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Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Academy

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The Past, Present, and Future of Scholars of Color in the Religious Academy

On July 4th last year, Gary Y. Okihiro, the founding director of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University, published an essay, “The Future of Ethnic Studies,” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The field is under assault from without and within, he surmises. In May 2010, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed a law that prohibits schools from offering courses at any grade level that cater to specific ethnic groups, or that

promote resentment, ethnic solidarity, or overthrow of the U. S. government. In higher education, many people question the contributions of ethnic studies and ask why taxpayers should pay for it, given the severe budget cuts. But the greatest threat, Okihiro argues, is when the radical challenges of the field are derailed into the celebration of cultural diversity and multiculturalism, or into a transnational project that loses specificity. In so doing, “deliberately blunted is the political edge of ethnic studies, with its focus on power and demands for a most inclusive and just republic (and university) through a dismantling of hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation.”¹

Okihiro’s essay provides an important backdrop for discussing the past, present, and future of racial and ethnic minority scholars in the study of religion. James Cone began developing Black Theology at about the same time when students at San Francisco State University in California fought to establish ethnic studies in 1968. Today, racial and ethnic minority scholars also face challenges from without and within. I would like to discuss where racial and ethnic scholars in religion have been, where we are, and where we are going through my involvements in the field and in the American Academy of Religion (AAR).

Racial and ethnic female scholars in religion fought an uphill battle to gain a place in the academy. When Inez Talamentez, a scholar in the Native American tradition, joined the AAR in 1979, she became one of the pioneers. A group called Religion of the American Indian Native American Traditions met from 1973-79. Then in 1987, a group of international scholars met to

¹ Gary Y. Okihiro, “The Future of Ethnic Studies: The Field is under Assault from Without and Within,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 4, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Future-of-Ethnic-Studies/66092/>

form the Native Traditions in the Americas group. The Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society group was formed in 1985 with Cheryl Townsend Gilkes as the first national convener. Today, the Womanist group is one of the largest racial and ethnic minority program units in AAR. In 1986, I presented a paper in the first panel on Asian feminist theology at the annual meeting. This panel stimulated Asian American women to organize their own panel in 1992, which led to the creation of the Asian American Religion, Culture, and Society group in 1997.² The first co-chairs were Rita Nakashima Brock and Rüdiger V. Busto. In 1989, the first meeting of what came to be *La Comunidad* of Hispanic Scholars of Religion was held. In the late 1980s, Ada María Isasi-Díaz presented papers on *mujerista* theology in various sessions, including in Womanist panels. She was one of the co-chairs of the Hispanic American Religion, Culture and Society Consultation in the early 1990s, which became a group in 1994. The name was subsequently changed to Latina/o Religion, Culture, and Society.³

The analyses of the multiple oppressions of women as a result of the intersection of race, gender, and class differentiated the scholarship of women of color from the early work of white feminists. Each group of women of color began to look at our archives, tapped into unused resources and overlooked data, and developed our methodologies along the way. The challenge has been to build what Toni Morrison has called “intellectual neighborhood” in a way that fits our experience and respects our heritage. The development and teaching of this new body of

² The name of the group was changed to Asian North American Religion, Culture, and Society in 1998 to include both Canada and the United States.

³ Grateful acknowledgment to Michelene Peasantubbee, Rita Nakashima Brock, Rüdiger V. Busto, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Edwin David Aponte, and Luis G. Pedraja for their help in tracing the history of these groups.

knowledge have often been met with suspicion if not outright resistance. As Katie Cannon notes, the classroom is a value-laden space. She questions “the authority of masculinist traditions that claim color-blank, apolitical, mathematically regulated temporal, dispassionate, detached space that maintains so-called universal objectivity.”⁴

Racial and ethnic minority scholars struggled for many years before we finally secured a permanent place in the structure of the AAR. The Committee on the Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession was an ad hoc committee for eight years before it became a standing committee in 2002. I was the chair of the Committee from 2003-2005. During that period, the Committee worked on different fronts. We gathered the chairs of the different racial and ethnic minority groups to identify common concerns and issues. Since the review for renewal of some of the minority groups had created mistrust, the Committee organized a meeting of the chairs of the minority groups with the AAR’s Program Committee. We discussed with the AAR president the need to add a particular series to the AAR book series that would promote the work of racial and ethnic minority scholars.⁵ Our most important achievement was the publication of the *Career Guide for Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession*, a collaborative effort edited by Miguel De La Torre.⁶

⁴ Katie G. Cannon, Alison P. Gise Johnson, and Angela D. Sims, “Womanist Works in Word,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 2 (2005): 145.

⁵ Currently the book series are Academy Series; Religion, Culture, and History Series; Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion Series; Teaching Religious Studies Series; and Religion in Translation Series. The proposed new series was not added.

⁶ Available at the AAR Web site, http://www.aarweb.org/publications/Online_Publications/REM_Career_Guide/default.asp.

The Committee was also concerned about the troubling lack of representation of racial and ethnic minorities serving in positions of leadership within the AAR. The 2003 statistics indicated that self-declared racial and ethnic minorities accounted for 1,286 of the total AAR membership (about 13 percent); yet only 12 served as members of committees and task forces. Among them six served on the Committee on the Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession! Thus the Committee recommended a periodic review of Board, Committee, and Task Force make-up, in light of the AAR's concern with stronger involvement of racial and ethnic minorities in all aspects of the AAR and profession.⁷ The representation of racial minorities in leadership position in AAR has been much improved in recent years.

The Committee has sponsored Special Topic Forums at the annual meetings since 1998. These forums meant to bring the concerns of minority scholars to the wider academy. The topics of these forums touched on many aspects and reminded us that our struggles continue to the present day. The topic of the first forum was "Constructing New Knowledge: The Impact of Racial and Ethnic Minority Scholars on the Study of Religion." Subsequent forums discussed the identity, research and teaching, and public roles of minority scholars. One forum talked about "surviving and flourishing" (2003); another had "storming the ivory tower" (2005) as its title. Last year, the Committee sponsored a forum on "Queering Communities of Color," a topic that has received little attention.

If racial and ethnic minority scholars in the past have to struggle to gain visibility in the profession, develop a separate field of studies against many odds, and push for greater

⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, "Status of Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession Committee Report to the Board," March 2004.

representation in the academy, today we face other problems. As our number continues to grow, and many schools and institutions have already hired one or two token racial minorities on their faculty or staff, younger scholars find it increasingly difficult to find jobs. This was compounded by the financial crisis and economic recession in the past several years. Many schools have hire freezes or want to hire a generalist who can teach many subjects in the curriculum. White scholars are seen to have the ability to teach any subjects in the field, while racial minority scholars are still erroneously perceived to be able to teach only subjects related to their racial and ethnic groupings.

In the last three years, the number of self-identified racial and ethnic minority members of the AAR has dropped by 27 percent, from 1,295 in 2008 to 939 in 2010. While there was a comparable drop among those who self-identified as white, it is worth noting that self-identified racial and ethnic minorities now comprise only 9.4 percent of the AAR membership, compared to 13 percent in 2003. I wonder if the percentage will increase again when the financial situation turns better.

In the book *Still at the Margins* published two years ago, racial and ethnic minority biblical scholars lament that their body of scholarship is still marginalized in the curriculum, academic guilds, and publishing.⁸ The same situation can be found in other theological fields. In systematic theology, for example, you would not be considered incompetent if you did not know the work of any Asian and Asian American theologians. While we want to encourage younger minority students to enroll in doctoral programs, we are also realistic about job openings and

⁸ R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Still at the Margins: Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years after the Voices from the Margin* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2008).

employment statistics. Some of us have encouraged Asian or Asian American doctoral students to select a broader topic for their dissertation so that they can be more marketable. Sometimes, this would mean less emphasis on their cultural history or concerns that arise from their specific context. This is certainly not ideal, and I wonder what is happening in other racial and ethnic groups.

The other challenge we face as racial and ethnic minority scholars is that we have very few opportunities for cross-fertilization and dialogue. It is good that we have eight different groups and consultations related to racial and ethnic minority scholarship in the AAR. The drawback is that we can hardly attend the programs of so many groups to keep abreast of what is happening in these discussions. As I have said on another occasion, as minority scholars, “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.”⁹

Generational difference among racial and ethnic minority scholars presents challenges and sometimes causes tensions. The first generation usually had to clear the ground and delineate a space from which to speak. As Okihiro notes, the work of this generation was politically motivated and the goal was to dismantle racial hierarchies. The second and third generations react against the work of the elders, often finding their analysis of racial experience too

⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, “Review of *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 1 (2010): 4. http://www.raceandreligion.com/JRER/Book_Reviews_files/Bailey%20review.pdf

essentialized and their methodologies too limiting. Using interdisciplinary tools and broaching topics that have not been examined, these younger generations of scholars have radically expanded the field, and brought with them vitality and freshness. They have also imagined racial politics in ways quite different from the generation that went before them. The roundtable discussion on “Must I be a Womanist?”¹⁰ brings out some of the tensions across the generations. The tensions described, such as the silence around homosexuality, the dominance of Christian scholarship, and the lack of self-critique and reflection, may also be found in other racial and ethnic groups.

Facing the future, I want to come back to a point that Okihiro raises in his article, that is, the relation between ethnic studies and the study of globalization and transnationalism. He notes that the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University is proposing a new major, which features a generic and global study of ethnicity and race to replace the comparative ethnic-studies major. He is against that move, and says, “I believe that ethnic studies, while necessarily global, should be anchored within the United States.”¹¹ I understand that when ethnic studies began, it had to delineate its parameters and focus, and differentiate itself from area studies. A professor at University of California at Berkeley sarcastically put up a sign saying that she was with Asian American studies and not Asian studies. But given the interrelated world we live in, I wonder if the nation-state should be our primary focus. U. S. history has intersected with the histories of Philippines, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Korea, and Vietnam, to name just a few.

¹⁰ Roundtable discussion, “Must I Be A Womanist?” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no.1 (2006): 85-134.

¹¹ Okihiro, “The Future of Ethnic Studies.”

And as Lisa Lowe has pointed out, we have to reckon with “America’s ‘past’—its past as empire, its international past.”¹²

A transnational analysis will elucidate the American empire in the past and the present. Such a framework will offer a more complex and multilayered understanding of racial formation and exclusion, gendered social stratification, and capitalist exploitation. For twenty-five years, a group of Asian and Asian North American women scholars have met annually.¹³ They have moved toward a transnational approach in the study of religion and theology, as evident in their book *Off the Menu*.¹⁴ A new Network of Asian Theological Educators, consisting of faculty members teaching in North America, will be launched in 2011 to support and facilitate exchanges with faculty and students in Asian theological schools. Latina scholars organized their first Inter-American Symposium in Mexico City in 2004, and the reflections were published as *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*.¹⁵ Womanist scholars such as Linda Thomas, Emilie Townes, and Traci West have done research work in South Africa, Brazil, Ethiopia, and other countries. Peter Paris was coordinator of a project on Pan-African Studies of Religion and Poverty, which looked at religions in African and African American contexts. The trend of racial and ethnic minority scholarship in religion is to go beyond narrowly

¹² Lisa Lowe, “The International Within the National: American Studies and Asian American Critique,” *Cultural Critique* 40 (1998): 30.

¹³ See their Web site, <http://www.panaawtm.org>.

¹⁴ Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-lan, and Seung Ai Yang, eds., *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women’s Religion and Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

¹⁵ María Pilar Aquino and Maria José Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007).

defined national boundaries in order to make wider connections and to see race, gender, class, and nation through multiple reference points.

We must welcome voices that have not been fully heard, especially those from LGBTQ communities of color. We still have a long way to go in making LGBTQ scholars feel welcome both in our religious communities and the academy. Some of them remain closeted because they would lose their jobs or ordination credentials if they do not. Some can be open to friends and relatives, but remain silent in their public career. We need to have more out and open LGBTQ racial and ethnic minority scholars to serve as role models for the younger generation. It is important to hear them addressing current issues in the public square. In the recent spate of gay teen suicides, it is deeply moving to hear Patrick S. Cheng, a Chinese American gay theologian, talking about his own experience of being bullied at junior high school in the Huffington Post. He challenges all of us to “give *faith* to our LGBT young people that things will get better, no matter how bleak things may seem right now.”¹⁶

The Census Bureau has projected that racial and ethnic minorities will become the U.S. majority in 2042. How will this changing demographic affect higher education and the teaching of religion? Can we imagine that in 32 years’ time, racial and ethnic minority members will outnumber whites in the AAR? While that might be difficult to imagine, given that we are less than 10 percent currently, we have to begin to create networks and infrastructures to prepare for the transition. Those of us who are in positions of power need to continue to push the doors wider for the upcoming generation. We should not be satisfied with having just a few tokens of

¹⁶ Patrick S. Cheng, “Faith, Hope and Love: Ending LGBT Teen Suicide,” in Huffingtonpost.com, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-patrick-s-cheng-phd/faith-hope-and-love-endin_b_749160.html.

minorities at our schools and institutions. At a time of tight job market when some of the younger colleagues cannot find jobs or get tenure, we should offer support and encouragement, and try to use whatever influences we have.

Racial and ethnic minorities need to create our own institutions so that we will not only survive, but thrive. We had discussed the idea of a summer institute for racial and ethnic minority scholars and students, but did not get funding to create it. A space for different racial and ethnic groups to interact and learn from one another is critical, especially in preparing ourselves to be the majority. We would need to learn that white people are one of the many races, and need not be the constant reference point of whatever we do. Then, we will have more time and make extra effort to learn from other racial and ethnic groups. We need to strengthen our channels of communication and broaden our avenues for publication, including electronic means. I appreciate Miguel De La Torre's effort of setting up the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*,¹⁷ and I am delighted to see many younger scholars contributing.

This year is the silver anniversary of my joining the AAR. When I look back at my own career, what I cherish most is the friendship I have cultivated with racial and ethnic minority colleagues over the years. I hope the foundation we have built will enable the upcoming generation to have a very bright future.

¹⁷ See the journal's Web site, <http://www.raceandreligion.com/JRER/Welcome.html>.