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The Elephant has Constructed the Room. Teaching Racism as a Biblical Scholar

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Blog Series: Race Matters in the Classroom

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One day in 2009 after President Obama took office, I walked into my Greek exegesis class at Ashland Theological Seminary in Detroit and one of two white male students asked, “Dr. Smith, don’t you think we live in a post-racial society given we have elected a black President and here I am sitting in your class a black female with a Harvard Ph.D.?” I didn’t doubt my student’s sincerity. I’d like to think that he felt safe enough in that space to ask that question of me. I breathed and seized the opportunity to address his question and discuss the masses of poor black people that, as Howard Thurman would say, continue to live “with their backs against the wall.” (Philippians, Acts or Eusebius were no worse for the wait). We must transcend our own class privilege as educators. The dilemma of the masses motivated me to write one of my first womanist biblical interpretation articles (“The Black Masses, The Global Imperative: A Womanist Reading of Luke’s Soteriological Hermeneutical Circle” in *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, Yung Suk Kim and Jin-Ho Kim).

My own experiences with racism (sexism and classism) have taught me that liberation is not achieved, for oppressed or oppressor, by avoiding “the elephant in the room.” But liberation is

more likely to occur if we can acknowledge that "the elephant" has constructed the room. Racism is not just about individual acts of violence or aggression against a person based on their race, particularly by those of the dominant race, but it also concerns structural, systemic injustice. As Cornel West argues in *Race Matters* the first order of business is to recognize that "structures and behavior are inseparable, that institutions and values go hand in hand. How people act and live are shaped...by the larger circumstances in which they find themselves" (West, 8).

As a biblical scholar teaching others to be responsible, critical, liberating readers of biblical texts, I affirm that no exegesis is without presuppositions, as Bultmann argued. The presuppositions that we bring to our analysis of texts are part of the matrix that is our social location. Our social location is shot through with assumptions and judgments about race, class and gender. We live in a racialized world where we are asked to identify ourselves by socially constructed categories of racial distinction. Many of us live in segregated neighborhoods, attend segregated monochromatic schools with matching administrators and teachers, and worship in segregated churches. How can we talk about biblical interpretation and not talk about race - "the elephant" that is the room? To avoid critical discussions about race in biblical interpretation is to be complicit in a racialized status quo, for the end goal of biblical interpretation is contemporary significance. And what could be more significant to us than race and the oppressive houses that race built and maintains (churches, institutions, systems)?



I think most theological educators would agree that our primary goal in seminaries and divinity schools is to prepare students for a prophetic, liberating, loving ministry in the church and/or in the larger world. I argue that we cannot do so without addressing racism (and the intersectionality of race, class, and gender). So, yes, in my first class of the new semester, *Engaging Texts and Contexts*, we discussed the Michael Brown murder in Ferguson. It was for me unavoidable for two reasons. 1) Our topic was biblical interpretation in general and the social location of the reader. Social location impacts how we read—from the selection of a text to the contemporary application. 2) "The elephant" was the room that has so poignantly impacted my life and the lives of my students—my neighbors or fellow human beings. And as President Obama stated in his comments following the George Zimmerman verdict in the murder of Trayvon Martin (and this goes for Michael Brown, Renisha McBride and others) African Americans are looking at these incidents "through a set of experiences in history that does not go away." What impacts my 'neighbor,' concerns me, regardless.

I offer a few brief recommendations.

- Don't avoid conversations about race because of discomfort. We selectively address topics uncomfortable for us or for students. The synoptic problem is uncomfortable for many students (it was for me), but we don't avoid it. Focus on providing a safe space for

- students to discuss uncomfortable, emotional topics while maintaining mutual respect.
- Be intentional about assigning readings that address issues of race. This may mean reading beyond one's own interests.
 - Don't rely on the minority faculty to address race, but insist upon diversity in all syllabi.
 - Engage in conversation with several minority faculty in biblical studies and across disciplines about addressing issues of race in the classroom. Don't assume that one minority can speak for all or that all minorities think the same.
 - Recognize that while race is a modern construct, it is a form of othering. The Bible is replete with narratives that provide opportunities for talking about racism as a form of othering at both the micro (individual) and macro (systemic) levels.
 - Teach ourselves and students to read not from the place of our privilege but from the vantage point of the marginalized and oppressed.

Please share your recommendations.

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