

## Article

# Paul, Timothy, and the Respectability Politics of Race: A Womanist Inter(con)textual Reading of Acts 16:1–5

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I interpret the story of the Apostle Paul's circumcision of Timothy in the New Testament text The Acts of the Apostles (16:1–5) from a womanist perspective. My approach is intersectional and inter(con)textual. I construct a hermeneutical dialogue between African American women's experiences of race/racism, respectability politics, and the Acts' narrative. In conversation with critical race theorists Naomi Zack, Barbara and Karen Fields, and black feminist E. Frances White, I discuss the intersection of race/racism, gender, geopolitical Diasporic space, and the burden and failure of respectability politics. Respectability politics claim that when non-white people adopt and exhibit certain proper behaviors, the reward will be respect, acceptance, and equality in the white dominated society, thereby ameliorating or overcoming race/racism. Race and racism are modern constructions that I employ heuristically and metaphorically as analytical categories for discussing the rhetorical distinctions made between Jews and Greeks/Gentiles, Timothy's bi-racial status, and to facilitate comparative dialogue between Acts and African American women's experiences with race and racism. I argue that Paul engages in respectability politics by compelling Timothy to be circumcised because of his Greek father and despite the Jerusalem Council's decision that Gentile believers will not be required to be circumcised.

**Keywords:** New Testament; womanist; Acts; Paul; Timothy; race; respectability; interpretation; intercontextuality; racism; Diaspora politics

## 1. Introduction

In the New Testament canonical text, The Acts of the Apostles, the Apostle Paul has Timothy circumcised so that he can join Paul's evangelistic team in the Diaspora (16:1–5). In this paper, I read that story from a womanist perspective. More specifically, I interpret the narrative through the framework of and in conversation with respectability politics, race/racism, and black women's experiences. A womanist perspective prioritizes the historical and contemporary concerns, traditions, and experiences of black women as a starting point and as an interpretive lens for reading biblical and other sacred texts and contexts. My approach is a womanist inter(con)textual reading of Acts 6:1–5, in that I construct a dialogue between African American women's experience of respectability politics and the biblical story. A womanist perspective takes seriously the intersectionality of gender, race, and class, since most non-white women experience the world as poor or middle-class women and are simultaneously impacted by sexism, racism, and elitism or classism. In my analysis of Acts 6:1–5, the term *race* heuristically refers to the dichotomous biracial<sup>1</sup> categorization of peoples as two kinds (*genos*) of people (*ethnē*), as in Jew or Greek/Gentile, as either one or the other, but never both.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The racialized biracial system of the U.S. divides peoples into two primary categories: One is either white or non-white. This is manifested in the U.S. census forms.

<sup>2</sup> Denise K. Buell (2002, 2005) has argued that, in the second through early third centuries CE, being a Christian was regarded as a universal or new race in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. Love Sechrest (2010) asserts that

Of course the term *race* as a modern social construct “stands for the conception or the doctrine that nature produced humankind in distinct groups, each defined by inborn traits that its members share and that differentiate them from the members of other distinct groups of the same kind but of unequal rank” (Fields and Fields 2014, p. 16). Racism is also a social construct based upon the concept of *race*, but the difference between the two, as Fields and Fields argue, is that, while *race* is a construct like the “the evil eye,” racism is like genocide (ibid., p. 129). I also employ *race* metaphorically to talk about the distinctions and relationship constructed between Jews and Greeks/Gentiles in Acts, particularly between Paul and Timothy in Acts 6:1–5. A metaphor makes an implicit, implied, or hidden comparison between two things that are somewhat unrelated, but which share some common characteristics. Race/racism in the modern sense is historically and ideologically distant and different from the rhetorical construction of Jew and Gentile in Acts, but we can find points of comparison or common characteristics. For example, in the modern social construction of people as “white” or “black”/non-white, one is never fluidly both, and white people are considered superior to and/or they dominate non-white peoples. Similarly, in Acts, one is either a Jew or Gentile, but not both. The Jewish leadership and apostles dominate over the Gentile believers in that the former make the crucial decision about outsiders and insiders, how people become insiders and on what basis; the Jews are the dominant race in Acts (of course Rome is the overarching hegemony).

Using the works of critical race theorists Naomi Zack, Barbara and Karen Fields, and black feminist E. Frances White, I deploy race and the burden and failure of respectability politics as a framework for reading and in dialogue with Timothy’s circumcision. Respectability politics is the notion that if a member of a subordinated, marginalized, or oppressed group exhibits acceptable and submissive behaviors, is socially compliant in her appearance and ways of being (e.g., attire, hair style, language, voice, sexuality, marital status, and so on), achieves some measure of success regardless of any systemic obstacles, and according to the standards of the dominant culture, she will be accepted by the dominant group; she will be treated justly and equally and will earn access to the same privileges and protected rights enjoyed by the dominant group. In Acts, Paul, as a member of the dominant race, succumbs to and imposes the burden of respectability on Timothy when he has him circumcised *after* the Jerusalem Council had ruled, under the leadership of James, the brother of Jesus, that the burden of circumcision should not be hoisted on the backs of Gentile believers. Often the superior, dominant group regard other people as possessing some perennial problematic difference that can never fully be overcome in this life (or in the afterlife with its segregated heaven, as some whites believe(d)). The contextually superior and dominant group is the privileged race and the other subordinated race is compelled to submit to the will and rules of the dominant group, especially if they expect to experience any degree of inclusion or access to resources and privileges. Respectability is inherent in and defined in relation to the dominant race and is often a fetish of the subordinated race. Thus, this paper begins with a discussion of respectability politics, African American women, and Timothy. Second, I examine the problem of race and bi-racial identity in Acts and in the U.S. The hyphenated form *bi-racial* refers to people who, because of known, observable mixed parentage, are (self-) identified as bi-racial. Without the hyphen, *biracial* refers to the dichotomous construction of peoples as either one race or another and never both. “Races do not exist in the sense in which reasonable people persist in speaking as if they did [scientifically]. If races do not exist, then mixed races do not exist either,” but because of their common usage in the U.S., it is necessary to both mention and use them in our quest to comprehend significant human behaviors (Zack 1993, pp. 70–71). Third, I address geopolitical Diaspora space, the circumcision of Timothy, and respectability. The intersection of race, gender and Diaspora politics compel the cutting of Timothy’s flesh, as an act of respectability. Finally, I discuss the relationship between problematic flesh, exceptionalism, and the myth of acceptance in Acts and

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Paul understood himself as a Christian, which can be understood as a third race within the context of Second Temple Judaism; Paul no longer saw himself as a Jew. In my view, this is not the case in Acts (or in Paul’s writings) where the Jesus movement is still a sect within Judaism with Jewish leaders who do not cease to be Jewish or to call the shots.

in the U.S. concerning African American women. Respectability is carved in the flesh of exceptional racialized non-white and non-Jewish women, men, and their children, but it never achieves human equality and never satiates the genocidal monster of racism.

## 2. Respectability Politics, African American Women, and Timothy

Respectability politics has been imposed upon and employed by enslaved and free black and brown people as a means to ameliorate racial and gender violence and oppression, or to facilitate assimilation into or acceptance by the dominant culture. Some enslaved Africans in the American South believed that by becoming Christians, their enslavers would treat them more humanely and perhaps emancipate them (Raboteau 1978; Smith and Jayachitra 2014). In the last part of the 19th and first half of the 20th century, African American educator, spokeswoman, and author of *A Voice From the South*, Dr. Anna Julia Cooper (1988), placed the burden for the uplift of the “Negro” race on the shoulders of elite educated black women<sup>3</sup>: “Now the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the re-training of the race, as well as the ground work and starting point of its progress upward, must be the *black woman*,” and to do so she must be educated and reflect “true womanhood” (p. 28, Cooper’s emphasis). A black woman was labeled “unrespectable” if she was positioned outside the “protection” of womanhood (White 2001, p. 33). She should achieve a high level of education and be somebody’s good, domesticated wife. Cooper (1988) believed that educated and passionate women—empathetic intellectual thinkers—were what the world needed, but education should never interfere with marriage (pp. 50, 65–68). An “earnest, well-trained, Christian young woman, as a teacher, as a home-maker, as a wife, mother, or silent influence even, is as potent a missionary agency among our people as is the theologian”; an “elevated and trained womanhood” would purify the Negro race from within (ibid., pp. 29, 79). Cooper articulated black womanhood within the framework of white women’s Victorian womanhood (although not without critique). Thus, assimilation to ideal Christian womanhood (the achievement of respectability and consequently inclusion and/or equality) would uplift the black race through the ideal black woman; like white Victorian womanhood, her views were elitist and reinforced distinctive notions of conduct respectable for men and women, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, African Americans practiced politics of respectability long before it was theoretically conceptualized. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1994) coined the term “politics of respectability” in her book *Righteous Discontent*, where she analyzed the activities of the Women’s Convention of the Black Baptist Church (1880–1920) and its focus on individual behaviors like cleanliness, thrift, proper manners, sexual purity, and temperance as means by which black women could uplift the black race. Higginbotham states that “African American women were particularly likely to use respectability and to be judged by it” (ibid., p. 213). It was important to act and appear respectable and educated in public, especially when one had to traverse the white world where one worked or conducted business. In this 21st century, notable elite (and middle class) members of the black community, like Bill Cosby and President Obama, have criticized black children for how they behave and dress and publicly chastised black parents for how they and their children are perceived by the dominant society. Such perceived failure to adhere to respectability politics is grounds for blaming those children and their parents (especially single mothers) for most of what has gone wrong in their lives and communities; the impact of systemic racism and concomitant poverty is minimized. As Paisley Harris (2003) posits, the “politics of respectability undermined the rigidly scientific nature of racial categories, but generally tended to reinforce status distinctions within the African American community. These distinctions were about class, but they were defined primarily in behavioral not economic terms. By linking worthiness for respect to sexual propriety, behavioral decorum, and neatness, respectability served a gatekeeping function, establishing a behavioral “entrance fee,” to the right to respect and the right to

<sup>3</sup> Cooper earned a master’s degree from Oberlin College in 1887 and defended her Ph.D. at the University of Paris in 1925.

<sup>4</sup> See Alridge (2007).

full citizenship,” and the protection of black people’s rights, if white people are so inclined (p. 213). But E. Francis White (2001) argues that, rather than acquiesce to respectability politics, black women are required to make their boundaries as expansive and elastic or flexible as possible (p. 16). Black women should resist submission to respectability politics.

We find no evidence of resistance in Acts when Timothy is compelled by Paul to acquiesce to the demands of the Diaspora “Jews,” and to bear the marks of his assimilation in his flesh. Differently, William Jennings (2017) asserts that Timothy, the mulatto child, chose to be circumcised, although it was “Paul’s design” (p. 154). But, nothing in the narrative implies that Timothy chose to submit to circumcision. We have no idea about Timothy’s age; how old or young he was. We do know that before Paul arrives and expresses his desire for Timothy to accompany him and consequentially be circumcised, it had not occurred to Timothy’s believing mother or to Timothy himself that he should submit to circumcision. One can be compelled to do something one would not ordinarily do in order to fit in or to obtain the benefits, privileges, or position that others enjoy. Thus, one acquiesces to gain acceptance, privileges, and human dignity otherwise denied in a racialized world. Circumcision becomes an option when Timothy is offered the opportunity and privilege of becoming one of Paul’s co-laborers.

It seems hypocritical that Paul should take Timothy on the mission to deliver the Jerusalem Council’s decision to the *ekklēsiai* (assemblies, often translated as churches) that the Gentile believers should not be asked to undergo circumcision, after having Timothy circumcised contrary to the decree of that very Council. The Jerusalem Council decided that Gentile believers should only be asked to abstain from eating meats improperly killed or prepared and meats offered to idols (Acts 15:19–29; cf. Gal 2:1–10). James Baldwin (1991) has harsh words for Paul and his impact on Christianity and white Christians: “[White Christians] have forgotten that the religion that is now identified with their virtue and their power . . . came out of a rocky piece of ground in what is now known as the Middle East before color was invented and that in order for the Christian church to be established, Christ had to be put to death, by Rome and that the real architect of the Christian church was not the disreputable, sunbaked Hebrew who gave it his name, but the mercilessly fanatical and self-righteous St. Paul” (p. 44).

### 3. Race, Bi-Racial Identity, and Respectability

It was because of “the Jews” who insisted on the circumcision of Gentile believers that the Jerusalem Council was convened and Paul and Barnabas were sent to appear before it (Acts 15:1–6; cf. Gal 1:18–2:1–10). Gentiles are not Jews; Jews are not Gentiles. It is a matter of race. When we talk about race, we are also talking about racism, since race functions in the service of racism. Racism is political; it concerns how people, communities and societies act and institutions function on the basis of race—policies and laws are enacted, rights are recognized/denied and protected/violated, and resources/benefits are provided or withheld on the basis of race. “*Racism* is first and foremost a social practice, which means that it is an action and a rationale for action, or both at once. *Racism* always takes for granted the objective reality of *race*” (Fields and Fields 2014, p. 17; emphasis author’s). Race is not biological and has no scientific or genetic basis (ibid., p. 8). Paul wants to make Timothy one of his co-laborers, but Paul is concerned about the Jews in the Diaspora where Paul has been sent to preach the gospel of God’s grace. Thus, Paul decides that Timothy should be circumcised because of his father’s race—he is Greek (*Hellenos*) and not Jewish. But Timothy’s mother is a Jewish woman (*gynaikos Ioudaias*) of faith (*pistes*); she is a believer or member of the Jesus movement. She is anonymous in Acts. Commentators only marginally mention Timothy’s mother, if at all. She is silent and silenced, as are many other women in Acts (Reimer 1995; Smith 2011). Perhaps her silence reflects her impotency to intervene; potency is gendered. The anonymity of Timothy’s mother in Acts highlights the insignificance of her presence and her voice.

If non-white people, particularly black and brown people, can be convinced that their silence and acceptable behaviors, including language, dress, and a smile, are the ticket into the center, then

race/racism can continue unmolested. Those who do not act deaf, dumb and blind will bear the blame for any and all rejection and failures of the system to treat black people fairly or with equity and/or to protect them or their rights. Respectability politics demands a level of complicity with the system and the silence of those who try to acquiesce to the system's demands and to assimilate to the dominant culture. As Audre Lorde (1984) asserts our silence immobilizes us and our silence will not save us (pp. 11, 44). The silence of black women and our communities will not save us, our children, or the generations that follow. A child's suffering is a mother's suffering. Black women are generally well-liked, as long as they suffer in relative silence: Do not demonstrate anger; do not challenge dominant authority; do not ask too many questions; and certainly do not accuse well-meaning white people of being or acting racist.

The Deutero-Pauline text of Second Timothy identifies Timothy's grandmother as Lois, and his mother as Eunice, both of whom were known as women of faith (1:5). Timothy is a believer like his mother, but he is his father's son first and foremost and the latter is neither a believer nor Jewish. No mention is made of Timothy's father in 1 or 2 Timothy. Perhaps, Timothy's father was an absentee father. Paul describes Timothy as one whose concern for others is unparalleled. The relationship between Paul and Timothy is as a child (*teknon*) to a father (*patri*) in the Deutero-Pauline texts; Timothy slaved (*edouleusen*) with Paul for the gospel and apparently submitted to Paul as his superior in order to serve Paul in the Gospel (Phil 2:22; cf. Rom 16:21; 1 Cor 4:17; 1 Tim 1:2, 18; 6:20; 2 Tim 1:2, 3:10). Indeed, according to Acts, Timothy submitted to circumcision, as a son would (or an enslaved man) to a Jewish father.

Eunice's Jewishness is insufficient and Timothy's father's Greekness is a problem that can only be surmounted by the cutting of the young man's flesh, by circumcision. Eric Baretto (2010) argues differently that Luke (and Paul) never resolves the matter of Timothy's "irreducibly mixed ethnic identity"; Timothy was both Greek and Jewish (p. 63). But when racial-ethnic identity is bifurcated as in Jew and Gentile/Greek in Acts and in Paul's writings, even when Gentiles become believers, hybridity is never an option. Claims to be Jew *and* Gentile, bi-racial, as in modern racialized societies, reify the ideology of race and racial purity. Because of the mixing of diverse peoples throughout human history, most all peoples are hybrid. Bi-racial claims usually imply that one is equally white and non-white or Jew and Gentile. Which veins carry white blood and which non-white blood? Which parts of Timothy are Jewish and which parts are Gentile? Perhaps Paul has a phallic solution in Timothy's case. Racial purity is a myth of the social construction of race. Race is not biological or genetic and racial purity is an ideological charade that allows dominant groups to subordinate and dehumanize others for their own benefit and purposes.

In 1977 the U.S. federal government identified the following basic racial/ethnic categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian or Pacific Island; Black; Hispanic (regardless of race); and White. One could select American Indian or Asian; Hispanics could identify as White or Black, but all persons with any origins in Africa were "black racial groups" (Ferrante and Browne 2001, pp. 135–40). In 1997, twenty years later, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) asserted that no one could report belonging to more than one race or as being "multiracial," and in the same year changed the "Black" category to "Black or African American," leaving the definition unchanged (Ferrante and Browne 2001, pp. 139–41).<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Census required that citizens choose between White and other categories; the only category associated with ethnicity was Hispanic. In essence, if a people are not identified as White, they are considered non-White (i.e., Black/African American, Asian, Native Indian, or non-White Hispanic). Paul Knepper (2001) states that throughout American legal history, state and federal governments were inclined to enforce a narrow definition of "White" and a broad definition of "Black" and opposed attempts to blur "racial distinctions with a greater

<sup>5</sup> The OMB also allowed for the use of terms like "Negro" or "Haitian."



delineation of racial lines" (p. 130).<sup>6</sup> Instead, the U.S. has sometimes identified subcategories for "Black" persons. For example, in the 1854 California Supreme Court case, *People v. Hall*, a white man named George Hall appealed his murder conviction on the grounds that the witness against him was not white; a "Negro" or "Indian" could not legally testify against a white man. Not wanting to leave the question of race in doubt, the Court ruled that "white," by its very definition, *ex vi termini* (by the force of the boundary or by implication), excludes black, yellow, and any other color; a "black person" should be understood as "everyone who is not of white blood" (*ibid.*, p. 131). In the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the plaintiff, Homer Plessy, represented the Citizen's Committee to Test the Constitution of the Separate Car Law, a group of multiracial New Orleanians. Louisiana's Railway Accommodations Act of 1890 provided "equal but separate" accommodations for white and "colored races," wherein it was a misdemeanor for conductors to violate the seating law. Plessy, who appeared to be white, argued that since he was seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African, and the "colored" part was *not* discernable, he deserved the legal status of white citizens (emphasis mine). But Justice Brown sided with Louisiana's law: The state has the power to decide a person's race and the railway conductor by extension has the power to determine a person's race and who should sit where, without assuming any risk (*ibid.*). Throughout the Jim Crow period, the courts decided upon issues of racial identity. Even white people mistaken for and thus treated as black brought cases to prove that they were white, which usually resulted in more rigid definitions of whiteness. One drop of African blood excluded a person from being identified as white and made him black, better known as the "one-drop rule". Under Tennessee law, all "Negroes, mulattoes, mestizos, and their descendants" with any African blood coursing in their veins were considered colored or non-white people (*ibid.*, pp. 131–32). It did not matter if the African blood came from the father or the mother.

Both Jewish and Greek society were patrilineal in that the racial-ethnic status of the children was determined by the father's race. Shaye Cohen (1985) asserts that in biblical times since Israelite society was patrilineal and not matrilineal, offspring between an Israelite and a non-Israelite was determined patrilineally; the father's status would determine the children's ethnicity or social status. First century Jewish writers like Philo, the Apostle Paul, and Josephus show no familiarity with the matrilineal principle and it is unclear whether Luke is familiar with it in Acts 16 (p. 28). Later, in the mid-second century CE, we find matrilineal marriage in the Mishnah, which states that marriage between an Israelite woman and a Gentile man produces offspring that are considered Jews of impaired status (*mamzer*) (*ibid.*, p. 19).<sup>7</sup> Thus in first century CE Judaism, Timothy would be considered a Gentile, despite having a Jewish mother.

The mother's racial-religious status does not count and in a patriarchal household where the father/patriarch is Greek apparently male children are not circumcised, at least not in this case—a fact that seems to be known by Paul based on the racial-religious status of Timothy's parents (Acts 16:3). In a racialized society, few would identify Timothy as *bi-racial*; the dominant group in a *biracial* society would view Timothy as Greek/Gentile, associating him with the subordinated race. Claims of *bi-racial* or multi-racial identity are disruptive and political. Brian Bantum (2010) asserts that "interracial bodies ... perform a disruption they themselves do not fully understand or live into ... their presence is political even if they are not" (p. 50).

<sup>6</sup> During the colonial period, lawmakers constructed an ideology of race and enacted laws to enforce it; mutually exclusive categories of race were used to sustain the distinction between enslaved and enslaver. For example, in 1664 the Maryland Colonial Assembly enacted laws to clarify persons identified as "Negro." The law stated that all Negroes and the enslaved already in the province and those later imported shall be enslaved in perpetuity (*durante vita*). However, previously, like other servants, "black" persons had the opportunity to be freed (Knepper 2001, p. 130; see Giddings 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Cohen (1985) argues for parallels between Roman laws about marriage between non-Roman citizens and Roman citizens as possibly influential on the development of the matrilineal principle in rabbinic literature.

#### 4. Geopolitical Diaspora, Circumcision, and Respectability

It was because of “the Jews,” or the circumcisers in Judea, that the Jerusalem Council was convened to decide on what basis the Gentile believers would be accepted into the Jewish Jesus movement (15:1–6). Timothy, and perhaps at least his mother, are living in Lystra in the Diaspora, which is thirty miles northwest of Derbe in the region of Galatia (16:1). Timothy is already a disciple when Paul decides he should undergo adult circumcision. Thus, Timothy has likely experienced both water baptism and Spirit baptism because neither are required and both are insufficient in light of Paul’s anxieties about “the Jews” in Lystra and Iconium, all of whom know that Timothy’s father is Greek (6:3), the “gaze” of “the Jews” in the Diaspora. Similarly, black people who embraced respectability politics were very conscious of the “white gaze,” adopting a different code of conduct and language (especially for their children) when in the presence of white people, dissimilar from their behaviors in the private space of their homes and neighborhoods. “Respectability became an issue at the juncture of public and private” space (Higginbotham 1994, p. 213).

Paul treats Timothy like his child/son when he has him circumcised and later in the ministry, but what Paul is most concerned about is how Timothy is perceived by “the Jews” in the geopolitical space of Diaspora. It is perhaps both the fact that Timothy’s father is not a believer *and* is Greek that could cause trouble for Timothy among “the Jews” in Lystra, Iconium, and throughout the Diaspora (cf. 14:1–2). When “Gentiles and Jews” of Iconium pursued Paul beyond Iconium, Paul fled to Derbe and Lystra in the region of Lycaonia, where the Lycaonians (mis)identify Paul and Barnabas as the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus, respectively, after Paul heals a man who had been born unable to walk (14:5–18). The Jews from Antioch and Iconium stoned Paul and left him for dead outside the city; his disciples rescued him, and they fled to Derbe (14:19–20).

Timothy’s good reputation among the brothers or believers in his hometown counts less than the possible hostility of “the Jews” toward him (and Paul) in the Diaspora. Richard Pervo (2009) argues that the act of circumcising Timothy (whether Paul did it himself, we cannot know), “serves the Lucan program of ‘Jews first,’ and demonstrates Paul’s loyalty to the traditional faith,” but Paul’s insistence that Timothy be circumcised makes him vulnerable to the charge Paul makes against Peter in Gal 2:14 (p. 388). Benny Tat-Siong Liew (2004) asserts that, not only does Acts have “an ethnicity problem,” Paul, as portrayed in Acts, has one too. Liew notes that “Acts contains many references to the community’s successful mission to Gentiles, but the work of mission and evangelism is restricted to Jews (Palestinian and Hellenistic . . . This ethnic monopoly (a kind of ‘glass ceiling’ for Gentile Christ-followers? [perhaps] may explain why [Luke’s] Paul circumcises Timothy” (p. 422). Timothy likely became a believer prior to the Jerusalem Council’s decision that Gentile believers should not be made to submit to circumcision. Did Paul not view the Council’s decision as retroactive?

As the most influential Diaspora evangelist that the Antioch *ekklesia* commissioned in Acts (Paul seems to arise to the same status as Barnabas who vouched for and mentored him, Acts 9:26–27, 13:1–3, 15:36–41), Paul had the authority and influence to place the burden of circumcision on Timothy, despite the Jerusalem Council’s decree, and he did. Paul’s bias and fears superseded the just decision of the Council not to place the burden of circumcision on the Gentiles (cf. 1 Cor 16:10).

We might argue that Paul is a good person. He has sacrificed his well-being to take the gospel to the Gentiles; he meant no harm. But he still operates from a position of racial bias and as the one with the authority and power, his bias is oppressive, harmful, consequential, and impacts Timothy’s quality of life. Sometimes white people know that the pound of flesh that other white people demand of non-white bodies is unjust and overly burdensome, but they are silent and thus complicit in racism. Whitney Alese (2018) writes that respectability politics imply that the racism I encounter is my fault.

Paul’s desire that a *circumcised* Timothy labor with him in the Diaspora is more important than the physical impact on Timothy as an adult. Jewish males are normally circumcised on the eighth day of their birth, as was Paul (Phil 3:5); adult circumcision can be debilitating or fatal and perhaps more so if the circumcised male adult is required to travel immediately after the procedure (cf. Gen 34:25–31, after the rape of Dinah, the men of Shechem agree to be circumcised; the men are slaughtered while

they were still in pain on the third day after their circumcision). It is likely that the recovery time in the first century CE was greater than in modern times with advanced medicine and health care—an adult circumcision now takes about an hour to perform (compared with 2–3 minutes for an infant) and recovery time is 2–3 weeks. While the churches are strengthened as Paul and his traveling companions spread the news of the Jerusalem Council’s decision, Timothy, the Greek son, has been compelled to submit to the cutting of his flesh and thus is very likely ailing and weak (6:4–5). This recovery time may account for Timothy’s absence when Paul and Silas arrive in Macedonia and where they are jailed and accused of being Jews who are troubling the city; Timothy is not with Paul and Silas when they are arrested in Philippi of Macedonia (Acts 16:19–24). Timothy mysteriously reappears in Berea where Paul and Silas preach the Gospel after being set free from the Philippian jail (17:10–14; cf. 18:5, 19:22, 20:4).

According to Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he never compelled his traveling companion Titus to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek (Gal 2:3). In his own writings, Paul is consistent in his view that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised; the Pauline writings also have no single “theology of circumcision” (see [Livesey 2010](#)). Perhaps Paul’s insistence on Timothy’s circumcision is part of Luke’s construction of “the Jews” as the arch-enemy of the Pauline mission and of those who co-labor with him (see [Smith 2011](#)); “the Jews” would be as antagonistic toward Timothy and more so if they knew his father was Greek and that he was uncircumcised; the Jesus movement, as noted, is still a Jewish movement or a sect/party within Judaism, as the Jewish leaders articulate when they visit Paul under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:17–22). Perhaps by persuading Timothy to submit to circumcision, Paul can present Timothy as respectable to “the Jews” and therefore as less of a target of their hostilities. Another possibility is that Luke attempts to show that Paul never really regarded the Jerusalem council as authoritative over his Diaspora ministry, as Paul states in his own writings (Gal 1:11–2:10).

It is also possible that Paul viewed Timothy as such an asset to his ministry that he wanted to ensure Timothy would not be hindered as his co-laborer in the Diaspora, despite that Paul himself, a circumcised Jewish male, had been forced to flee from place to place by “the Jews” and hostile mixed mobs that “the Jews” incited (9:23–25, 13:50–51, 14:6, 19–20, 17:13–14, 18:6). It does appear in Acts that Timothy is able to travel from region to region unmolested, either with or without Paul, unlike the way that non-white immigrants have been restricted from crossing U.S. borders. But Timothy had to become a Jewish man or like a Jewish man in order to move freely unmolested in the Diaspora.

The U.S. has a history of restricting the movement of non-white peoples wanting to immigrate into the country and non-white immigrants carry the burden of respectability as they are expected to behave better and work harder at menial jobs for less wages than the average white U.S. citizen, or they bear the risk of being called aliens, thugs, and thieves, being deported, and/or having their children snatched from them in their homes, at school, and/or at the U.S. border. The U.S. government asserts that it is not respectable for non-white mothers to risk their lives to seek asylum for their children and a better life away from unspeakable violence and poverty. President Donald Trump has referred to non-white asylum seekers as “stone cold criminals.”<sup>8</sup> As of June 2018, Trump’s immigration ban consisted of primarily non-white Muslim countries: Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, North Korea, and Venezuela. The U.S. Immigration Act of 1917 and 1920 prohibited and restricted, respectively, immigration from Asia and the Pacific Islands; the 1920 Act reduced the numbers of immigrants accepted into the U.S. from Southern and Eastern Europe ([Knepper 2001](#), p. 132). In the 1922 federal court decision in *Ozawa v. U.S.* the court ruled that, based on the understanding of the “average man,” there is an “unmistakable and profound difference between” Japanese people and white people and thus Takao Ozawa, who had been born in Japan but lived in California for twenty years, was not considered a “free white person” and thus was ineligible for naturalization (*ibid.*, pp. 132–33). Knepper writes that “[t]he judiciary has refused to recognize the multiple and overlapping ancestry of the American people, but it has consistently upheld efforts to separate black from white” (*ibid.*, p. 133).

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<sup>8</sup> [Jansen and Gomez \(2018\)](#).



## 5. Problematic Flesh, Exceptionalism, and the Myth of Acceptance

As mentioned above, according to Galatians, Paul did not insist that Titus, a Greek, be circumcised. Perhaps Paul viewed Timothy as exceptional; they certainly had an incomparable relationship as Paul's authentic and disputed letters attest. African Americans generally recognize that the problem with respectability politics is that they often appeal to the "exceptional Negro" or to Du Bois's "Talented Tenth" (Du Bois 1989) and not to African Americans in general (O'Neal 2018, p. 28). As Marsha Darling (2011) argues in her essay "The Personal is Always Political," African American and other non-white communities have always conceived and nurtured "bright, ambitious, high-achieving black American women and men, girls and boys," and too many "never made their mark as professionals, not because they lack motivation and smarts, but because racial bigotry and discrimination and disdain for women and girls slammed and jammed shut opportunity's doors" (p. 231).

Respectability politics has driven black women (men and children) to seek to be pure and acceptable by other people's standards, particularly the dominant white culture and to be blemish free, even as the dominant white culture nudges the yardstick forward to ensure that black people never measure up or the goal is placed out of reach for the masses of non-white people—only the exceptional black people achieve. When desperate, the white majority will simply change the rules. We saw this with President Barack Obama's candidacy and presidency, manifested in the birtherism movement that propagated the mendacious notion that Obama was not a citizen of the U.S. because he had not been born in the U.S. When the Republican-controlled Senate and House blocked President Obama's March 2016 nomination of Chief Judge Merrick Garland to replace Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, they argued that, since President Obama was in his final year in office, he had no right to replace Scalia. Thus the nomination remained before the Senate for 293 days, the longest nomination process in U.S. history; Garland's nomination expired on 3 January 2017, with the end of the 114th Congress. Obama was treated as if he was no longer the President in his last year in office. Of course, it was a ploy to allow the incoming President (Donald Trump) to fill Scalia's seat with an ultra-conservative nominee. Non-white people will never measure up if the standard is to *be* white in a racialized society dominated by whiteness, undergirded by an ideology of white supremacy and entitlement.

In their quest for racial respectability and human dignity, some black people with extremely light skin, straight hair, and other features associated with whiteness attempted to pass as white—to be more than exceptional, namely to be white; it is called "passing."<sup>9</sup> As Bantum (2010) argues: "[T]he ability of some folks to pass implies how racial purity and notions of fixed identity require peoples to adhere or live into racial (and cultural) ideals" (p. 46). The "tragic mulatto" is the black person who, because she looks white, is rejected by the black community, but is also regarded as black and rejected by the white community because of her black blood, even if one drop (the kind that can only be detected when her parents are known to be black), is coursing through her veins. The classic film *Imitation of Life* is the story of the "tragic mulatto" and her struggle for inclusion into the white community because she looks (and feels) white; she attempts to *pass* as white. In the 1959 version of *Imitation of Life*, Sara Jane's parents are both considered black or Negro, but her father was a very fair skinned "Negro" who looked "practically white" and was likely so-called mixed race himself. Sara Jane favors her father and wants to pass as white, which she constantly attempts to do, but her mother always intervenes, showing up at her elementary school and at the club where she obtains a job as a chorus girl far from home. Even as a young child, Sara Jane was made to feel different and to know what it meant to be treated like a Black person. When Susie, Sara Jane's little white playmate and daughter of the white woman Laura Meredith (Lana Turner), for whom Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore) serves as a live-in maid, asks Annie, also known as "mammie," what color Jesus was, Sara Jane responds that "he was white like me." Sara Jane refused to attend the "Negro" church and "Negro" schools, to date "Negro" boys, to play with Susie's "black" doll, and to let anyone know that her mother was a "mammie." As a

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<sup>9</sup> See Nella Larsen (2000) and James Weldon Johnson (1994).

teenager, Sara Jane enters into a relationship with a white boy, who assumes she is white. When he discovers through town gossip that Sara Jane is black, he beats her, leaving her bloody and curled up like a dog in an alley on a dreary rainy night; it seemed like nature or God was crying with her, for her or both. It is never enough to look white, to be the exceptional black person, one must *be white* to enter into the white world as an equal. Sara Jane is determined to have the jobs, connections, and respect that the white folks whom she resembles are given and have opportunities to achieve because they are white. Sara Jane is willing to disown her mammie-mother to *be white*. Finally, in desperation to live as she looks, she disowns her mother, asking her that if she ever sees her on the street to act like she does not know her; her worn-out and broken-hearted mother agrees to honor Sara Jane's wishes. Mammie returns home where she resides in Ms. Laura's house and dies of a broken heart.

Respectability politics require that marginalized and minoritized women and men, particularly African American women, be exceptional; that they view themselves and are seen by the "elite" within their own community, as well as by the dominant white group, as set apart or different from the rest of their people/community. But the exceptional "Negro" is still a "Negro" to the dominant white group! Alice Walker's (1979) first definition of the term *womanist* describes the black woman in her short story "Coming Apart" as a womanist, which is "a feminist only more common." My own experiences as an African American woman are more common to black women and the black community; mine are not exceptional. I offer my personal experience with the idea and expectation of the "exceptional Negro," which is quite common, even if anecdotal. In my former life, as Paul would say, I was a legal secretary—I trained to be a good one, one of the best, sometimes the best at typing or shorthand in my high school class and among the top four in the region. When I landed my first job as a legal secretary in Columbus, Ohio for a sole practitioner and his law clerk, the law clerk thought it good to inform me one day that I was the first black girl they had ever hired; they presumed that all black women were slower than white women. Then he said, "But you are the fastest secretary we have ever had." I remember first being shocked and then being unimpressed. I had a number of high school classmates, black and white, who were professional and excellent at typing, shorthand, and other office skills. I thought about all the black women who never got an interview, simply because they were black and presumed to be too slow. However, possessing the skills that the law clerk thought were so superior did not keep them from paying me well below market rate, I soon found out. And my being on time and never absent for almost two years straight did not keep them from stating in my presence that black people are always late; I guess I was considered the exception. Being the exceptional "Negro" means that you cannot make mistakes, or your mistakes are attributed to an innate deficiency and not to a bad day—it is inherent in what the dominant group thinks of black people. I remember turning in a paper on time in my doctoral program, even though it was incomplete; in my anxiety, I presumed it was better that the paper was turned in on time, regardless of how unfinished it was. The white male professor wrote on my paper that I should know how to do analysis by now (I knew I had not finished writing the paper). He felt that was the only scenario that could account for my unfinished paper. I was hurt, but I knew my truth.

Paul regards Timothy as exceptional, but even the exceptional have a price to pay for inclusion. The price of inclusion is steep for Timothy and for black women—sometimes life threatening, death dealing, and it definitely can be traumatizing. The circumcision of Timothy was no microaggression. I don't know how old Timothy was but he was far from being an eight-day-old baby. The respectable behaviors that the dominant white group requires of non-white people to be accepted, to be included, or that the non-white people require of their own, are futile. It is not the behaviors of non-white people per se that are the problem for the dominant culture, it is our non-white flesh and what that flesh represents in a racialized society—that part of us that we cannot change no matter how well-behaved we act. As White (2001) asserts, "race remains immutable in the minds of most Americans" (p. 19). And racism, grounded on the ideology of race, demands a pound of black or brown flesh, but never envisions equality or parity.

Respectability was a principal basis upon which African Americans asserted their equal status and citizenship during the Progressive era. Defined more broadly, respectability continued to be a significant basis for claiming rights throughout the civil rights era and beyond, but it also potentially promoted exclusionary gatekeeping by linking claims of rights to certain behaviors and potentially limited the impact and effectiveness of black antiracism scholarship (White 2001). Most of the world never heard Serena Williams, the GOAT (greatest of all time), talk about the racial injustices and microaggressions she experienced as a strong capable black woman throughout her tennis career. Even now it is not respectable for Serena to claim that she felt cheated and to have the audacity to be angry and to stand up for herself while steeping in that anger. Black women have a right to be angry without being accused of whining, of being immature, or showing poor sportswomanship. Angry black women are often intelligent, capable individuals, who are forced to spend too much of our time dealing with rudeness, insults, and doubts about our capabilities from white (and some non-white and male) colleagues; black women are “[n]ot whiners, not complainers—just living a different reality” (Tillman 2011, p. 95). Serena is an example of how hard black women can work and how much they can achieve and still be accused of cheating or not measuring up—of being deficient. When black women (and men and their children) bend the rules of black respectability, they are no longer the exceptional “Negro.” This reality is universal for black women. In her essay “Being Black and Female in the Academy,” Linda Tillman (2011) argues that “the assumption that one can be promoted and tenured, promoted to full professor, and become a distinguished scholar and a respected leader if one just simply works hard is often a myth when applied to black faculty . . . the norms of the academy do not allow for a critical mass of accomplished black female scholars . . . only one or two black females are allowed to excel during any given period of time. More than a few intelligent black women in the academy is contradictory to the traditional roles that have been assigned to us” (pp. 91, 96). Tillman further asserts that she learned that the academy expected her not to act “too black” and not to “talk back” or to believe that she really belonged in academia. In fact, “no amount of publications, conference presentations, committee appointments, or awards will ever make others respect us or our work,” she states (ibid., pp. 96, 105). Respectability politics reinforce the idea that black people will never measure up and that the majority of African Americans are inferior and will never fit in, but there are always exceptions.

Prior to that moment at the U.S. Open Championships in New York in 2018 where Serena expressed her anger publicly, many white folks who previously supported her turned against her on twitter and Facebook posts, calling her behavior unacceptable and announcing that Serena has been replaced, in their hearts, by Naomi Osaka, the somewhat shy and composed twenty-year-old young woman, whose Haitian identity many of those same white people conveniently forget to acknowledge. Osaka, according to the white dominant account, is the first Japanese player to win a Grand Slam single title. Naomi is still finding her own voice, but she will know, if she does not already, that respectability politics that demand our silence on issues of race/racism will not shield her/us from racism, that inclusion is at a cost to self and community and is not to be confused with equality and equity. Neither a politics of respectability nor a politics of inclusion will dismantle racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression. What non-white peoples need from white allies is active engagement in dismantling, brick-by-brick, the “big houses” that slavery built and the structures that racism maintains and fortifies. From my own experience, and based on the stories of other African American women, well-behaved non-white women, those deemed worthy of acceptance and inclusion and those most acceptable once included, are black women who conduct themselves above reproach and teach their children to do likewise; they imitate ideals and ideas of white womanhood and culture, seeking to blend in and not to stand out; and they do not complain, or complain very little, at least not about systemic racism and the microaggressions that non-white people endure. But non-white women (men and their children) know, experientially and statistically, that inclusion—whether it be acceptance in a doctoral program or into a seminary or divinity school where one might be the only black female professor—usually means that African American women

and men are expected to bare the burdens of systemic racism in silence and without naming the racism that one experiences.

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