

Invisibility of Whiteness: A Homiletical Interrogation

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Abstract: *This article examines the invisibility of whiteness in homiletics which operates in and beyond homiletics. One example is that white authors still rarely self-locate in their academic writing. White scholars' lack of self-location is juxtaposed with BIPOC¹ scholars' pressure to self-declare. Another example is that the work done by racialized scholars is parceled out as specialized, resulting in further marginalization, while white scholars' work is universalized and centralized. A further issue that teachers of homiletics must be conscious of is how we select (i.e., choose and omit) readings for students as well as how to arrange the chosen readings beyond white normative ways. Once the reality of whiteness in the field of homiletics is made visible, preaching practices and consideration of environments including preaching place and worship space are examined. The article argues how influential the preaching place is. In a similar vein, it interrogates the use of art in worship and the location of the pulpit as it conveys whiteness. The article further probes the symbolism of color that is embedded not only in visible art but in language, especially within the text of the Bible. Two stories in the Bible from the book of Ruth and Genesis will be discussed as a homiletical interpretive task of making whiteness visible.*

Invisibility of Whiteness in Writing, Publishing, and Selecting Readings

I begin with an assumption: it is not a matter of asking if the scholarship of homiletics embeds whiteness, but it is a matter of revealing how it does so. With that assumption, I self-critically examine how we as scholars write, how we publish, and how we select course readings.

Lack of Self-Locating

While I am aware of the danger of generalizing here, I contend that many Anglo male homileticians of European descent who belong to the so-called SWAM—Straight, White, American (US) Male as Joseph Jeter Jr. called it, or others referring to Straight, White, Able-Bodied Male²—have not taken sufficient time to self-identify in their scholarly writings. They do not (need to) consciously name their particular identities, but due to their positions in power their claims and their views are considered universal. However, postmodern thought has taught us any universal and normative view should be questioned and deconstructed. To embody postmodern is to be “uncomfortable with and suspicious of words like ‘truth,’ ‘reality,’ ‘objectivity,’ ... ‘universality,’ and ‘absoluteness,’” Ronald Allen writes.³

According to Tema Okun, one of the signs of white supremacist culture is objectivity and neutrality. In white supremacy culture, there is the “belief that there is such a thing as being objective or ‘neutral’” and that “emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not

¹ Here the acronym “BIPOC” refers to “Black, Indigenous, People Of Color.” I will use BIPOC and racialized interchangeably.

² Joseph Jeter, “Bipolar Preaching,” in *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, ed. Ronald Allen (St. Louis: Chalice, 1998), 52. The Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion identifies SWAM as Straight, White, Able-bodied, Male.

³ Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2009), 15.

play a role in decision-making or group process.”⁴ From the persistent work of feminists we know that emotions are equally valid, integral to wholeness and scholarly work. We also know such universal and logic-centered claims are power-laden. A good historical example of a universal claim embedded in language is the universal use of the word “men” to represent all humans when it really only reflects male normative dominance in the world.

Homileticians who study the intertwined relationship between Christianity and culture know that culture in general and white Anglo male culture in particular are far from objective or neutral, let alone beneficial to all. Thus, those of us who benefit from the racial and cultural hierarchy must recognize that we hold dominant power in society and that our experiences are regarded as normative. As Christine Smith noted, homileticians with racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation privileges find it difficult to describe their social location, whereas those who are marginalized and minoritized are usually better able to articulate and “take responsibility for the limited, prejudicial, and often oppressive dimensions of one’s human identity in relation to the rest of humanity.”⁵ I would like to nuance her argument on marginalized or the minoritized homileticians’ abilities to better articulate their identities. It is not because they have a special ability or a special gift to take on this responsibility of self-awareness but because they often are forced to locate themselves. For marginalized communities, self-locating is not a voluntary choice but is often an involuntary imposition forced by the normalized gaze of colleagues, demanding that they legitimize their existence. “In the act of seeing,” as Miguel A De La Torre puts it, people in power “create that which legitimizes and justifies their position, vis-à-vis the colonized and disenfranchised.”⁶ This position of gazing creates normativity. It is normal or acceptable for SWAM scholars not to self-identify. This normativity masks their whiteness. As a structure of power, whiteness produces the normative culture that continues to benefit people that belong to SWAM and others in power with privilege.

The theme of the 2019 Academy of Homiletics, “Unmasking Homiletical Whiteness,” uses a good metaphor. The verb “unmask” conjures the image of revealing someone’s hidden face. The mask of whiteness exists. It conceals a hidden reality, like air. Whiteness in homiletics is invisible but breathes deeply in the cultural norm of whiteness in academia and preaching practice. Thus, an interrogation of the invisibility of whiteness in homiletics as a self-critical discipline is to declare our social location, naming biases and privileges when we write. This declaration is not an exercise in political correctness but a theological act of confession with humility and honesty. The homiletical task of self-locating requires humility and honesty because it involves vulnerability, exposing the preacher’s own limits and weaknesses. Barbara Blaisdell puts it this way: “We must be honest about our own doubts, questions, and experiences as we prepare to write. This part of preaching is confessional. The final sermon need not be autobiographical, but it must reflect the real issues and struggles of a person of faith.”⁷ Confession is an integral part of the preaching act.⁸ Anna Carter Florence further develops the

⁴ Tema Okun, “White Supremacy Culture,” *DRWORKSBOOK* (website), 2001.

<http://www.dismantlingracism.org/white-supremacy-culture.html>

⁵ Christine Smith, ed., *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 3.

⁶ Miguel A De La Torre, “Identity Cross-Dressing While Teaching in a Global Context,” in *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan (Grand Rapids: Baylor University Press, 2015), 76.

⁷ Ronald J. Allen, Barbara S. Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnson, *Theology for Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 182.

⁸ Christine Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Encountering Handicapism, Ageism, Heterosexism, Sexism, White Racism, Classism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

theological dimension of preaching in a confessional sense by framing it as testimony. She calls for the preaching act to be that of narrating one's life, a life that is inevitably shaped by colonialism, migration, and other difficult realities.⁹

Invisibility of Whiteness (Whitewash) of the Publication Industry

The lack of self-locating as it takes place in the publication industry is an example of the invisibility of whiteness in academia. The impact of whiteness is felt personally but its nature is structural. As elsewhere argued, whiteness is a structural power and its presence is most prevalent in its invisibility.¹⁰ Courtney Goto examines the edited volume as an example of the hidden structural problem of whiteness in practical theology. She interrogates *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*,¹¹ a volume edited by two white scholars who asked her to contribute to “the Asian American chapter.” She noticed two other racialized scholars were also asked to write their chapters (African American and Latino), while none of the white scholars were asked to write their own ethnic and racial chapters. Instead, they were invited to address approaches that are central (meaning foundational or well-studied) in the field. After Goto vocally raised the concern of the racial parceling out of volumes and subject matter, a chapter entitled “White Practical Theology” was added. Yet, the whole structure of the book (15 chapters total), Goto notes, “assumes that the field is divisible into broad approaches that are seemingly untouched by race, while the work of addressing issues of race is assigned to isolated chapters coded as such.”¹² She also points out that this practice is pursued in other theological disciplines as well.¹³ It is hard to deny that academic publishing culture breeds white invisible normativity. The well-intentioned effort of including non-white scholarships ends up further ghettoizing and tokenizing their voices. That is why the late homiletician Dale Andrews, who was asked to write an African American chapter in the same volume, writes, “We have not escaped the marginalization of studying the marginalized.”¹⁴

In this regard, it is worth highlighting one book that attempted to escape the marginalization involved in studying the marginalized. Ruth Duck's introduction to Christian worship put white worship as “a” particular pattern along with African American, Korean, and Latina/Latino worship patterns. Her intention to structure the book this way was to make whiteness visible. White worship tradition has “much to commend it,” she explained, “just as it has much to learn from other traditions, as it takes its place in the rainbow—but not as the norm—of Christian worship in North America.”¹⁵ Compared to Duck's textbook, the late James White's *Introduction to Christian Worship*¹⁶—notwithstanding its excellent research, comprehensive historical view, and encyclopedic knowledge of the classical patterns of Western

⁹ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), xviiiiff.

¹⁰ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “The Emperor Has No Clothes!: Exposing Whiteness as Explicit, Implicit, and Null Curricula,” *Religious Education* 114:3 (2019): 239–251.

¹¹ Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds., *Opening the Field of Practical Theology* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

¹² Courtney T. Goto, “Writing in Compliance with the Racialized ‘Zoo’ of Practical Theology,” in *Conundrums in Practical Theology*, eds. Joyce Ann Mercer and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Boston: Brill, 2016), 112.

¹³ Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), cited in *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Dale P. Andrews, “African American Practical Theology,” in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*, 27.

¹⁵ Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 51.

¹⁶ James White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3rd edition (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000).

worship traditions—is obviously an example of embedded whiteness. While it only presents the European and white North American measure of liturgy, its whiteness is masked by the lack of recognition as such. Unfortunately, however, this book is one of the most-well used textbooks for introductory worship courses in Protestant traditions not only in North America but in other parts of the world (translated into many different languages). The fact that the third edition was printed in 2000 underscores its importance and the widespread and uncritical acceptance of the whiteness of Christian worship education and its textbook industry around the world.

Turning to textbooks in homiletics, I wonder if there are any books that decenter whiteness by making whiteness visible. If we cannot locate such books on our homiletics bookshelf, the absence suggests that whiteness is still powerfully at work in homiletics as well. To repeat, whiteness is most powerful when it is invisible. It breeds well in its absence. Andrew Wymer notes that the fact that white homiletical discourse in journal articles and books is silent about whiteness is evidence that whiteness is pervasive.¹⁷ The reality is dire when one looks at the late Haddon Robinson’s *Biblical Preaching* as an example, which has been the most sold textbook (over 300,000 copies) in homiletics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in North America.¹⁸ Robinson’s book has been republished (in its eighth printing as of 2007), and has been translated into many languages for use in different parts of the world. Yet, it too mainly reflects and represents the European and white North American experiences and understandings of homiletics. Few of the authors Robinson cites are BIPOC; thus their contribution is almost nil. The absence of their voices and contributions in Robinson’s book is an indication that white voices, in terms of their experiences and perspectives, have become normalized and dominantly represented in unexamined ways.

Those of us who belong to the Academy of Homiletics rather than the Evangelical Homiletics Society may pat ourselves on our shoulders thinking that we have done a better job than those who belong to the latter group. However, before we congratulate ourselves let us engage self-scrutiny by posing such self-critical questions as the following: Is the homiletical theology in any preaching textbook informed by critical theories of race, including critical race theory and postcolonial theory? Or are we making an assumption that an engagement of such critical theories is not really homiletics, merely categorizing them as “ethics” and not essential to homiletical theology?¹⁹

Selecting and Arranging Course Reading Materials

As instructors who choose books and journal articles for courses on preaching, we need to be careful and intentional about how we choose (or omit) reading materials for students. This is an important consideration, especially when we take into account the changing demographics of our student bodies, knowing their diverse identities and multiple social locations. As teachers we must include readings that reflect students’ lived experiences and their marginalized (and privileged) identities. We also need to include readings that help our students grow in terms of broadening their limited views and challenging their unexamined prejudices. Barbara Lundblad invites us to consider the following questions when we select readings: “Are there readings by

¹⁷ Andrew Wymer, “Knee-Deep Preaching: A Homiletical Engagement of White Bullshit,” *Practical Matters* (July 2018): 7. See <http://practicalmattersjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Wymer-KneeDeep-Preaching.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2021).

¹⁸ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

¹⁹ I am thankful for John McClure who gave me this helpful feedback.

women as well as men? Will the voices of different cultures and traditions be heard? Are theological perspectives from the worldwide, ecumenical church present? Are there readings that are grounded in our particular location, as well as those that help us see communities that are very different from our own?”²⁰ When the academy as a space of whiteness functions as a status quo, it is easy to cite white authors exclusively without consciously and explicitly recognizing them as white.²¹ Furthermore, we need to go beyond simply “including” non-white voices, mainly and merely satisfying the diversity checklist of curriculum review. Since the majority of scholars who have written substantive amounts of material in homiletics are still Straight, White, American, Able-bodied Male (SWAAM), BIPOC authors’ work is still viewed as a token. Thus a more diligent scrutiny and a more nuanced inclusion of other voices need to take place when teachers of preaching look for reading materials for courses. For example, it is worth including materials written by a SWAAM who positions his arguments and ideas in critical conversation with documented arguments and ideas made by BIPOC scholars in generous and respectful ways. By critical conversation I mean including honest questions about how African American homiletics and Korean American homiletics are less than conversant with women and the GLBTQIA community. Simply including African or Korean American readings may end up being entirely uncritical. Engaging critical conversation also includes the other within the other, acknowledging that there are ethnic and racial as well as gendered hierarchies within BIPOC scholarship just as there are within SWAAM scholarship. Thus, it is prudent to ask where womanist and queer resources are within Black homiletical scholarly writings, while searching for self-critical writings of Korean or Korean American homiletics within Asian homiletics in a nuanced and intersectional way.

Given that the existing power of scholarship is asymmetrical, it is imperative to include materials written by non-SWAAM scholars as assigned core and additional readings. Yet, the challenge continues. Despite the growing numbers of racialized scholars and their thought-provoking contributions, many of them have not written books that are considered encyclopedic or comprehensive. We just do not have enough selections to choose from among racialized BIPOC scholars’ textbooks in terms of content, length, and scope. Thus what often happens is that most introductory-level homiletics courses still have a textbook almost exclusively written by SWAAMs as “the main reading” and provide “side readings” in “Black homiletics,” “GLBTQ homiletics,” “feminist homiletics,” “Korean (or Asian) American homiletics,” or “Latinx homiletics.”

It is time to make a personal confession. That is my syllabus. I am complicit in this way of arranging course readings. It is challenging not to have a single textbook but to organize a syllabus with multiple readings and chapters from various books. There is also an additional challenge in finding accessible and cutting-edge publications written by BIPOC scholars that are suitable for introductory preaching course readings. And we normally cannot impose on our students more than 50 pages of weekly reading.

Again, simply including non-white scholars’ work even if treating them as core readings is not enough to unmask whiteness in homiletics. The further question to be probed is in terms of how these readings are arranged. One must ask which texts are read first and granted normative

²⁰ Barbara K. Lundblad, “Designing the Introductory Course in Preaching,” in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, eds. Thomas Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 211.

²¹ Tom Beaudoin and Katherine Turpin, “White Practical Theology,” in *Opening Field of Practical Theology*, 258.

status? In the linear order of things, this in itself is a colonial mindset as white authors' readings come first; how these readings are organized embeds how whiteness is implicitly operative.

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, for example, disturbing but not surprising realities are being unmasked. Majorities of those who are affected by COVID-19 are non-white, poor, women, and elderly, especially those who are living in nursing homes and assisted living facilities. Black people are dying of COVID-19 at alarming rates in the United States. One data source shows that although just 14 percent of the population of Michigan is Black, 33 percent of coronavirus cases and 41 percent of deaths were in the Black community. In Chicago, 23 percent of the residents are Black but account for 58 percent of COVID-19 related deaths. In Milwaukee, African Americans make up half of coronavirus cases but 81 percent of the deaths.²² The list goes on. The situation elsewhere is not much different from that in the United States. The irony of the COVID-19 virus is that it is so dangerous because we cannot see it. The invisibility of the virus puts all of us at risk. Yet, this invisible virus vividly exposes the social inequality and racial hierarchy hidden among us. COVID-19 unveiled the communities that have been unknown to many of us who are beneficiaries of systemic injustice. One such community is the cleaners and janitors. They are invisible to most of us most of the time because they work at night when we all go home to our comfortable places to rest after work. These invisible workers are predominantly women, and many of them are recent immigrants, and most of them are from Asia. Some are undocumented workers without any social net or protection by society. Ironically, however, these most vulnerable members of our society are looking after us. They are the ones who protect the health of the public. They are the ones who sanitize places so that we can safely commute, shop, work, and get medical help in this scary COVID-infected world. The preaching task in the era of COVID-19 urgently requires the serious engagement of critical theories. In the world ignited by the anti-Black racism protests across ethnic, racial, and national lines as a just outcry against George Floyd's murder by Derek Chauvin, unmasking the invisibility of whiteness in preaching is no longer just the work of one particular group but must be owned by all of us as scholars and students of preaching.

Thus far, I have examined issues that matter to scholars of homiletics as authors and teachers. We must learn to name our social location as the basic but necessary first step of unmasking whiteness, making our privilege and marginalization visible in scholarly writing. Conversely, as authors who work with different authors in edited volumes, we must be vigilant about how BIPOC authors may be singled out racially, and targeted or tokenized for work to satisfy a racial point of view. As teachers who have power to choose readings for courses, we must also be responsible for decentering whiteness by including diverse voices and marginalized perspectives in our readings in ways that are genuine and generous rather than tokenizing. In addition to race considerations, we may add class, age, ability, sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of different voices and perspectives needed. What is required is an intersectional approach to race in unmasking whiteness because its face is multifaceted and not simply black and white, so to speak. Next, we turn our attention to preaching and the preaching environment as we continue our unmasking of whiteness.

²² Nina Misuraca Ignaczak and Michael Hobbes, "Black People Are Dying Of COVID-19 At Alarming Rates. Here's Why," *HuffPost Canada* April 8, 2020, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/black-people-are-dying-of-covid-19-at-alarming-rates-heres-why_n_5e8cdb76c5b62459a930512a?ri18n=true (accessed June 13, 2020).

Unmasking the Invisibility of Whiteness in Preaching Practices: Preacher-Congregation Communication and Dynamics

What is preaching? How does one know that a sermon is a sermon? Can it include physical gestures, visual representations, and even silence? What constitutes the act of preaching? There are many answers to these fundamental homiletical questions but one assumption may be that preaching happens in a congregation as a publicly gathered assembly. Preaching assumes that there is a body that came to a particular place to encounter the holy, revealed in but not limited to scripture. This question assumes that preaching is a distinct act that some are called to do. I do not want to exclude the notion that not all preaching is pulpit preaching. Some preaching has happened and should happen outside the pulpit.²³ I do not promote a solo preaching idea, either. As a matter of fact, I applaud the steady critique that preaching is not the monopoly of one person in a congregation but must be shared work of the congregation.²⁴ Germane to the topic of whiteness, I highlight that such an individualistic attitude of the solo preaching is one of the symptoms of the white culture, for white culture privileges a focus on individuals and not groups.²⁵

However, while advocating for the importance of the centrality of communication and interaction in the preaching event, I want to establish the difference between the preacher and the congregation without assuming that there is one single privileged person in a congregation. An effective and faithful preacher needs to know what the congregation's needs are. Meeting the needs of the congregation is challenging when it comes to the issue of whiteness in a predominantly white congregation. While whiteness culminates in the problem of racism, it embodies other issues, including gender. In fact, problems related to race and gender often intersect rather than exist in isolation; thus it may be fruitful to raise the issues of sexism and racism together in the examination of whiteness in the pulpit. Again, a recognition of intersectionality is key to interrogating the invisibility of whiteness in preaching because other forms of oppression are operative in interlocking ways (for example, poverty and disability are often recognizably correlated with racism).

According to The Faith Communities Today 2010 national survey, only 12 percent of 11,000 congregations in the US have a female as their senior or sole ordained preacher, and that number drops to 9 percent in evangelical congregations.²⁶ This data do not specify any ethnicity. However, it rings true to many Black women who preach. The pulpit is generally the venue of men in Black churches as it imitates, Teresa Fry Brown writes, "the exclusivity of the white churches" that came from the colonial slavery era of the eighteenth century. Yet she does not blame this sexist practice solely on the white church, but holds the Black church accountable. She unearths how the propaganda of the Black church community as the "cradle of freedom"

²³ Charles Campbell and Stanley P. Saunders, *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

²⁴ E. g., in chronological order: Reuel Howe, *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* (New York: Seabury, 1967), Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1971), John McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), Leonora Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), Lucy Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), Lucy Hogan and Robert Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation: Rhetoric and the Art of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), Joseph Jeter and Ronald Allen, *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002).

²⁵ Okun, *White Supremacy Culture*, 2001.

²⁶ As quoted on *The Hartford Institute for Religious Research* website, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/quick_question3.html (accessed June 25 2019).

combatting racism and dismantling white supremacy masks the denial of the access to the pulpit for Black women.²⁷ That is why another African American scholar, Katie Cannon, also worked to debunk and disentangle the messages in African American rhetoric when these messages of justice and liberation veil the injustice of keeping Black women from preaching.²⁸ Brown's and Cannon's self-critical views of their own Black churches find a kindred spirit in Eunjoo Mary Kim, who is self-critical of her own Korean churches in terms of sexist and individual blessing-oriented preaching practices, while also critiquing the negative influence of white cultural imperialism in Korean American preaching.²⁹

The pulpit as a gendered and sexist preaching place is an age-old problem in churches. One may claim that heterosexist patriarchy is one of the oldest forms of oppression in human society.³⁰ The challenge today is that the change is slow and may actually be going backward. Statistics tell us that sexual and domestic violence imbued with homophobia and racism have escalated in recent years. In the era of the "Me Too movement," a term coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006,³¹ it is shocking but not surprising to find that sexual abuse, harassment, and assaults of men against women, especially racialized women, and heterosexist men against members of the LGBTQ community, take place almost ubiquitously at home, at work, and in church and politics. In this alarming situation, Barbara Patterson asks, "How many sermons have we heard that have no shared experiences with real women who suffered violence?"³² The lack of homiletical references to gender-based violence is related to the male-centered pulpit: the majority of preachers are still very white and very male, as well as very heterosexist. Again we must ask, what are the assumptions of the pulpit regarding power for/with/over people concerning how it is located and used to persuade and teach?

When the congregation is white, middle class, sexist, and heterosexist, it is difficult even if preachers want to engage in exposing whiteness. This becomes extremely troubling when preachers belong to minorities (race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, and language) whose identities are the opposite of the majority of the congregation. Yet preaching as a communicative event cannot take place without the congregation. Lenora Tubbs Tisdale writes that preachers are called to be both prophet and pastor; and yet to balance between these seemingly opposite poles in preaching is hard. She makes several diagnoses about why there is resistance to prophetic preaching among preachers. I recognize that three of those fears directly point to the preacher's fear of challenging the congregation in addressing the normativity of whiteness: 1. fear of conflict, 2. fear of dividing congregations, 3. fear of being disliked or even fired. The preacher is reluctant to tackle whiteness any of these three fears might be realized.³³ These layered fears

²⁷ Teresa Fry Brown, "An African American Woman's Perspective: Renovating Sorrow's Kitchen," in *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Christine Smith (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 44–45.

²⁸ Katie G. Cannon, "The Wounds of Jesus: Justification of Goodness in the Face of Manifold Evil," in *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 112.

²⁹ Eunjoo Mary Kim, "A Korean American Perspective: Singing a New Song in a Strange Land," *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Christine Smith (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 99–112.

³⁰ Emily Askew and O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Beyond Heterosexism in the Pulpit* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015), 16–20.

³¹ Eleven years later on October 5, 2017, the Me Too movement went viral when *The New York Times* and *New Yorker's* investigations went into and revealed the sexual misdeeds of Harvey Weinstein. The #MeToo movement is now spreading to the entire globe and entering into a courageous fury over the ways women are mistreated.

³² Barbara Patterson, "Preaching as Nonviolent Resistance," in *Telling the Truth: Preaching about Sexual and Domestic Violence*, eds. John McClure and Nancy Ramsay (Cleveland: Chalice, 1998), 105.

³³ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2010), 10–20.

become excruciatingly painful when the preacher is not white and is preaching to a predominantly white congregation. The racialized preacher's position and role is extremely vulnerable.

Whiteness in Architecture, Art, and Authority in the Worship Space

Since preaching normally happens in worship, the worship space is essential to preaching. Philosopher Susanne Langer speculates that human perceptions are affected by physical forms. She argues that architecture serves more than a functional purpose because it shapes a space of "human relations and activities."³⁴ In this regard, the pulpit, as architecture in worship space, shapes relationships in the preaching event. This shaping is subtle, but powerfully and intuitively communicates a certain message in affective and often effective ways. If a pulpit is built as a big, wide, and elegant structure, it may communicate the majestic authority of the preaching and the preacher but it may also communicate something domineering, too. The elevation of the pulpit is an important aspect of its architecture as well. A suitably elevated pulpit maximizes visibility and audibility. But too great an elevation may overemphasize the authority of the preacher.

Yet discourse related to the pulpit, its location, and its use is never simple.³⁵ The location of the pulpit is more than utilitarian, it is also symbolic. It creates the environment for a theological encounter. James White puts it this way: the location of the pulpit is important "not because of the place itself but because what God does for humans in that place."³⁶ In my qualitative research on the BIPOC women preachers in the United Church of Canada, interviewees were divided over the use of an elevated pulpit while preaching.³⁷ Those women who preferred to use the pulpit for preaching argued that the pulpit is a symbol of preaching authority and that using it compensates for the marginal identities of their non-white female bodies. They also pointed out that for many churches, the pulpit is still a man's space and a white space, so it is important to claim it as women's space as well as a racialized space by preaching from that very location. However, the voices of those who opposed using the pulpit argued that the elevated pulpit sets the preacher above and apart from the congregation, symbolizing a colonial theology that overvalues the authority of the preacher.³⁸

Since preaching is a part of liturgy, we as preachers must also investigate how whiteness is manifested in the symbols and art related to the liturgical season, especially the ways in which the symbols of light and darkness are employed in liturgy.³⁹ For example, the color white is associated with manifestation of the Divine presence, the *theophany*. The story of the transfiguration, for example, appearing in the liturgical season of Epiphany, describes Jesus "transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling

³⁴ Susanne Langer, "Feeling and Form," in *Art and Its Significance*, ed. Stephen Davis Ross (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 235.

³⁵ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "Probing the pulpit: Postcolonial feminist perspectives," *Liturgy* 34:2 (2019): 22–25.

³⁶ White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 81.

³⁷ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "Sharing the Feast and Hearing Complex Calling: A Study of Racialized Ordained Women Ministers of The United Church of Canada," report submitted to the McGeachy Senior Scholarship Committee, 2011, <https://unitedchurchfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/Sharing-the-Feast-and-Hearing-Complex-Calling-HyeRan-Kim-Cragg.pdf> (accessed June 15 2019)

³⁸ Roxanne, Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

³⁹ Michael N. Jagessar and Stephen Burns, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (Oakville: Equinox, 2011), 37–50.

white” (Matthew 17:2, NRSV). In this Gospel text, the use of white as a sign of the divine presence is obvious. It is hard to preach against this obvious sign revealed in scripture. It is like rowing a boat against a powerful current. Christmas and Easter also use the color white. Here, white communicates the meaning of goodness, joy, new life, and holiness in western liturgical symbolism and culture. However, white does not mean the same thing in other cultures. White clothes in western culture is associated with joyful celebrations (the wedding dress, for example) whereas the wearing of black is common when one is mourning.

But in other cultures (Korean, for example), people wear white during funerals and red or multi-colors during joyful celebrations such as birthdays and weddings. The color white signifies death and sadness in Korean and other East Asian cultures. The color white may not be necessarily negative, but it certainly communicates solemnity rather than joy and happiness. One may also point out that black does not have negative connotations in western culture all the time. “Black tie,” for example, denotes formality and is usually associated with happy, special events such as weddings. Judges and academics have worn black gowns, including the Geneva gown (called “the preacher’s gown”), to emphasize their authority, signifying something that is honored and respected. However, it should be noted that dark colors, including black, are often negatively associated in many cultures. The ubiquity of the color black as negative poses a serious problem. In the worst case, the color black is associated with sinful, dirty, and dangerous meanings and is used to stigmatize Black people and other racialized populations. Exposing this association in preaching with a more sustained examination of the symbolism of these colors is necessary because it takes us more deeply into the assumed associations that we bring with us to art, and that also pervade our interpretation and translation of scripture texts.

Whiteness in the Interpretation of Scripture

Last but not least, preaching involves reading and interpreting sacred texts. The Bible has often been used to propagate the idea that it is “the transcendental text which all people in all cultures at all times in all circumstances should obey.”⁴⁰ To say that the Bible serves as a tool of oppression is not to deny the importance of the Bible as a tool to resist and liberate. Without question, readers and communities of faith who have suffered oppression have also found the Bible to be a source of freedom and hope. The Bible readily lends itself to transcultural readings even as it is often used to repress affirmations of difference.⁴¹ Being aware of biblical authority in its various guises and their impact, let us approach two issues: the use of the symbolism of color, and racial bias contained in scripture texts. We may do so using two biblical stories, one from the book of Ruth and the other concerning Noah’s son in the book of Genesis.

As pointed out previously, the greatest danger in the use of color symbolism is to have a color associated in a negative way with a particular racialized group. The *Inclusive-Language Lectionary* has the following to say:

The New Testament imagery of light versus darkness is often used to contrast good with evil. The equation of darkness with evil, or that which is done in secret and out of the light, has unfortunately led some persons and groups to condemn and reject anything that

⁴⁰ Mary Ann Tolbert, “A New Teaching with Authority: A Re-evaluation of the Authority of the Bible,” in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 176.

⁴¹ Kathleen O’Connor, “Crossing Borders: Biblical Studies in a Trans-cultural World,” in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 328.

is black or any dark-hued person as evil or somehow condemned by God.... While the biblical context may be free from racial intent, the too-easy misconception that dark people are also condemned and to be avoided has led to the use in this lectionary of terminology other than 'dark and white' as metaphors for what is either condemned or loved by God.⁴²

Such a dichotomy is pervasive in the cultural and visible representations of the Bible.

One vivid example of such an interpretation is found in a famous visual depiction of Ruth and Orpah by William Blake, a white British man who lived during the nineteenth century colonial era. His depiction is called "Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab" (1795).⁴³ In this painting, Ruth, who is interpreted to have been faithful by clinging to Naomi, the woman from Judah, is portrayed as lighter in complexion and with blonde hair. On the other hand, Orpah is painted with black hair and wearing a darker color dress, turning away from Naomi. It is fair to assume that both being Moabite, Ruth and Orpah would have shared the same ethnic and racial identity. But Blake's visual interpretation of the Bible suggests otherwise.

As teachers of preaching, we need to equip our students to learn to question why Blake painted that way, investigating what is behind his interpretation and who and what influenced his reading of this text. The invitation to question is a part of preaching, in line with a hermeneutics of suspicion. This kind of preaching involves challenging the traditionally dominant and conventional readings of the Bible that reinforce racist and ethnocentric patterns of thought. Orpah has been cast by many Jewish and Christian scholars in a negative light, accusing her without textual evidence of being irresponsible and betraying her mother-in-law. Some even go so far as to accuse her of being an enemy of Israel and cursed by God while praising Ruth for choosing the God of Israel because "Israel is the inheritor of the One Universal Creator."⁴⁴ Native American biblical scholar Laura Donaldson's reading of Orpah is more helpful for preachers who would appreciate Orpah's dilemma from a different perspective.⁴⁵ Donaldson instead lifts her up as one who made a decision to go back to her mother's house. She does this reading from her Cherokee perspective. Her social location shapes her biblical interpretation, enabling her to illuminate Orpah in a less biased way. Donaldson debunks the traditional interpretation of Ruth as choosing to leave a childish life of savagery and clinging to the promise of civilization and true religion, and becoming an ancestor of Jesus: Ruth as "winner takes it all"! Instead, Donaldson turns Orpah's negative value into a positive one, resurrecting her as the woman who took a courageous step of self and communal affirmation: "the choosing of the indigenous mother's house over that of the alien Israelite Father."⁴⁶

Another example from the Hebrew Bible that we need to look at to unmask whiteness and its practices is the story of Noah's son Ham in Genesis (9:18–27). It is an important text to interrogate because it has been used to justify the slavery of Black people. An interpretation of this text identifies Ham as the progenitor of those with black skin because Noah had cursed him.

⁴² *An Inclusive-Language Lectionary: Readings for Year C*, revised edition (Atlanta: John Knox; New York: Pilgrim, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 262.

⁴³ William Blake, "Naomi entreating Ruth and Orpah to return to the land of Moab," 1795 painting, *Bible Odyssey* website, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/image-gallery/r-ruth-william-blake> (accessed July 15 2019).

⁴⁴ Cynthia Ozick, "Ruth," in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, eds., Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballentine, 1994), 222.

⁴⁵ Laura E. Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes," in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 159–170.

⁴⁶ Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah," 168.

Thus he is said to be the ancestor of Africans traced back to Canaan. David M. Goldenberg has investigated every reference to Blacks in Jewish literature up to the seventh century and discovered a misreading of Hebrew and other Semitic languages that led to the translation of the word “Ham” as “dark, black or heat.” He also argues that there was no anti-Black sentiment in ancient Greece, Rome, or Arabia.⁴⁷ One may wonder, then, how such an interpretation of the Ham story in Genesis justified the enslavement of Black people in the modern era. It has to do with the colonial conquest of the transatlantic slave trade that began in the sixteenth century. By the nineteenth century, when slavery was the established norm in the United States, pro-slavery Southerners were drawn to the story of Ham because it helped endorse this politically sanctioned practice.⁴⁸

Thus, unmasking whiteness in homiletical reading practices and interpretations of the Bible must incorporate critical and complex understandings of literary studies, colonialism, and cultural studies.

Conclusion

We as preachers and teachers of preachers are called to proclaim the Good News that ultimately leads to life abundant. Some of our fellow citizens’ lives have been suffocated by the toxic air of whiteness. To breathe anew the wind of the Spirit among us, we are called to repent by learning to self-locate and to constantly scan our own biases and prejudices when we preach, write, teach, and research. An interrogation of the invisibility of whiteness in preaching is a regular practice that engages us on multiple, critical levels as we wrestle with where to preach, how to preach, and how to do biblical exegesis involving various modes of interpretation as well as the location and the identity of the preacher and sermon listeners.

Proclamation goes hand in hand with confessing the mask of whiteness as structural sin. This proclamation includes denouncing the assumed supremacy of whiteness as it is sustained by the systems, institutions, and environments that support it (e.g., cultural, spatial, habitual practices of these places). This prophetic act requires both exposing the hidden face of our own complicity in whiteness and exercising our commitment to dismantling it.

⁴⁷ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴⁸ Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).