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## Review

**Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew,  
and Fernando F. Segovia, editors,**  
*They Were All Together in One Place?  
Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*  
(Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009)

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I would like to congratulate the editors and the contributors of *They Were All Together in One Place?* for their groundbreaking effort in bringing this anthology together. The book came out of a project that brought biblical scholars from diverse racial and ethnic groups into sustained conversation. Contributors display a high level of skills and sophistication in their interpretive practices, as they scrutinize how race and ethnicity intersect with class, gender, sexuality, nation, colonialism, and empire. The anthology as a whole debunks a reified and essentialized notion of

race, showing that racial and ethnic formation have always been contingent upon complex historical, social, cultural factors. I applaud the attention given to gender parity and the inclusion of an equal number of the Asian-, African-, and Latino/a-American members, though this stated goal cannot be always achieved because of the small number of biblical scholars in some communities.

In the book's concluding chapter, Fernando Segovia candidly identifies two key lacunae in the volume. First, there is an "under-theorization of criticism" especially with regard to what constitutes "minority criticism." He writes, "not enough consideration is given to what constitutes or differentiates criticism as minority, beyond yet bringing together in some distinct fashion African American, Asian American, and Latino/a American criticism" (386). Second, there have not been more critical interchanges and fertilization across the racial groups. He notes that each contributor articulates his or her own reading strategy, without identifying similar moves in the same racial group or in other groups. As such, there is a lack of comparative perspective and a deeper relational and multicultural exchange.

What distinguishes this volume from other anthologies is that contributors come from Asian-, African-, and Latino/a American communities. After reading the excellent introduction, the reader would want to know what are the commonalities and differences in minority biblical criticism. Are these contributors natural allies because they are all racialized readers, or are they strange bedfellows? What have they learned from the reading practices of other racial groups? Do they agree or disagree with each other some of the time, or most of the time? If they have discussed such questions when they gathered, the book does not give sufficient information. For example, what has Demetrius K. Williams' Pentecostal reading of Act 2 to do with Benny Liew's queer reading of John's Gospel? How can one compare the survival narratives in the chapters by Francisco García-Treto, Frank Yamada, and Gale Yee? And why is Gay Byron's chapter on the Axumite Empire placed in the section on "Expanding the Field" while others are not? It seems to

me that García-Treto's bilingual reading and his intertextual reading of Lamentations with Daína Chaviano's novel also expands the field. The same can also be said of other chapters engaging critical race theory or postmodern or postcolonial theories.

If I were to answer the question, "Were they all in one place?" I would say, "Not quite and not yet." Segovia suggests other ways the project might have been organized, such as circulating the papers beforehand and publishing responses and comments from the critique and discussion (386). In fact, this has been done in some publications of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, such as *Spirituality of the Third World*, in which the paper by the scholar of one continent was responded to by scholars from other continents.<sup>1</sup> But I want to address the deeper epistemological and institutional challenges of a project that would facilitate closer interactions among racial minority biblical scholars.

The emergence of racial and ethnic criticism is only about two decades, if we count the publication of Cain Hope Felder's *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* in 1989 as a landmark event.<sup>2</sup> In the Asian American community that I am more familiar with, the anthologies *The Bible in Asian America* and *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading* did not come out until 2002 and 2006 respectively.<sup>3</sup> In the present volume under review, Frank Yamada, Gale Yee, and Jae Won Lee are beginning to develop reading strategies out of the Japanese and Korean American experience, or addressing the stereotypes of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigner and model minority. In other words, many of these scholars are in the early stages of excavating

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<sup>1</sup> K. C. Abraham and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, eds., *Spirituality of the Third World: A Cry for Life: Papers and Reflections from the Third General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Tat-Siong Benny Liew, ed., *The Bible in Asian America*, Semeia 90/91 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); and Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan, eds., *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006).

their historical and cultural archives. Until more work has been done and more conversations of what constitute “Asian American hermeneutics,” it may be a little too early to expect them to talk about a comparative minority biblical criticism.

Apart from the relatively newness of minority criticism, there are other barriers to cross-fertilization among the racial groups. Because of the identity politics and politics of hiring practices in seminaries and colleges and universities, minority scholars are hired to teach and further their research on the racial group that he or she is seen as a “representative.” The dominant center needs a few tokens to mark the differences, and we are assigned the role of what Rey Chow has called “the Protestant ethnic”—such as talking back to the dominant center, including telling the center what has gone wrong. There is little encouragement for acquiring competence in the multicultural history of the United States, and developing an intersectional or cross-racial biblical hermeneutics from such competence. We have yet to produce someone like Ronald Takaki in theology or biblical studies, who has a superb grasp of the complexities of America’s multidimensional racial histories. We are bilingual, because we are trained to speak the dominant tongue, and we take up Asian-, African-, or Latino-American studies on the side. The challenge for minority criticism is how to become multilingual, and to encourage each other to see this as an important part of our work and career development, in light of the changing demographics of the 21st century. To develop some common goals for minority criticism, we must get beyond the niceties, and have the courage to address painful encounters and tensions, such as the acknowledgment of Asians owning slaves, and the racism of some Asians toward blacks.

Although I hope the contributors would interact with each other more, I can discern several themes recurrent throughout the anthology, which deserve further attention. The first concerns the use of postcolonial theory in minority criticism. Many chapters highlight the experiences of empire, colonization, exile, and diaspora in the Bible: exile and return of refugees

(Anderson, García-Treto, Ruiz, Liew); racial and ethnic differences under the empire (Jae Won Lee, Bailey, Liew, Williams); treatment of others perceived to be “foreign” (Yamada, Yee), and the existence of competing empires (Byron). Different authors have noted how Segovia’s work on postcolonialism, diaspora and exile, as well as cultural studies have been helpful for their work (García-Treto, 71; Yamada; Jae Won Lee, 145-46; Byron, Williams, 290, and Rivera, 314, 318).

I have noted that Asian American and Latino/a biblical scholars have used insights from postcolonial theory for some time, and I am delighted to see the sustained engagement in Gay Byron’s chapter. I concur with her that much is to be gained by intersecting race and ethnicity with the realities of empire, nation, migration, and language, etc. (165) and I applaud her effort extending our gaze from the Roman Empire to include the Axumite Empire. She is on target that empire and imperial formation cannot be seen as a “Western” phenomenon. Throughout history there had been other powerful empires competing for power, such as the Mongolian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Japanese empire. How did race and ethnicity intersect with colonialism in these “non-Western” imperial formations? Much postcolonial criticism has been done by scholars who have experienced colonialism under the British, Spanish, and American empires. I hope that scholars who have experienced other forms of imperialism might open up the Bible, based on their history and culture. In other words, we cannot be parochial in our minority criticism by focusing only on the U.S., but need to include transnational discussion of racial and imperial formation, especially in our global age.

The second theme that runs through the anthology is the intersection between sexuality and race and ethnicity, an intersection often neglected in many publications of minority criticism. Anderson discusses the intermarriage ban in Ezra in the context of exclusionary antimiscegenation laws in America’s segregationist past. García-Treto evoked the raped and defiled figure of the Daughter Zion in Lamentations to describe the agony and suffering of exile.

Gale Yee discusses the sexual exploitation of Ruth as a foreign woman and the ways her reproductive labor benefit Boaz and Naomi economically. Bailey challenges heterosexist readings of the Esther story, and shows how sexual markers become racial ones, and vice versa, in the text. Liew's queer and transgender interpretation of John's Gospel highlights Jesus as a cross-dresser, who transgresses numerous boundaries, including sexual identity. These authors have shown that sexual identity, relations, and metaphors are important lenses to look at the policing of group identity, the representation of colonized others, the exploitation of the female gender, the construction of race, and heterosexist views of the nation. I would like to see much more cross-fertilization between minority criticism and queer theory and sexual theology in the future.

Here, I want to relate to James Lee's argument in his chapter. He notes that Asian American studies have been concerned with the warfare imperative: "illegality, criminality, the rules of war, and police procedures" (354), and Asian American scholars, like other racial minorities, have positioned themselves as "resistant readers" (350). I would suggest that sexuality and sexual oppression is at the heart of warfare, and should not be left out. But, as Foucault has said, power does not only oppress, but represses and suppresses as well. Instead of the familiar language about oppression and resistance, I want to explore how attention to sexuality in our readings would open new avenues for minority criticism and rhetoric. What if we read the Bible as minority readers not through politics and warfare, but through illicit relations, multiple liaison, decency, blood relations, purity, shame, barrenness, adoption, circumcision, and the like?

Racial and ethnic minority readers often contest dominant readings with regard to women's sexuality in the Bible. Both Yamada and Yee have challenged the traditional reading of Eve as a sinful and fallen woman and white women's attempts to rehabilitate her. Instead, Yamada reads Gen 2-3 intertextually with narratives of the Japanese American internment and

Yee offers a materialistic interpretation, focusing on economic oppression of the elites. Yee and I have not praised Ruth for her female agency in using sexuality to secure survival, as many white female interpreters have done. We read the story of Ruth within the larger social context of immigration, the picture brides, and the stigma of “foreign women.” Laura Donaldson, as a Native American reader, does not identify with Ruth at all, but lifts up Oprah, the Moabite woman who did not marry into the Jewish community, but returned to her own people. Reading against the grain, both Anderson and Liew challenge Ezra’s ban on interracial marriage and his chastisement of the “foreign women” married to Jews. Liew uses Ezra’s obsessive concerns over foreign women, marriage, and children to elucidate the patriarchal and heterosexist ideologies of nationalist movement. An area that we have not touched upon and perhaps is still taboo is the sexual desire of women in the Bible. Is there any space for thinking about the sexual desire of Ruth, Esther, and others?

The last theme I want to briefly mention is the awareness of complexities and complicity in minority readings, as James Lee reminds us of the “complex personhood” each of us embody (356). Mayra Rivera also argues that there is no unmediated knowledge of God, transparent texts, or privileged and unconvoluted readers. Many contributors of the volume recognize both their marginalized and privileged statuses. For example, Gale Yee says that Ruth’s story can be “an indictment of those of us who live in the First World who exploit the cheap labor of developing countries and poor immigrants” (134). As male readers, Bailey, Liew, and Williams include substantial discussion of gender oppression in their respective chapters. There is also the critique of the intersection between ethnocentrism and heterosexism in the chapters by Bailey and Liew, an approach not often taken in previous racial and ethnic readings.

In describing a hermeneutics of hope, Mayra Rivera reminds us that “revelation is not to be imagined as the unveiling of what was already but as an opening for new worlds” (326). This opening of worlds entails the future as well as the past, for as postcolonial critic R.S.

Sugirtharajah has said, “the future is open and the past unstable and constantly changing.” The gathering of the racial and ethnic minority scholars in one place has opened many new worlds in both the biblical past and our present situation. I am very grateful for their insights and hope that this is just the beginning for more to come.