Episode 63: Nyasha Junior

# KL: Katie Linder NJ: Nyasha Junior

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode sixty-three.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the shows website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I’m joined by Dr. Nyasha Junior, an Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible in the Department of Religion at Temple University in Philadelphia. She holds a Ph.D. in Old Testament from Princeton Theological Seminary. She is the author of An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation (Westminster John Knox Press, 2015). Visit nyashajunior.com and follow her on Twitter @NyashaJunior.

Thanks for joining me, Nyasha.

**NJ:** Thanks for having me.

**KL:** So I’d love to start in this first segment talking about your most recent book which is on womanist biblical interpretation, so can you just share a little bit about the book? What’s the general premise of it?

**NJ:** So my first book is an introduction to womanist biblical interpretation, and basically I wrote the book to try to offer some starting point for people who were curious about womanist approach in biblical studies. And in the book I argue that womanist biblical interpretation, while related to feminist biblical interpretation can also be traced with a longer history to earlier black women, who were not technically biblical scholars, but who engaged in biblical interpretation. So I’m arguing that while black women are new to Biblical studies, they are not new to biblical interpretation.

**KL:** Interesting, so as some of our longtime listeners know, this is actually one of the topics on the show that’s actually a little bit in my wheelhouse, because my background is in women and gender studies, but I would imagine that for some of our listeners, the term womanist is very new to them. So could you talk just briefly about a definition of that, and you’ve kind of rooted in your research a little bit, but can you just expand on that a little bit for folks that may be hearing it for the first time?

**NJ:** Yeah, so the term womanist comes from Alice Walker, and in her 1983 volume, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens”, she defines the term womanist in a creative four part definition. So the definition is a full page, but people will often shorten it to a couple of pieces, one of which is womanist is a black feminist, or a woman of color, and the other one you may have heard of is womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. And so again, it’s a long definition, but those two elements are the key things that people usually point to as a definition of womanist.

**KL:** So we will definitely link to that book in the show notes for anyone who wants to follow up on it and read a little bit more. Can you talk a little bit Nyasha, about the origins of this research for you? What drew you to this topic, was there a particular need or a gap you were trying to fill?

**NJ:** Yes, I felt that there was a gap in biblical studies in that there were many people who were using the term womanist as synonymous with black woman scholar. There were also people who were using feminist slash womanist, as if the two were parallel. And there wasn’t anything at the time when I was writing, as an intro volume into some of these issues particularly within biblical studies. So I wrote the book because I wished that I had had a book like this when I was writing my dissertation and it didn’t exist. So I was writing particularly thinking of graduate students who needed a place to begin in thinking about womanist approaches in biblical studies.

**KL:** So given this audience, and thinking about kind of a graduate student audience in particular, did that change how you approached your topic? I mean were there specific decisions made as you were writing that were really kind of tailored to that particular audience?

**NJ:** For me, I think of myself primarily as a teacher, so I am a teacher who writes and does research, and I tried to provide a lot of background information because I was thinking of a graduate student audience. So for me that meant that instead of starting the conversation with the first black woman in the US with a PhD in biblical studies, that I wanted to start earlier than that and talk about people outside of the field. It also meant that rather than focus only on biblical studies, which might do if you were writing an introduction on biblical studies, but instead of focusing only on that field, I chose to talk about religious studies because there’s a lot of work that crosses those lines, and I also wanted to talk more about feminism and womanism outside of biblical studies, and then talk about how they apply within biblical studies. So for me, in thinking about a graduate student audience, it meant that I was trying to provide a lot of background information that I probably wouldn’t have done if I had been thinking of an audience that was more familiar with those terms.

**KL:** Mhm, so as you’re working, I think this book is such an interesting example of writing to a particular audience, and I know that you’re expanding womanist studies into your other work as well, can you tell me how you distinguish your womanist approach to biblical studies as compared to a feminist approach? Are there particular elements of Alice Walker’s definition that you’re pulling out, or is it more personal and specific to your line of work? What does that look like to you in your own application of that kind of interpretation?

**NJ:** So I should be clear, I don’t identify as a womanist, and the book itself, there may be some conversation about this, but the book itself is not what I would consider a womanist approach. So it’s more descriptive about what I am noticing in the field. So to be brief, and this is kind of controversial, in womanist approaches, I argue that there is currently no consensus position about the features of a womanist approach. So that’s in contrast to feminist approach in biblical studies, where there is a diversity, but we have 40, nearly 50 years of scholarship so that people have a fairly good feelings about some of the characteristics of a feminist approach in biblical studies. So that may be looking at female characters, talking about issues of gender, talking about how particular texts have affected women, those types of things. So even if someone is not identifying as feminist, we still have a pretty good idea about what it looks like if you’re doing a feminist approach in biblical studies. And part of what I argue in my book is that with womanist approaches, at this point, because there are very few people doing womanist approaches within biblical studies, and so we don’t have a lot to work with. What it means, fundamentally, is that for many people a womanist approach is not about the approach itself, but it’s about the scholar who is doing the work. So womanist is often thought of as if a black woman scholar is doing the work. And that’s part of what I tease out in the book is that there are misconceptions about the level of, again, consensus, and often when people are writing, they are writing with a lot of generalizations about womanist approaches, and so I wanted to take some time and unpack that.

**KL:** Have you found this to be, I mean I made this assumption while reading the book, have you found that other people are assuming that you’re coming from a womanist approach because of the topic of the book itself? Or have you found that people are distinguishing between those two things in terms of the approach and the content that you’re covering in the book.

**NJ:** So I explain in the beginning of the book that I’m not a womanist, and this appears to be quite a shock to many people. I still find that people make many assumptions about scholars and their scholarship. And so yes, people assume that I am a womanist, people assume it’s a womanist work, but also people have lots of different ideas about what they thought the book would be. So some people seem to think it would be a one volume commentary, in which I discuss every book of the Bible, or every woman character of the Bible using a womanist approach, or that it would be sort of litany of scholarship of black women or of womanist scholars. So I think in part because there wasn’t a book like this when I published it, that people have a lot of different ideas about what would be in the book.

**KL:** So I’m curious, you know, you’ve picked some subjects that for many people are very personal, thinking about issues of gender and belief systems, religions. What are some of the challenges that you’ve encountered as you’ve worked on this book, talked to people about this book, communicated with people about your scholarship? Or have there been challenges as you’ve been working in these paradigms that to many people, they’re pretty personal.

**NJ:** Oh, I don’t talk to civilians much so.

[*laughs*]

I try not to tell people much what I do, I never tell people what I do on airplanes or in airports. Yeah, so I talk to people who do religion, and I talk to people who do Bible, and apart from people [*unintelligible]* I don’t usually discuss much with other people, in part because people don’t understand that I’m talking about an academic, critical approach. For example, in my Twitter bio, I don’t say that I’m a biblical scholar, even though that’s the language that normally people in biblical studies would use. But for people outside the discipline, they don’t what that means. Am I a minister, am I a pastor, am I evangelical, people just don’t know what to do when someone does stuff with the Bible, and I don’t usually think of it as a critical approach. So, yeah usually, I don’t, I confess, I don’t talk to people about.

**KL:** You just don’t like to open that can of worms

[*laughs*]

**NJ:** No, because people will confess deep, dark secrets to me, people will start talking about what the Bible says, and my son is gay, or all manner of things, and I’m not equipped, I’m not in pastoral care, that’s not what I do, I’m a scholar. So normally I really just don’t, I don’t talk about it.

**KL:** That’s very interesting. Well we’re going to take a brief break, when we come back we’ll hear from Nyasha about the text-based components of her research. Back in a moment.

[*music plays*]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Nyasha, one of the components of your research that I find really interesting is that it is mostly text-based in methodology. And I think that some people might think about biblical interpretation and they’re thinking, well what does that entail exactly? And you had mentioned in segment 1 that there are some misconceptions about what you do, so when you’re doing research for this book and for the other projects that you’re working on, what does that look like? What is the text-based methodology that you’re using to dig into the Biblical interpretation that you’re looking at?

**NJ:** So, when we’re talking about doing text-based research, I explain it usually to people as, I’m much more like an English professor than whatever it is you might be thinking about when you think about the Bible. What I mean by that, is that we in biblical studies have a corpus of material and we’re focused on that. So it might be similar to someone who’s in an English department and focuses on a particular time period and location or a particular author. So in biblical studies, it means that usually we are talking about either Jewish canon or the Christian canon or how people are using those materials, or comparative literature relating it to those materials. Specifically for the book that I wrote, and in this way it’s not so much the Biblical text itself that I was focused on, but I was interested in looking at how scholars were using feminist approaches and how people were using womanist approaches in biblical studies. So in that way, it means looking at how scholars have defined those terms, so how have they defined womanist or feminist, how have they engaged with the work of Alice Walker, and what steps are they taking in making arguments about biblical texts using those methods.

**KL:** So aside from the book that you’ve worked on, or other projects that you might be doing, are there certain works, or certain canon that you’re using or are there certain parts of the Bible that you’re focused on, or does that change from project to project? How has that been narrowed for your own work?

**NJ:** So, within biblical studies there are lots of different ways to do it, and it could involve particularly focusing on one text, and it could also involve looking at how other people have interpreted a particular text or a group of texts. So for me, the project that I am working on now, is a project on Hagar, and for those who don’t know, Hagar is one of the characters in the Bible, she’s in the book of Genesis, she is an Egyptian slave woman, and she is a wife of Abraham and mother of Ishmael. So with that project, it means that I’m focused primarily on Genesis 16 and Genesis 21, the main texts in which Hagar appears. She’s also in [*unintelligible*] 25, but I’m primarily looking at those two Genesis texts and looking at how other scholars have understood Hagar from those texts. So some of it’s me and the biblical texts, and some of its me and other scholars and how they are looking at those biblical texts.

**KL:** So I can imagine certain benefits and challenges from doing text based research, and that you might have certain areas that are really more convenient for you, but also some areas where you might find some levels of more constraint. Can you talk a little bit of some of the benefits you’ve found from using this kind of methodology in your work?

**NJ:** Hmm, it’s tough for me to think about benefits, because it’s what I do, I don’t really think about it as having benefits.

[*laughs]*

I would say, for me I enjoy it, because part of what I enjoy is looking at the different ways people are looking at texts, and the different interpretations that they have over time, so my current project Hagar. On Hagar is looking specifically at how Hagar becomes appropriated by African American communities, and how she is read in parallel to those experiences, and understood as a black woman. So, it means that I’m looking at lots of different types of material, so I’m looking at novels, at poetry, at sermons, at songs, at lots of different elements, in the history of interpretation of this particular character, and this particular character as identified ethnically and racially. So I guess one of the benefits is, I look at lots of different things, because the Bible is important within western literature and culture, so it’s never dull, there’s always something new for me to learn.

**KL:** So it sounds like its an interdisciplinary field, and I would imagine another benefit is, you’re not ever seeking out external funding in order to complete this research, that you have the kind of material that you need relatively at your fingertips. In the terms of the kinds of resources you’re looking to, not just within the biblical text, but in the kinds of surrounding scholarship that you might be referencing in your research.

**NJ:** That’s true for the most part. I just need a good library, some digital databases, time and space. Most of the things that I need I have access to, but it means that it’s difficult to apply for external funding, because there’s not a whole lot of funding for religion, and there’s not a whole lot, as you can imagine, for bible in religion. And I don’t really need things, like I don’t need a particle accelerator, or a lab, or whatever it is people in science do. What I need is time and space and maybe a library assistant to go get me some books.

[*laughs*]

**KL:** So you’ve mentioned one challenge, which is the difficulty of finding funding, kind of at the other side of that, are there difficulties that you find in this kind of research in particular that you’re looking at.

**NJ:** I’d say finding funding is tough, also communicating what we do to people who are outside the field. So in airports, I don’t have to tell people what I do, but it is difficult to communicate to people say within the college of liberal arts, religion is a department within the college of liberal arts, trying to explain to tenure and promotion committees what it is that you do, when there might be people on the committee who’ve never heard of critical biblical studies. Even within religion departments, so some of us do biblical studies, but others do Buddhism, Judaism, early Christian origins, so even within the same department, we don’t do the same kind of work or go to conferences, or teach the same classes the same way.

**KL:** Like in any discipline [*laughs*] there’s niche areas.

**NJ:** True, but I think in sociology, they are all sociologists. Even if they do different types of sociology, or even if they use different methodologies or whatever, but they do all see themselves as sociologists, and they all tend to go to the same sociology conference.

**KL:** So I’m wondering if there’s any advice, I’m curious, for people might want to get started with this kind of text based research, maybe they’re kind of intrigued by it or if they’re coming from a student perspective, we have several students listen to this show, both undergrads and grads, are there resources that you might recommend to them in terms of how to start thinking about working with texts in the way that you do?

**NJ:** The main thing I would say would be start learning your languages as early as possible. It is often the case that people in religion will do an MDv, a master of divinity, before going on to do PhD work, and what I’ve found in my conversations with MDvs, is often they didn’t know there was a path to the PhD, and they didn’t know the required languages, and that trips them up. So taking Greek, taking Hebrew, that would be the first place to start if somebody wanted to get into this field.

**KL:** Alright, well we’re going to take another break. When we get back we’ll hear a little bit more from Nyasha. Back in a moment.

[*music plays*]

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Nyasha one of the things I really enjoyed in following your work, is that I did stumble across you on social media, you are promoting this book, and you’re doing some speaking, I also follow you on Instagram, so I see you do campus visits and other things. And also I think you have a really wonderful professional website, and we will link to that in the notes. But I’m wondering what you’ve done to promote this book, and get on people’s radar in being able to talk about these topics. What are some of the techniques you’ve used in promoting this book?

**NJ:** The first thing for me in terms of promoting the book is not so much the book but myself. One of the publishers I know talks about, you can’t think of promoting the book, you have to think about the book as resting on your platform. So for me the first thing was to have a professional website. I’ve had a website for a while now at the urging of my students several years ago. Like many academics I am actually an introvert, so I felt like nobody needed to know who I was or where I was or how to reach me, or what I look like. And my students convinced me that it was important for me to have a presence, that people would be looking for me, and that I should have a social media, because there were audiences that I wouldn’t reach normally. So flash forward, now I have a website, I’m on social media all the time, but I would say a website is key because you need a place to tell your story. I think at a basic level, if you were an academic, or a grad student thinking of going on the market, you don’t need anything fancy, but you should have at least a page that’s you. With a photo, with a way to contact you, and with some description about your work. So it doesn’t need to be fancy, my website has gotten fancier over time, but there needs to be a place where people can see who you are and what your story is.

**KL:** So I’ve always heard this described as sort of a home base, you know if you move institutions, or you graduate or you get your first job, or you change to a new role, and you don’t necessarily want to depend on someone else’s website. You should have your own home base that you can control, that you can change over time, and like you said, it doesn’t have to be super fancy, but it gives you kind of a space to share your work and to really be in control of that representation of yourself.

**NJ:** Yes, I think that is key, to have at least one place where you are in control of that, and you can change it.

**KL:** So your website, is this something you initially designed yourself, or is this something you have had some assistance with?

**NJ:** No, I am not the least bit visual, I’m a text person, I can read but I can’t imagine and visualize things very well. So my web designer is in charge of all of that, and I just send her lengthy descriptions of who I am, what I’m going for, and she just works her magic and makes the website sort of what I’m looking for, but push me to be more visual and share more. So her name is Nikki Terry, she is at Orange Custard design.

**KL:** So I would imagine some people listening to this would say, okay so how did you find this person?

[*laughs*]

You know, they’re also saying, I’m text based, I’m not a visual person, so how did you about that process of thinking about this and hiring a web designer?

**NJ:** Well my first website was done by a former student who just kind of took pity on me because I didn’t know where to begin. Now I’ve been working with Nikki for a couple of years, I found her on Twitter I want to say, she has worked with a number of academics and writers and I liked her style. Also I wanted to try to support a black woman entrepreneur, so she ticked all the boxes, and she understood what I was looking for as an academic, so I wasn’t someone who was selling widgets or selling shea butter or those kinds of things, and she understood what I was trying to convey. So for me it was important to try to find someone that would help me articulate what I was going for, but also understand that I had no idea how to do any of this. So working with her was a challenge for both of us, but I was happy with the end result.

**KL:** So I would imagine that it’s, publicizing a book is not as simple as putting up a website, building a little bit out your personal brand and then people just flock to you, buy your book and invite you to speak. I’m sure there’s other kinds of promotional activities that go into that, or maybe I’m wrong, maybe it was kind of a magical occurrence with your website. But can you talk a little bit about, you know you have your website, you’re building your platform, what other kinds of things did you do? To promote your book, to starting letting people know that you were available to do speaking on those topics?

**NJ:** So for my first book I actually started talking about the book before it was even done. So I share a lot of different things on twitter, but I’m also an academic on Twitter, so I started a hashtag, introwbi on Twitter, I put that in my twitter bio, and whenever I posted about the book I would include that hashtag. So by the time that the book came out, my followers knew about the book, had been with me for part of the journey and were looking forward to the book. So Twitter was big, I am rarely on Facebook, I don’t enjoy Facebook but I also posted there, and a little on Instagram, like the cover and things like that. Again it’s not, academics don’t sell a whole lot of books anyway, so it not as if I was thinking this was going to be a New York Times bestselling author or anything like that. For me it really was, I wanted people to read the book, so I wrote the book in what I thought was a fairly accessible style, I knew there were people in biblical studies, in religion, and also outside of those people outside the discipline who might be interested in this work, including laypeople, people who are not academics, but who might have some interest in the topic. So in writing the book, I was thinking about that particular audience, and in social media I was also letting people know things about womanism, things about Alice Walker, I have Instagram boards sharing information. I also often tweet the work of black scholars in religion and in biblical studies and started another hashtag: aarsbl. Aar is the American Association of Religion and SBL is the Society of Biblical Literature. And that’s the major conference, it’s a collocated conference for those two organizations that’s the big annual meeting where religious scholars go every year. So I don’t just push my book, I talk about my work, and I also share the work of other scholars and other things that are related to the book. So people started inviting me to talk about the book, because they had read the book, seen the book, assigned the book, and then I also had found people are starting to ask me to talk about other things as well. So for example, about social media, even though that’s not my area of academic expertise, my experience in social media, and my Twitter account, which I think, is it 2015 or 2016 was named one of the most indispensable academic twitter accounts to follow by the Chronicle? So people knew me from social media and also wanted to talk to me about that. So I just did an engagement at Drew University, and they asked me could I just come and stay. And I was like what do you mean, and they were like well we want you to do two things: for you to talk about social media and having a professional web presence in the morning, but then we want you to do a talk on your book in the evening. So we had to do a lot negotiation to make that happen, but I thought it was a great example of how different people know me for different reasons, but having a platform allowed me to do that, I wasn’t just a person that was talking about my book.

**KL:** Well we will make sure to link to your social media profiles and your professional website so folks can take a look. Thank you Nyasha so much for taking the time to come on the show and talk about your book and also your experience promoting it and being an academic online. Thanks so much!

**NJ:** Thanks for having me!

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us on this weeks episode of Research in Action, I’m Katie Linder and we will be back next week with a new episode.

# Show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor’s guide for incorporating the episode into your courses, can be found at the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

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