for changing the heart and behaviors of oppression because it is this force that refuses to be stuck in the dualistic binary of separateness from any member of humanity.

⁹ See “On Violence and Cowardice” in *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi* edited by R. K. Prabhu and U. R. Rao (Prabhu and Rao 1998).

¹⁰ Tommy J. Curry admits in (Curry and Hills 2015) that the strength of King’s radical approach and understanding of racial justice was to embrace “Black Power”. According to Curry, this vision is rooted in Blackness and is all about the empowerment of personal dignity that flows from the awareness of global interconnectedness with all other human beings. It would be my sense that this vision of Black Power is built on the spiritual foundation of interdependence where no human beings are *enemies* (including those who are doing violence and oppression) and thus nonviolent social engagement is the natural aligning spiritual praxis of this social vision. For King, evil is manifest through racism, ideologies, ignorance, and hate within the human heart and this can only be overcome with love and not hate. This does not mean it is the *responsibility* of the oppressed to end the oppression, this is impossible; however, it means it is the *responsibility* of the oppressed to refuse to allow hatred to have the final authority on their heart and decisions when resisting evil and oppression.

¹¹ While I do not have adequate space in this article to develop my take on what constitutes “violence”, my broad response to this is that the aim of nonviolence seeks to preserve and remain open to the spiritual well-being of collective life (including both the oppressed and oppressors) by seeking the social, relational, financial, emotional, psychological, and spiritual disturbance of the consciousness of the oppressor which is needed to free such a person from the “(un)consciousness of justified oppression”. The myth of violence or exclusion (which is often subtle and unconscious) is at the root of the evil fallacy that causes humanity to not treat other human beings as persons. This also means that while efforts should be taken to sequester the violent tendencies of those doing harm, the goal of nonviolent transformation is to always maintain and affirm the dignity of all parties.

While compassion-based activism does not necessarily claim to have the ability to finally end this vicious cycle in all people and at all times, it allows for more people and institutions to clarify the reality as it is happening and to act in resistance of this through the path of non-violence. Ishmael Tetteh, a spiritual teacher from West Africa (Ghana) discusses that the greatness of a person is found in the ability to call others to greatness and this practice of compassion-based activism will allow for the engaged practice of living free from the tyranny of fear, even amidst the realities of death.¹² Other examples of this are found in the teachings of the liberation movements of Latin America, which understood self-sacrificial solidarity with the poor as a path that will likely lead to martyrdom yet is the foundation for spiritual and social revolution. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador believed that if people were murdered for the sake of love and justice, then their lives would be resurrected in those who remain alive, and consciousness would be raised even higher to resist evil. Other examples include the revolutionary Civil Rights movement in the USA where protesters would often *pause and pray* before and throughout their social engagement as well as the anti-apartheid work shaped in part by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa. These examples demonstrate the possibility of what can happen spiritually and materially as a result of compassion-based activism.

With nonviolence at the core of compassion-based activism, it gives the practitioner the ability to rise above the evil presently manifest in the world and bear witness to the possibility of life beyond violence. Here is where a spiritual master's true power is evident. Compassion-based spirituality involves a courageous and self-empowered willingness to undergo suffering (if necessary) to transform social realities of oppression and injustice. The willingness to undergo suffering, however, is never something that should be forced on the practitioner as to prove themselves a spiritual master, but must come from a place of profound self-empowerment, embodied wisdom, and the self-actualization of love.

I would never romanticize suffering and would maintain that a person should exhaust every path to avoid harm when confronting injustice if possible, but maintain the readiness to suffer, if necessary, to offer one's life for the sake of love and justice. In compassion-based activism no one is ever seen definitively as an "enemy," but affirms humanity and dignity in all with the potential of transformation and love always present (including those who are doing evil). With that said, a truly compassionate spirituality will also not be naïve or blind to oppression but hold "firm limits around violation" so that the vulnerable are protected and grievously are willing to place an unrepentant perpetrator in isolation from human community (Rogers 2020). Thus, while the argument for what constitutes violence is still debated, and it is not my intention to settle this here, my main intention is to advocate for the reality of approaching justice through a restorative lens rather than retributive. This approach also centers the complicated layers of multi/racial experiences and admits that freedom and liberation can only come when all beings are involved and connected. While this project focuses on multiracial people broadly, the desired larger outcome is greater connection and restored relationships with all things and all of life.

The third risk and/or critique is of the intense nature of racialized trauma and suffering. My first response is to name that a spiritually based approach should not be applied in place of psychotherapy but rather alongside it. From my perspective, a compassion-based spirituality simply helps to create the rich ground (or safety) for psychological suffering to be dealt with. Another way to put it might be that spirituality helps to create better conditions for trauma to be tended to rather than avoided (but this does not mean that a person can be healed from trauma without doing the necessary psychological work). There is a real and serious problem when spirituality is used in replacement of psychological care and each person must manage this tension on a personal basis and with much patience. Furthermore, if holistic healing is to occur, it must not only be spiritual and psychological but also social and structural.

¹² See (Tetteh 2020) Dr. Ishmael Tetteh's teachings and collected works by visiting www.drishmaeltetteh.com.

As a result, depending on where each participant is at personally, they may or may not be *ready* for all levels of the spiritual journey and life, but the intention is that they will not be judged for however they choose to engage but to simply be present with themselves in a compassionate manner and to keep growing in the truth out of relationships with self, others, and the world. Not only that, but because race is such a loaded and sensitive topic, and there is still inadequate research done on multi/racial experiences, this affirmation helps those who might feel misunderstood or threatened by the way race is framed when discussing it. Interestingly, even if a person is open and courageous enough to discuss race more deeply, great pain will often be uncovered in this work and so they need the permission and grace to be met and validated where they are. Eventually, it is my contention that if a person continues down the path of compassion, there will inevitably be a confrontation with the reality of suffering as part of life and the willingness to embrace this in the hope that fear and hate will not have the final authority to name what human life is all about but instead love will be all that remains.

3. Re-Imagining Compassion-Based Activism in Light of Multi/Racial Oppression

In this final section, I would like to re-speculate on how compassion-based activism might be adapted to center multi/racial experiences (particularly in predominantly white institutions and spaces) and be helpful to all who are inclined to the struggle for justice in the US. The recommendations I am about to make are particular to the diversity of multi/racial struggles as illuminated by critical mixed race studies and are focused on the US national context. While I recognize this approach is limited, in comparison to a global approach (as the compassion-based activism model is rooted in), I believe it is necessary and helps to concretize the possibilities of how the compassion-based approach might be used in a real context. My decision to focus on race relations within the US also allows for a more thorough and relevant investigation of how multi/racial oppression might be made visible and resisted in a particular place or society.

The first recommendation is to more clearly identify elements of compassion that embrace cultural histories, heritages and ancestral wisdom that the workings of white supremacy have attempted to negate. For example, critical Indigenous studies has borne witness to how certain cultural and spiritual practices were viewed as demonic due to Euro-centric Christian normativity and must be regained for healing to occur. Particularly, for multi/racial people who do not belong to any one monoracial group but multiple racial-ethnic groups, they must be spurred onto remembering all that whiteness has attempted to destroy and erase. While the remembrance of such violence is a painful process (and for many it can be tempting to avoid thinking about their racial-ethnic identity because of it), it seems that compassion would call for this type of recovery. Therefore, efforts to center multi/racial people would call for changing the language within compassion-based activism to concretely involve the reclamation of cultural and spiritual heritage that has been lost through the workings of white supremacy. For example, Rogers discusses the importance of a “grounded non-reactive presence” but fails to name the sources of grounding on which multi/racial people can be strengthened, found in their particular cultural, spiritual, and ethnic makeup. In light of this, a movement of multi/racial empowerment would include the specific invitation for people to embrace their own multi-ancestral heritage (and additionally might even call those who identify as white to remember their own cultural ethnic heritage apart from whiteness).

The second adaptation I would offer is to adapt imaginative social problem solving to speak more to the fluidity of multi/racial experience by renaming it “imaginative situational problem solving”. This agrees with the previously acknowledged reality that every situation is unique but also takes it a step further to realize the malleability within racial dynamics and especially the fluidity that multi/racial people have to constantly endure. The discernment of what action to take of course must promote personal harmony but also collective racial justice in solidarity with other monoracially minoritized groups. Situational problem solving will definitely involve the social-structural level but also integrates the personal, interpersonal, ecological, and other levels of the encounter. This expands the nature of how race impacts life and invites the practitioner to consider many perspectives when discerning the

appropriate action to take. This further specifies the multi-dimensional and micro-differential layers of oppression where “one” situation contains many different energetic possibilities. This situational posture requires even more sensitivity to embodiment and is a call to move from beyond intellectual-only approaches and privileges the embodied sensations that arise as a source of alternative wisdom beyond dualisms and binaries.

Finally, I would recommend that any approach to compassion-based activism (in the US specifically) must continue in dialogue with critical race theories and analysis. While some practices of compassion-based activism might attempt to focus solely on gender or class-based justice, it seems vital to recognize the preeminence of racial dynamics at play in perpetuating injustice within society at large. A compassion-based activism that includes race analysis would call forth an embodied and subversive resistance that is inter-cultural and cross-social group. For example, it is only when whites from all backgrounds and across all sectors of society begin to pursue and lift up racial justice with humility that things will begin to change.¹³

This cross- and inter-group project is difficult and will call for continual attentiveness, compassion, and honest conversation even amongst various members from communities of color but this poly-perspectival approach to social transformation is what compassion further advocates for, and also serves as source of energy needed to facilitate the cross-group cooperation needed at the core of justice work within US society. Here I am not simply talking about the need to analyze the matrix of oppression that is exponentially multiplied by a person’s social location (this is, of course, very important) but rather the need to continually come together and resist the temptation to allow for individual identity politics to be taken up without cross-group and cross-identity solidarity. Perhaps the theme of a “strategic focus on violence” could be changed to read a “strategic focus on racial and systemic violence.” There continue to be too many cases within the US where people fail to internalize and adequately reflect on how US systems and structures perpetuate white normativity and use other identities of oppression to get out of truly considering dynamics of race; therefore, I recommend the continual emphasis on social analyses that begin with the analysis on the preeminence of racial oppression in US life.¹⁴

¹³ This recommendation helps re-imagine ways to address the ubiquitous nature of state-sanctioned inter-group violence (performed by whites as the dominant racial group leading the State) against Black bodies as named in the Social Dominance Theory (SDT). SDT problematizes the ways in which individual, institutional, and social forces coalesce to keep social hierarchies in place. My suggestion is that rather than trying to “change the State” from within, (which Sidanius argues is virtually impossible due to the forces at play) the call from compassion-based activism is to engage in resistance through alternative and creative means and, particularly, it offers a way for those from dominant groups to forego and unlearn oppressive ways of being by deferring to marginalized voices. An example of this could be starting a new inter-cultural and cross-group institution “of safety” within a particular community that replaces the functionality of law enforcement wherein members from various social groups partner together in dialogue and model a different way of ‘keeping one another safe’ than oppressive violence. This is starting to take off in places across the US to form new “communities of care and safety” following from the wisdom of Indigenous communities and communities of color where the police will not be involved in institutional life. For according to SDT, it is only when people with high and low social dominance orientations come together in courageous partnership that the tearing down of “hierarchy enhancing (HE) and “hierarchy attenuating” (HA) institutions (which is the basis of how hierarchy perpetuates) will be possible. The call from compassion-based activism is a personal and collective invitation to see more clearly and allow for the necessary unlearning to take place which is the prerequisite for enacting justice. Compassion also helps to resource people with capacities of courage to disrupt processes that further re-entrench social hierarchies through the power of wisdom and engaged presence. See (Sidanius et al. 2006).

¹⁴ Within Intersectionality studies there is ongoing debate and discord around the politics of resistance and the role of the Black male. Mainstream society constantly demonizes Black men as violent and aggressive and philosopher Tommy J. Curry shows how this is furthered by critiques from Black feminists and womanists. The issues raised by intersectional thinkers is that Black males (when they assert their voice) simply mirror the patriarchal tendencies (copying white men) and, in so doing, silence Black womxn (this term is used in place of ‘woman’ to center trans and nonbinary women of color). However, Curry demonstrates that there is a very large problem with this in that it discounts the realities of race that Black men continually undergo, further undermining Blackness and making Blackness something that is only legitimized when other “non-Black” identities are paired with it. Curry further shows how it is this sort of thinking that allows for the perpetuation of violence against Black men. While my paper is not intended to center on this debate, it is vital to bring this issue to light in any remedy that seeks to support Black bodies in the US. I argue that this issue also further exacerbates the need for the continual insistence of personal agency in the lives of minoritized bodies (in this case, the need for Black men to share their perspectives) and that the path forward is together and can only be worked out by the way of compassion which I

This makes me wonder how each theme of compassion-based activism would be strengthened if it began with a serious and conscious look at structural racism? In my view, the entire spirituality would be deepened and further legitimized when racial dynamics and biases are made visible and the true power of compassion would then be apparent through the lives of those who are working to unlearn racially oppressive tendencies and attitudes and take responsibility to take actions towards healing and flourishing.¹⁵ What if more spiritual practices across wisdom traditions started with particular experiences and critical theories of oppression as the first step or test of helpfulness to humanity?

I imagine that compassion-based activism will provide the impetus and space for Black and white, male and female, queer and cisnet, and all other identities across categories to stand together to enact and call for change. For it is in this type of movement that the narratives and systems of oppression will begin to be reconstructed and reimagined as a different possibility than the demands of subservience to the empire of oppression(s). It is my view that compassion-based activism should not be void of materialist aspirations but rather the actions taken are not contingent upon the results of such an action and remain open to (and even long and hope for) the possibility of transformation. This is another reason why a compassion-based activism must always be in partnership with critical intersectional and racial analysis in its efforts.

In the lives of multi/racial people who know well what it feels like to be excluded from monoracial groups, they perhaps have a unique purview as to embodying the call to Inter-Justice. I submit that Inter-Justice differs from monoracial approaches to racial justice (that are a result of the Black/white binary where the tendency is to only view oneself as either part of the oppressor or the oppressed) because it assumes a multiplicity within oneself and the need for cooperation with diverse others (especially those who are marginalized in society and perhaps even the Earth) in the pursuit of justice. Centering multi/racial experiences will perhaps invite more people from all backgrounds to do the spiritual work necessary in justice, which is both: a (re)claiming of personal agency and dignity amidst the experiences of oppression and also taking time intentionally to seek out, build relationships with, listen, and take actions of solidarity with those who are experiencing different forms of systemic oppression (that is not evident to oneself because of systems of power and privilege), all the while holding the space to overcome the innate temptation to demonize and otherize those who are performing hegemonic actions.

Thus, a compassion-based activism from a multi/racial perspective, Inter-Justice, will choose confrontation with monoracial oppression in all forms but also move beyond the in-group needs (in this case multi/raciality) and seek lives of authentic solidarity with Black and Brown liberation as well as members of groups beyond race. However, the fact remains that for healing to take place in this current US moment, this must include a deep dive into race and the evils of white supremacy. I believe it is the posture of both claiming voice and power sharing that multi/racial experiences can help bring to clarity and offer to people who desire to pursue justice. While the adaptations I have suggested are given to privilege multi/racial experiences in the US, it seems they may also be a helpful starting place for others who are seeking greater self, cultural, and collective empowerment in the struggle against racial oppression (and oppression of all forms) and gift humanity with faculties of compassion so that all stories will be included, valued, and embraced.¹⁶

understand to be helpful in producing genuine conversations and relationships of solidarity with members who experience different marginalization than oneself. See (Curry 2017; Wallace 1979).

¹⁵ My sense of this echoes the humanistic theism proposed by Black philosopher Dwayne Tunstall, wherein the workings of God or the divine can only be called as such when they are tethered to the ethical implications of how humanity treats racially oppressed bodies and commits to resisting anti-Black racism and insisting on the recognition and inclusion of personhood inherent to all people. See (Tunstall 2013).

¹⁶ Thank you to Frank Rogers Jr. who helped lay a foundation for my perspective in this work at the Claremont School of Theology as well as the anonymous reviewers for their candor, perspective, and advocacy that deeply sharpened my approach to this topic in the spirit of solidarity and accountability to other racially minoritized groups (who are not multiracial) in US society.

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