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Workshop Notes: Faculty's Positionality and Soul Care

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Workshop Notes: Faculty's Positionality and Soul Care LEVaT Colloquium at Hamline University, May 2023

Rebecca Y. Kim (Pepperdine University) and Nicholas Rowe (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary)



THE PROJECT ON
LIVED THEOLOGY



L. to R. Nicholas Rowe, Karen Johnson, Patricia Brown, Rebecca Kim

Our Context

As Willie Jennings argues in *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (2020), the white, self-sufficient man runs, embodies, and haunts western higher education, especially Christian higher education. It is, therefore, important for us to discuss how this context of our work affects faculty on the ground, particularly those faculty that do not fit the “white self-sufficient male” ideal of Christian higher education. Despite the universities’ rhetoric about knowledge and objective neutrality, who we are as individuals, our personal experiences, and differences in our position and power in society affect our pedagogy. Moreover, to have a pedagogy on race and justice in the first place, we also need to discuss how faculty can sustain themselves and persist in their work.

Given this, our workshop consists of two parts. First, we encourage faculty who are doing the lived theology/pedagogy of “after whiteness” on the ground to speak on how their positionality

affects their pedagogy. We then discuss how faculty can exercise “soul care” to sustain themselves because as professors “profess” and “pour out,” they also need to be poured in and rejuvenated to sustain their work.

Example of Faculty’s Positionality and Soul Care

Positionality

Recently, I (Nick) discovered that a former black student of mine had become a highly accomplished poet. When I reached out to him to congratulate him on his accomplishments, he remarked that I was the first black teacher he ever had as his professor of Western Civ. I taught that class for years, and I recall some of the mischief I deployed teaching it because I was very positional before it became a practice. I could not help it. My experiences as a subject of empire were not the ones that my colleagues had, and I made sure to mention them in the class. In other words, I could not repeat the self-perpetuating and self-adulating narratives of empire. My background and experience meant that I asked questions of primary sources and texts that mainstream culture does not ask. Recently, there was a significant commotion among historians as the president of the American Historical Association wrote a professional column warning against “presentism” creeping into historical analysis, where there is too much emphasis on questions of race, class, and gender being read into the texts. It took black historians, especially black women historians, to remind our colleagues that black folks have always questioned the assumptions of historical texts based on contemporary circumstances, and things have not changed. Notice how the imperial impulse attempts to shut down voices challenging its preeminence.

Positionality, then, is more than a pedagogical practice. For education in a Christian context, explicitly, this is a spiritual discipline in that it decenters not only the professor, but it is a subversive act to decenter whiteness by making it *visible*. Whiteness’s normativity, its “invisibility,” is its centering that makes a reality that communicates “this is the way things are, and there is no reality outside of this,” as its most potent weapon. We are all formed by it, and unless there is something to make one aware that “you are in the matrix” –what Scripture would call “salvation,” God turning on the lights, then our reality and formation are to serve the purposes of the order, the world. This is not the way things are supposed to be; the Kingdom of God is total reality. No one group sits at the center as the norm: that is God’s place and His throne. If white teachers *also* exercise positionality, they reveal that they are not the norm, to which all others must relate. They reveal themselves as just another cultural expression in reality, equal to everyone else, with no special claims to normativity. It reveals the true *reality* of things, of the reality of the Kingdom, where *everyone* and *all nations* exist relative to God. He is not *a* God that we pick in a consumerist fashion; He is *the only wise God*, no exceptions, and no competition.

So, positionality is a weapon against being colonized, and also a prophetic tool in institutions, especially Christian ones, that still bend toward whiteness. This brings us back to

Daniel and his friends. They lived in explicit positionality. And at times, it got used against them, as we know, because the practice of positionality is also one of vulnerability. As we recall in Daniel's account, the empire is not particularly happy when we refuse to bow down to the image it has set up. So, while we are not threatened with incineration, things can still get hot. And like Daniel, the things we emphasize and stress can be devalued and called a waste of time so that these things are not rewarded, but seen as uncollegial or divisive. The microaggressions and other indignities pile up and take their toll. Therefore, we must discuss critical disciplines of soul care, disciplines that enable us to withstand the deforming processes of whiteness in institutions.

For more on Positionality

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1999. "Reflections on the Outsider Within." *Journal of Career Development* 26(1): 85-88.

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Jun, Alexander, Tabatha L. Jones Jolivet, Allison N. Ash, and Christopher S. Collins. 2018. *White Jesus: The Architecture of Racism in Religion and Education*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Soul Care

We are integrated persons, of body, mind, and spirit, and articulate in the emotions. Soul care requires care for all three things to stand in the middle of the deformations of empire and to recover from its traumatic assaults. More importantly, these things are done in community. We do not sort these things out by ourselves.

Soul care must begin with some fundamental scriptural truths about the human person. Every human being is of infinite value based on two things: the fact that God made us bearing His image (Genesis) and that he sacrificed His Son in order to restore that image when it was broken by our rebellion (I Peter 3:18). This is the basis of our identity as persons, as articulated by scripture, and which no empire can erase. We must find regular contexts for this reaffirmation of our identity, which is not determined by the needs of empire, but by the Lord of all creation.

We need places of lament, of grieving, of processing the repeated assertions of empire and the injustice that results. This may require counseling or spiritual accompaniment processes that provide a healthy output for the emotions, especially the negative ones that are a legitimate expression of a violation of personhood and injustice. Our emotions need care.

Finally, we need to take care of our bodies. We need to *move* to counteract the stress hormones, the fight or flight juice in our bodies that prepares us to face threats to our lives—and the pushback against positionality or being ourselves and not staying in the lanes that empire has prescribed for us. The physiological aspects of trauma get lodged in our bodies, as those hormones have nowhere to go, and they can have damaging repercussions if they are not dispensed with. So—we move. We dance, get up out of our seats. We shake it out.

For more on Soul/Self Care

David D. Perlmutter, Admin 101: Campus Administrators Need Self-Care, Too. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/admin-101-campus-administrators-need-self-care-too>

Allison M. Vaillancourt, “5 ‘Dirty Tricks’ Common in Campus Administration,” <https://www.chronicle.com/article/5-dirty-tricks-common-in-campus-administration>

Fernanda Zamudio-Suarez, “Race on Campus: Black Academics Celebrate Their Achievements on Their Own Terms,” Race on Campus, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11 May 2021. <https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/race-on-campus/2021-05-11>

Ella F. Washington, “Recognizing and Responding to Microaggressions at Work.” *Harvard Business Review*, 10 May 2022. <https://hbr.org/2022/05/recognizing-and-responding-to-microaggressions-at-work>

Sindhumathi Revuluri, “How to Overcome Impostor Syndrome,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 October 2018. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-overcome-impostor-syndrome/>

Nicholas Rowe.2009. “The Urban Practitioner: Some thoughts toward the development of a new professional identity.” *Praxis: A Journal for Christian Business Leadership* 16 (2/3): 2-7.

Sheila Wise Rowe. 2020. *Healing Racial Trauma: The Road To Resilience*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. .

Sheila Wise Rowe. 2022. *Young, Gifted, and Black: A Journey of Lament and Celebration*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.)

<p><i>Jordan Ryan (New Testament, Wheaton College)</i></p>	<p><i>Self-care is crucial, but so is knowing how to balance saying yes. Racialized minority faculty struggle with what we call the “double appointment,” doing the same work as white faculty and much more beyond what is expected of white faculty. White faculty can better support racialized minority faculty by sometimes being willing to say yes, but also having the self-awareness to know when not to take up space.</i></p>
<p><i>Drew Hart (Theology,</i></p>	<p><i>Hearing all the different experiences of the panel was really powerful. I’m</i></p>

<p><i>Messiah University)</i></p>	<p><i>taking away the need to say “no” and have more boundaries (while keeping track of that impact on other faculty and students of color) and also adopting a committee to oversee my decision-making and boundaries. I need a Jedi council.</i></p>
<p><i>Rusty Hawkins (History, Indiana Wesleyan University)</i></p>	<p><i>I was struck by Jordan’s reminder that when we say “no” that means someone else has to say “yes.” This insight gave me pause, even as I’ve been more deliberate about saying “no” to institutional requests in recent years. Peter’s comment about our purpose being to teach and form students and not institutional viability was a helpful metric to help better determine what to agree to take on and what to let pass. We exist for the students, not the institution.</i></p>
<p><i>Patricia Brown (English, Azusa Pacific University)</i></p>	<p><i>Say “no” to the good things. Say “yes” to the big things.</i></p>
<p><i>Michelle Gibbs (Theater, Illinois Wesleyan)</i></p>	<p><i>I was drawn to the presenters’ discussion about boundaries (i.e., learning to say no). I’ve learned that the act of protecting one’s boundaries is important because we understand, as professors, what the stakes are and what we risk when we don’t.</i></p>
<p><i>Tobin Miller Shearer (History, University of Montana)</i></p>	<p><i>I want to lift up the powerful affirmation Rebecca brought through her assertion that “I am the walking counter-narrative” to white, male supremacy.</i></p>
<p><i>Ken Guest (Anthropology, Baruch College)</i></p>	<p><i>I am grateful to Rebecca for laying out the impact of assumptions of producing the self-sufficient, white male in the university and the implications for colleagues of color and women of the assumptions of white and male as the normative default for leadership in this space. The implicit respect deficit and racial tax require our colleagues of color and women to do more publishing, teaching, mentoring, and serving—to go above and beyond, to achieve more in order to succeed in this system.</i></p>
<p><i>Phil Sinitiere (History, College of Biblical Studies /W.E.B. Du Bois Center at UMass Amherst)</i></p>	<p><i>The final session was just the right kind of culmination to the weekend. While I had already thought lots about positionality all weekend and had multiple conversations about it, hearing each panelist talk about it in relation to their home institution was enlightening. Collectively, the comments suggested ways for me to understand better how the particularities of my multiple identities as a white male historian co-exist in the theological space of a Black Bible college. The session helped me to find new language to think about my work at my institution as a historical translator/translator of history, so to speak, into theological spaces emphasizing propositional structures of thought and philosophical certainty focused on ideas of unchangeability. Furthermore, the slight linguistic shift from self-care to soul care presented new categories of consideration to potentially incorporate into my own practice.</i></p>



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