



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Decentering Biblical Interpretation is Anti-Racism Work: African American and Womanist Hermeneutics and Exegesis as Performing Whiteness

Mitzi J. Smith, *Columbia Theological Seminary (Formerly Ashland Theological Seminary - Detroit)*

Blog Series: Social Justice and Civic Engagement
August 10, 2020

Tags: anti-racism | allies | de-centering whiteness

In a webinar on “white allies” moderated by Dr. Lynne Westfield, her guests Drs. Melanie Harris and Jennifer Garvey discussed their collective anti-racism work. Dr. Harris stated that she feels called to work with white colleagues around anti-racism, but that white colleagues must do some preparatory anti-racism work before engaging black people in conversation or enlisting their help. I do not sense a call to anti-racism work *with or for white people*, but I find myself in the thick of it every time I teach a class open to all students and more so in a seminary where white students are the majority.

When white students arrive in my courses, they find that black and brown scholars and our scholarship are centered, thereby decentering whiteness. A question that some white colleagues and students ask after reading my womanist work for the first time, which is the case with this “African American Biblical Interpretation and the Gospel of Luke” course I am currently teaching, is “how do we know when we have gone too far?” (implication, you have gone too far?). Or they assert that “we must find the original meaning of the Bible before we can apply the truth” to contemporary contexts. I have never expressly articulated my work as a womanist biblical scholar as anti-racism work prior to this collaboration between a white male professor, Dr. Dan Ulrich (as learning professor in the course) and the dominantly white Bethany Theological Seminary/Earlham School of Religion where he teaches. This collaboration is my most labor-intensive anti-racism work in the classroom to date.

Teaching biblical studies as an African American female has never been without the challenges of sexism, racism, and classism. I am sure that this isolation required of me during this pandemic has lowered my threshold for racism, but I maintain my composure. Whether it is intentional or not, decentering whiteness while teaching as a black woman is emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and physically taxing. White people in general are oblivious to the impact of anti-racism work on black scholars as teachers and colleagues. In one breath, many white people position themselves as both progressives and gatekeepers of Eurocentric approaches to interpretation. When the participants (white and black) in this course were polled about how many books they had read by African American *biblical* scholars prior to this course, many named black theologians like James Cone or Delores Williams. One white male participant wanted to use his knowledge of Martin Luther King Jr. to demonstrate how radical my work is. King is only palatable to most white people and many nonwhite people post-mortem; in his later years King was regarded as radical. To racism, black bodies are easily interchangeable. As the instructor, I can muster the bandwidth to challenge racist assumptions and ideas or I can preserve my energy for other things. Dr. Harris asks herself “what is the garment I must place on my mind, my body, on my spirit to work with white students today?” Yes, so true.

Our consultants to this collaboration, Drs. Marcia Riggs and Mary Hess, asked me how I plan to create empathy among my students for people experiencing homelessness. My response was through stories, guest speakers (one of whom experienced homelessness and is now the founder/director of Love Beyond Walls in Atlanta), and Matthew Desmond’s book, *Eviction*. In a Consciousness-Raising document I constructed, one of the questions is “have you ever experienced trauma?” and “... or homelessness?” Quite a few said they had not. In *Eviction*, Desmond shares the stories of poor white people (living in a trailer park in the North side of Milwaukee) and poor black people (living in an apartment building on the South side of Milwaukee). Through their stories, readers witness the violent intersectional impact of systemic poverty, racism, and sexism.

The question that also arises is how does one create empathy for the plight of black people? The deaths of too many black and brown women and men have been videotaped and circulated on social media; they were suffocated or shot to death by police officers ‘before our eyes.’ George Floyd was not the first; the killers of Breonna Tylor have yet to be arrested. It is unclear whether most white people marching with BLM and SayHerName protests empathize with black people, it is popular now to do so, and/or the pandemic allows for and compels their participation. In this course, how do I create empathy for black people and encourage a need and desire for becoming anti-racist when white people believe they can have their Eurocentric exegesis cake and be progressive or progressing toward unmitigated anti-racism that both empathizes with black peoples and their lived realities with systemic racism and acknowledges (and exposes) sacralized rituals that perform whiteness?

John Warren argues that “education relies on maintenance of imagined purity, that education effectively treats and reproduces the cultural logic that bodies of color represent a disturbance in a culture of power, a contaminant against the performative nature of whiteness as a pure

and perfect ideal . . . education is a social process and that social process often works in violent ways to erase and inscribe violence on the bodies it encounters.”[1] Whiteness and its performance must be named, made visible to be displaced. One cannot empathize with black people and marginalize the black people’s stories, epistemologies, wisdom, and historical and contemporary experiences. Feminism centers women’s experiences and voices; this alone is troubling to exegesis born in the womb of eurocentrism, androcentrism, and racism. In a recent womanist reading of the story of the so-called “woman caught in adultery,” a white male biblical scholar asked why I must rescue all women. Yesterday, I made the comment “Yoho Must Go” on the YouTube video of Rep. Ocasio-Cortez’s response to Rep. Yoho. Someone responded to my comment by calling me a “FemiNazi.” I laughed out loud, but sexism, racism, classism, and homo/trans/queer phobia are no laughing matters; oppression is traumatic, debilitating, and death-dealing.

The majority students in this course have been indoctrinated to believe that exegesis is the scientific method that yields the truth and/or truths about the Bible; it is the *sine qua non* to biblical truth. In another student poll, I placed in the Moodle course for the week of July 20, majority students responded with certainty that exegesis is the opposite of eisegesis, as reading out of the text versus reading into the text. How does one encourage empathy for centering black women and our communities, our epistemologies, and our approaches to biblical interpretation that challenge what students believe is objective science (or subjective but superior)? There were no scientists at the table during the Enlightenment when European white biblical scholars invented exegesis as the antithesis of eisegesis. We all read into texts; we bring our biases, our training, the impact of our culture and ecclesial affiliations, to the task of reading. Most students believe exegesis is a skill; a few responded that it as a gift. Exegesis is a skill that is taught and with much practice is learned. But it, of course, is not a science with a guaranteed outcome/truth provided one uses a set formula, as evinced, at least, by the hostile arguments among biblical scholars over in/correct exegetical truths.

Let’s be honest; few students leave theological schools with the ability to write a good exegesis paper, but our institutions persist in their efforts to inculcate the notion that exegesis is the best and/or only legitimate approach to biblical interpretation and to claim to be doing anything but exegesis is unacceptable; only the uneducated or miseducated perform eisegesis. Seminary graduates interpret biblical texts variously on Facebook, for example, and label them ‘exegetical’ and themselves ‘exegetes’; often they are doing anything but exegesis. Labeling their efforts at interpretation as exegesis legitimizes them and their readings. Religion often dismisses common sense questions as not spiritual, but I am committed to challenge students with probing questions, such as “what is at stake?” “who loses?” and “what is the impact?” I hope to encourage or compel them to re/consider their assumptions and assertions. But it is also necessary to directly refute or challenge racist beliefs, assumptions, and assertions.

[1] John T. Warren, “Bodily Excess and the Desire for Absence: Whiteness and the Making of (Raced) Educational Subjectivities,” *Performance Theories in Education: Power Pedagogy, and the Politics of Identity*, eds. Bryant K. Alexander et al., (NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 86.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/08/decentering-biblical-interpretation-is-anti-racism-work-african-american-and-womanist-hermeneutics-and-exegesis-as-performing-whiteness/>