

“Which Contexts Count?” In Search of ‘Invisible’ and ‘Forgotten’ Contexts

On the 14th February 2020 Louise presented a paper at a workshop at the University of Bern in Switzerland on Contextual Readings of the Bible. Her title question ‘Which Contexts Count?’ forced her to think about how within the academy, ‘invisible’ or ‘forgotten’ contexts are often used as shorthand labels for those contexts perceived to be marked by marginalisation, oppression, limited access to power, and/or representation. Such contexts are ones which the liberation paradigm of social justice, and the contextual bible study (CBS) model which grew from it (with its privileging of community consciousness and praxis), often locate themselves within. She argued that ‘contexts that count’ cannot be critically gauged however, without due attention being paid to the academic contexts which have inevitably patterned and shaped encounters within the CBS movement. Nor too can consideration of ‘invisible’ and ‘forgotten’ contexts be undertaken without reference to the researcher/facilitator’s own status within the CBS process and subsequent narration. In reference to the present GCRF/AHRC funded collaborative project between the Universities of Exeter and Namibia, the National Federation of People with Disabilities in Namibia (NFPDN), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) she employed insights from Southern Theory and Disability Studies to probe (a) CBS and North-South Global Inequalities; and (b) CBS and Forgotten/Invisible Bodies.

Southern Theory, coined by feminist and post-colonial theorist Raewyn Connell, traces the outcomes of knowledge economies patterned by colonial histories and north-south global inequalities.¹ ‘Southern’ here is not wholly conceived geographically, but rather ‘symbolically’ to denote space of marginality vis-à-vis centres of power and wealth.² Southern theory has an important role to play in destabilising and limiting the dominant and dominating ‘global north’ patterns of knowing.³ In its participatory methodology and epistemic privileging of voices outside the global north’s academy, CBS could itself be seen as drawing on rich ‘Southern’ traditions of education, including Paulo Freire’s critically acclaimed, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). The Contextual Bible Study Movement itself was nurtured in the townships of South Africa during the apartheid era as a force of liberation. The movement, like base community readings in Latin America, sought to engage interpreters with no specific training

¹ Raewyn Connell, ‘Using Southern Theory: Decolonizing Social Thought in Theory, Research and Application’ *Planning Theory* (2013) 13(2), 210-223.

² See contributions in Emma Mawdsley, Elsje Fourie, Wiebe Nauta (eds) *Researching South-South Development Cooperation: The Politics of Knowledge Production* (Routledge, 2019).

³ Debbie Epstein & Robert Morrell ‘Approaching Southern Theory: Explorations of Gender in South African Education’ *Gender and Education* 24 (2012), 469-482.

in biblical study, in contemplative conversation with the text and value readers' experience as a stimulant for both knowledge and social praxis. Zodwa Motsa, from a decolonial position, exposes the 'epistemicide and linguicide of knowledges and languages'. Citing an African proverb she starkly writes: 'until the lion tells his/her own story, the hunter will always have the best part of the story'.⁴

Certain bodies (particularly those perceived as non-normative or dis-abled) have also frequently been rendered invisible within intellectual enquiries framed and curated by Northern epistemologies and able-bodied researchers; CBS has, and could further play, an important part in redressing this divide, in creating encounters which are culturally sensitive, and prioritise, as the cultural minority model of disability promotes, persons with disabilities sharing their own experiences, cultures and modes of communication. Actual CBS practice within disability communities hitherto has been scarce, and in distinction from trends within the CBS movement itself, almost exclusively employed in the global north.⁵ In responding to such imbalances from Southern theory, Connell herself underlines that disability in the South needs to be situated within social, political and economic contexts of violence, capitalist accumulation, and material aspects of disability. For her 'Global society has to be understood as embodied, and social embodiment as a reality-forming (ontoformative) process, not a system-maintaining one.' Moreover, 'intellectual, cultural and social resources of colonised and postcolonial societies' must be disclosed as these 'provide vital resources for disability politics'.⁶

Following Xuan Thuy Nguyen's theoretical work, academics operating from the global North, need to carefully locate research within the context of global development but also set up 'project[s] of decolonization that engage with indigenous ways of knowing about disability experiences'.⁷ One must also frankly searchingly ask:

⁴ Zodwa Motsa, 'When the Lion Tell the Story: A Response from South Africa' *Higher Education Research and Development* 26 (2017), 28-35. Available online at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311565769_When_the_lion_tells_the_story_a_response_from_South_Africa.

⁵ See Louise Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels: Depictions of Sensory-Disabled Characters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Also M. Hewerdine, 'Studying the New Testament using a Disability Hermeneutic: Notes for Contextual Bible Studies' MA Dissertation, Queens Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham, UK (2011). Available online at: https://www.academia.edu/2252176/_Studying_the_New_Testament_using_a_Disability_Hermeneutic_Notes_for_Contextual_Bible_Studies_

⁶ Raewyn Connell, 'Southern Bodies and Disability: Rethinking Concepts' *Third World Quarterly* 32 (2011) Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.614799>.

⁷ Xuan Thuy Nguyen 'Critical Disability Studies at the Edge of Global Development: Why Do We Need to Engage with Southern Theory?' *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 7 (2018). Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v7i1.400>

Whose research is it? Whose interest does it serve? Who will benefit from it? How can the research team engage in Southern stories and epistemologies while being located as insiders and outsiders of Southern spaces?⁸

To sum up: Which contexts count? The answer in short is of course all of them; but one must also be alive to the ways and means by which ‘some contexts count more than others’. The Anglo-American metropole, and its able-bodied intelligentsia, though often unmarked in discourse, has perhaps (albeit invisibly and hidden) counted far too much.

Louise Lawrence Staff Profile: <https://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/theology/staff/lawrence/>

⁸ Linda Tuhiwai Smith cited in Nguyen ‘Critical’, no pages.