

Black Scholarship Matters

TAT-SIONG BENNY LIEW

bliew@holycross.edu

College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA 01610

Frank Leon Roberts’s website (BlackLivesMatterSyllabus.com) is brilliant in recognizing and promoting the connection between what one does in the academy and as an activist. Academic scholarship does not require neutrality. As Howard Zinn explains, academic “objectivity” does not mean that one should not “have strong opinions on which ideas are right and which are wrong,” but only that one will be “fair to opposing ideas by accurately representing them.”¹

As the Black Lives Matter movement confronts society with the question, “Whose lives count as lives?” I find myself asking, “Whose scholarship counts as scholarship in my guild?”

Just as the African American civil rights movement in the 1960s helped open and pave the way for other racial/ethnic “minoritized” groups to fight for equal access to legal rights and protections, *Stony the Road We Trod*,² which I read as a doctoral student in the early 1990s, helped me consider if and how my specific location as a first-generation male immigrant from Asia could or would impact my practice of biblical interpretation. Cain Hope Felder’s “Introduction” provided for me insights into the racialized dynamics of the US academy and words to express my own feelings. He talked about the structural factors (both economic and political) that kept most African Americans from pursuing higher education, the pervasive and inveterate whiteness of graduate programs in biblical studies, as well as black biblical scholars’ experiences of isolation and pressure to assimilate.³

I read and reread that anthology in those early years. Womanist readings therein exposed me to intersectional analysis with their focus on both race and

¹Howard Zinn, *Passionate Declarations: Essays on War and Justice* (New York: Perennial, 2003), 7.

²Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

³Felder, “Introduction,” in Felder, *Stony the Road*, 1–14, here 1–2.

gender.⁴ I was especially intrigued by and indebted to the essay by Renita Weems, because it also emphasizes literary and interdisciplinary readings of the Bible by referring to the work of feminist literary critics in “linguistics, psychology, sociology, and philosophy.”⁵ Weems’s essay also points to the need for biblical scholarship to be methodologically rigorous, even or especially when reading processes “are both empirical and intuitive, rational and transrational, recoverable and unrecoverable.”⁶ A sentence in her essay remains important to me today: “Texts are read not only within contexts; a text’s meaning is also dependent upon the pretext(s) of its readers.”⁷ Largely because of this anthology, I decided to make “identity politics” one of my comprehensive examination topics and started dipping my feet in African American studies and Asian American studies and learning from the writings of Barbara Christian, Henry Louis Gates, Patricia Hill Collins, Elaine Kim, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, and Cheung King-kok. Though I was not ready to dive into anything that might be called Asian American biblical interpretation on my own for my doctoral dissertation,⁸ I did enough to sense that a group project similar to that of *Stony the Road* could be both desirable and feasible. Since (1) many among the already low number of Asian American biblical scholars at the end of the twentieth century were trained, as Felder pointed out, by white scholars in white institutions; and (2) I was just beginning my teaching career at the time and had little to no knowledge of how to organize or fund a gathering of scholars as the black colleagues did for *Stony the Road*, I decided to go beyond the biblical studies guild to see if and how scholars more familiar with Asian American studies might read the Bible. This resulted in a special double issue in the journal *Semeia*, entitled *The Bible in Asian America*.⁹

⁴Renita J. Weems, “Reading *Her Way* through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible,” and Clarice J. Martin, “The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: ‘Free Slaves’ and ‘Subordinate Women,’” in Felder, *Stony the Road*, 57–77 and 206–31, respectively. In addition to race and gender, both Weems and Martin also mention class as an important identity factor that functions to marginalize African American Women (Weems, “Reading *Her Way*,” 58, 59; Martin, “*Haustafeln*,” 208–9, 218 n. 55). I will return to the question of class in biblical interpretation later. For early articulations of intersectional analysis, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139–67; and Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241–99.

⁵Weems, “Reading *Her Way*,” 58.

⁶Ibid., 59.

⁷Ibid., 62.

⁸In the published version of my dissertation, my explicit engagement with my reading contexts as an Asian American is limited to the concluding pages and only as a pointer for future explorations. See Tat-siong Benny Liew, *Politics of Parousia: Reading Mark Inter(con)textually*, *BibInt* 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 150–58.

⁹Tat-siong Benny Liew and Gale A. Yee, eds., *The Bible in Asian America*, special issue, *Semeia* 90–91 (2002).

While this *Semeia* volume would have been inconceivable to me without the example and inspiration provided by *Stony the Road*, its publication in 2002 was actually preceded by another important publication of black biblical scholarship: the encyclopedic *African Americans and the Bible*.¹⁰ Despite differences not only in scope but also in direction (to which I will return in a moment), both of these volumes were intentional in involving scholars outside the biblical studies guild to talk about the Bible. In view of the temporal proximity of these two publications, a day-long symposium brought together a panel of African American and Asian American biblical scholars at Union Theological Seminary (New York) to discuss our different experiences in life and approaches to the Bible. Out of that came an essay that I coauthored with Vincent Wimbush, in which we talked about identities (problems of essentialism and effacement), communities (differences within and between our two communities of color), the guild of biblical interpretation (its dismissal of or disinterest in “minoritized” readings), and possible changes (such as displacement of the biblical texts and the ancient world as the beginning and centering foci of biblical interpretation, or collaboration of biblical scholars among and across communities of color).¹¹

One of the African American scholars I met for the first time at the symposium was Randall C. Bailey. Since Fernando F. Segovia was also present at the symposium as a respondent, Bailey approached Segovia and me about a project involving biblical scholars from all three communities of color (African American, Asian American, and Latino/a American).¹² Bailey’s insistence from the beginning that sexuality be a part of our conversation pushed me to widen and deepen my intersectional interrogations of biblical texts by not allowing me to put sexuality issues on a back burner. After trying but failing to recruit a biblical scholar of color who has self-identified as queer, Bailey proceeded to tell me that he *and I* must do some queering in our respective contribution to the publication project. I took up the challenge by writing an article that queers John’s Jesus in terms of not only race/ethnicity but also gender and sexuality. In the process I learned much from queer studies done by scholars of color.¹³ Bailey also taught me how solidarity could be

¹⁰ Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Texture* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

¹¹ Tat-siong Benny Liew and Vincent L. Wimbush, “Contact Zones and Zoning Contexts: From the Los Angeles ‘Riot’ to a New York Symposium,” *USQR* 56 (2002): 21–40.

¹² See Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, *Semeia*St 57 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009). The collaboration also resulted in the establishment of a new SBL program unit called “Minoritized Criticism and Biblical Interpretation.”

¹³ Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Queering Closets and Perverting Desires: Cross-examining John’s Engendering and Transgendering Word across Different Worlds,” in Bailey, Liew, and Segovia, *They Were All Together*, 251–88; in the same volume, see also Randall C. Bailey, “That’s Why They Didn’t Call the Book Hadassah!: The Interse(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther,” 227–50.

practiced, promoted, and even pushed in the academy. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned from working with Bailey is that, when tempted to label a position or approach as “extreme,” we would do well to reexamine our perception of what is “acceptable.”

Second, while I was aware that race was a construct, my interaction with black colleagues gave me courage to try reading a biblical text as if I were an African American by using primarily African American resources. In another article on John’s Gospel, I read Jesus and his awareness of—even obsession with—his death (what John calls Jesus’s “hour”) as a colonized Jew through the lens of what Abdul R. JanMohamed identifies as a “death-bound-subjectivity” of many African Americans.¹⁴ Given Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism as “state-sanctioned . . . premature death,” it should not be surprising that death is a consistent subject in black scholarship.¹⁵

The directional difference between *The Bible in Asian America* and *African Americans and the Bible* can already be detected in their respective titles. Wimbush’s “African Americans” puts the emphasis on a community of people in contrast to the more geographically sounding “Asian America.” The conjunction *and* also implies a much more dynamic relationship with the Bible than the relatively static preposition *in*. Finally, the placement of the word *Bible* as the first or the second term is also telling.

In sum, while the *Semeia* project followed the more conventional disciplinary focus on reading for textual meaning (though from Asian American perspectives), Wimbush’s project focused on how African Americans make social and cultural meaning with and through the Bible.¹⁶

This key difference also explains why Wimbush started the Institute of Signifying Scriptures in 2004 and then embarked in 2006 on a different consultation project, in which I was also fortunate enough to participate and from which I learned. Although this latter project, like the earlier project with Bailey and Segovia, involved various communities of color, it pushed me far beyond my comfort zone as a

¹⁴Tat-siong Benny Liew, “The Word of Bare Life: Workings of Death and Dream in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature*, ed. Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore, RBS 55 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 167–93. See Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death*, Post-contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹⁵Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*, American Crossroads 21 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28. See also Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1997); Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*, New Americanists (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); and Karla F. C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹⁶Vincent L. Wimbush, “Preface,” in Wimbush, *African Americans and the Bible*, xiii.

biblical scholar. Instead of reading biblical texts or biblical interpretations, I was to engage in an ethnographic team project on how some Asian Americans make and negotiate meaning in their lives as racialized subjects in the United States by reading or believing in the Bible *literally*. It was an ambitious attempt to understand a segment of the Asian American communities in terms of not only what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call “racial formation” but also what Wimbush calls “reading formations” with and through the Bible.¹⁷ Interviewing living persons is very different from reading texts by authors who were either literally dead or, as Roland Barthes taught me, who are at least theoretically dead.¹⁸ Postmodern critiques of ethnography further increased my anxiety.¹⁹ Again, what I learned in the process was much more important than the product.²⁰

Gay Byron’s proposal to extend the study of Christian origins and traditions beyond the Roman Empire to include “places and people south of the Mediterranean,” such as Ethiopian civilizations and the Axumite Empire,²¹ also prompted me to rethink the foregone conclusion that the Christian canon has been fixed and closed since the fourth century CE. Given Wimbush’s understanding of “scripturalization” as “the use of texts, textuality, and literacy as a means of constructing and maintaining society,”²² I found myself re-viewing (Chinese/American) culture itself as a kind of open canon, *changeable* social script, or scripturalization. Instead of thinking that cultures and the Bible are finished products only to be transmitted and received, I should *dis*-close that all scripts, scriptures, and scripturalizing processes are not only authoritative and abiding but also arbitrary and ever-altering.²³ Black scholarship has made me a more careful critic and a more broad-minded biblical scholar.

The recent US presidential election has made it clear that race, religion, and *class*, among other issues, remain contentious matters in this country. Several news

¹⁷ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994); Vincent L. Wimbush, “Introduction: Knowing Ex-centrics/Ex-centric Knowing,” in *Misreading America: Scriptures and Difference*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–4.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath, Fontana Communications Series (London: Fontana, 1977), 142–48.

¹⁹ See, e.g., James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority,” *Representations* 2 (1983): 118–46; and Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

²⁰ Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Asian Americans, Bible Believers: An Ethnological Study,” in Wimbush, *Misreading America*, 165–207.

²¹ Gay L. Byron, “Ancient Ethiopia and the New Testament: Ethnic (Con)texts and Racialized (Sub)texts,” in Bailey, Liew, and Segovia, *They Were All Together*, 161–90.

²² Vincent L. Wimbush, *White Men’s Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 87.

²³ Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Journey-s to the West: (Re)Writing Scripts, Scriptures, and Scripturalization,” in *Refractions of the Scriptural: Critical Orientation as Transgression*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush, Routledge Studies in Religion 48 (New York: Routledge, 2016), 121–38.

commentators and political pundits have even brought back the popularized slogan of Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in the 1990s to analyze this election: "It's the economy, stupid!" Black biblical scholars have generally done a better job than most others of pointing to the importance of class, though many, including myself, who spent hour after hour in the classroom—which is often "indeed a room of class"²⁴—have proven to be slow learners. As Weems and Martin did in their respective contributions to *Stony the Road*, Raquel Annette St. Clair presents the challenges facing African American women in terms of "the tridimensional oppression of gender, race, and class" in her womanist reading of Mark's Gospel.²⁵ More recently, through her "hermeneutics of ambivalence, Shanell T. Smith's interpretation of the well-dressed and bejeweled Babylonian whore in Rev 17–18 and of herself, an educated and privileged black professor, both as victims and beneficiaries of empire brings up the issue of class to critique as well as for self-critique.²⁶ What this election and black scholarship suggest to me now is the importance of scrutinizing what bell hooks calls "imperialist white supremacist capitalist [hetero]patriarchy,"²⁷ in order to grapple genuinely with class, status, and economic issues in my own scholarship on the Bible.

Womanist scholars often express feelings of shame and anger, but let me point to St. Clair's articulation of "three key issues that shape the sociocultural location of African American women—suffering, shame, and surrogacy."²⁸ Those three words point to embodiment and feelings, thus what has now been called a new materialist turn within feminism and an affective turn in literary/cultural studies.²⁹ Black scholarship, biblical or otherwise, could have been an early precursor of *and* a continuing corrective to these trails of scholarly developments if I had been a quicker and better learner.³⁰

²⁴Miguel A. De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, 2nd rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), xi.

²⁵Raquel Annette St. Clair, *Call and Consequences: A Womanist Reading of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

²⁶Shanell T. Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence*, *Emerging Scholars* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

²⁷bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria, 2004), 17, 29, 51, 116 (emphasis added).

²⁸St. Clair, *Call and Consequences*, 8–9. See also Martin, "Haustafeln," 221; and Smith, *Woman Babylon*, 3, 92, 174.

²⁹Among womanist scholars, see Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (1987): 64–81; and Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

³⁰See, e.g., Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement 'Beyond the Human,'" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21 (2015): 215–18; and Diana Leong, "The Mattering of Black Lives: Octavia Butler's Hyperempathy and the Promise of the New Materialisms," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2 (2016): 1–35.

When hooks called the Chinese American film director Wayne Wang to task for casting a black actor in the role of the thief in the film *Smoke* (1995) and thereby perpetuating the racist and racializing stereotype of blacks as criminals,³¹ she was pointing to the failure of many to learn from black experience and scholarship. Likewise, it is one thing to have black bodies showing up in the annual SBL meeting or even joining SBL committees and council and serving as SBL presidents. It is quite another to acknowledge and integrate black scholarship into our disciplinary discourse. If we have learned anything from Michel Foucault or from feminist standpoint theory, it is the intertwined nature of power and knowledge.³² Of course, W. E. B. Du Bois might have said as much when he claimed to be “singularly clairvoyant” in his understanding of white people.³³ You always (try to) know what (you think) you need to know to survive. When one looks at the bibliographies and references of some of the most-used textbooks for introductory Hebrew Bible or New Testament courses, however, one will not see much indication about the importance of black scholarship.

To illustrate, let me use two introductory texts to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and two introductory texts to the New Testament.³⁴ Three of them were published by prestigious university presses and one by a well-known church-related publisher. All four were published within the last five years; two are updated editions that signify strong sales and popularity. Of a total of 114 chapters plus two unnumbered introductions and over 1,390 bibliographical entries, only four entries involve a black scholar. That would average out to be one single reference to black scholarship for each of these four introductory texts.

What does this practice of overlooking (at best) or excluding (at worst) suggest about the importance we, as a guild, place on the work of our black colleagues?³⁵

³¹bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 91, 157, 160–62.

³²See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980); and Sandra Harding, ed., *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

³³W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920), 29.

³⁴Since I am interested in making only a general comment and critique about the guild of biblical studies, I withhold the identity of these specific texts and their authors to prevent any misunderstandings.

³⁵Referencing another scholar’s work should signify, of course, real engagement rather than a polite exchange, though the lack of reference to black scholarship by non-black scholars (when the reverse is hardly the case) reminds me of the opening scene in Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* regarding how a tall white female newcomer to the schoolhouse in New England refused to exchange visiting cards with him when he was a young boy, which led him to a deep sense of the “vast veil” that separated him from the white world (*The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 3rd ed. [Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903], 2–3).

How is it possible that black scholarship remains so hidden in current—even revised—editions of texts used to introduce the academic study of the Bible? By saying in practice that black scholarship does not matter, we in the biblical studies guild are directly reflecting and indirectly ratifying—rather than rectifying—the dominant preconceptions of blacks as inferior and disposable.

Let me say, therefore, “Black Scholarship Matters.” This, like “Black Lives Matter,” is a statement that should not have to be made explicitly in 2017, but it obviously does. James Baldwin wrote back in 1955, “This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.”³⁶ It is far past time for the practices of our guild to reflect a broader awareness and acknowledgment of that reality.

³⁶James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 175.