Incarnate Words: Images of God and Reading Practices

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> Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images.
> The world will not receive truth in any other way.
> Gospel of Philip

The world will not receive truth in any other way: truth will always be among us as signs and images—particular and embodied—that communicate only through interpretation. Sought by particular subjects, embodied and embedded in culture and society, interpretation unfolds into uncontrollable multiplicity. Whether or not truth (or revelation) is explicitly invoked, biblical hermeneutics elicits the question of truth—or at least inquiries about truthfulness—in interpretation. What is the relationship between particular interpretations and truth, between meaning and words, or between finite texts and God's word?

As a theologian in dialogue with biblical scholars, I have been intrigued by the effects of unuttered questions of truth and revelation in the methodologies deployed by biblical scholars, especially those interested in issues of race and ethnicity. What is the theology of racial and ethnic approaches to biblical interpretation? What kind of God is affirmed by their methodological choices? What kind of creation do they speak about?

In this essay I ponder these questions. I attempt to uncover some of the links between the methodological considerations related to textuality and interpretation, commonly discussed among biblical scholars, and cosmological views pertaining to the relation of created particularity and the divine.

Theology undergirds models of interpretation. Conceptions of the relationship between the texts, contexts, and readers are informed by theories of language and representation, the discussions of which have become common in biblical scholarship. But theories of language, and particularly of biblical interpretation, are also influenced by (and influence) broader cosmological visions, including ideas about the nature of the divine and its relation to finite words. Indeed, for ancient theologians the multiplicity of meanings flowing from scripture had everything to do with the unrestrained flow of divinity throughout creation. My

interest in this essay is to foreground the theological implications of the practices of interpretation espoused in this volume and in the consultation that preceded it as sources for embodied cosmologies, investigating not only the images of divinity that undergird their worldviews but also what they imply for human relationships to other created beings and to the divine.

This discussion, which is visibly marked by postmodern and postcolonial theories, seeks to identify not only dominant ideas that the essays in this volume reject but, most importantly, the methodological principles they accept, which suggest specific visions of the relationship between particular words and bodies, social bodies, and the divine. Ideas about texts, histories, and subjectivity are implicit in these views of interpretation. I will argue that a relational hermeneutics that is embodied, apophatic, and open-ended calls for a thoroughly incarnate theological vision: where the divine infuses the particularity of bodies and words, both affirming finitude and luring it to transformation.

In Search for Naked Messages

The essays included in this volume participate in the postmodern critique of modern views of representation, specifically targeting methods of interpretation that assume the independence between texts and readers. Their specific strategies are also infused with concerns for representation in its political sense: not only are they concerned with the production of meaning through language, but also with the possibilities of participation in sociopolitical structures for marginalized communities. There is thus a profound critique of dominant modes of interpretation not only in terms of constructions of notions of language but also of subjectivity. The idea of the "universal man" is as problematic as that of the transparency of language.

Thus, I begin this discussion of ideas about textuality with a negative example: meaning splits off from words/matter—the former is imagined as stable and univocal; the latter changing and multiple. It is this very separation between meaning and words that secures the stability of the linguistic system, for with meaning firmly attached to a foundation unaffected by the instabilities of worldly existence, the success of reference can be guaranteed. In Fernando Segovia's analysis of the main paradigms of biblical interpretation, it is historical criticism that exemplifies the tendencies that I want to point to. Segovia argues that historical criticism approaches scripture as *means* to a greater truth. Signs are stable means to make reality fully present to consciousness, and scripture is assumed to possess a "univocal and objective meaning": a universal message that could be retrieved using the proper tools (2000). Interpretation is thus conceived as the extraction of meaning from texts—meaning that remains always separable from but accessible through words.

The idea of the existence of an essential meaning beneath or behind the biblical texts—a message untainted by and independent from the contingency and

obscurity of its words and stories—is not exclusive to modes of interpretation that explicitly dismiss the impact of sociopolitical ideology in the biblical words. Its common logic is expressed in the very idea of translation, for instance, which depends on the confidence that some meaning is transferable from one language to another. It is indeed possible to resist the idealist tendencies of interpretation, giving explicit attention to the social location of present and past readers of texts and still regard the meaning of scripture as univocal and stable. Some liberationist strategies of interpretation display this tendency to look beyond the contingencies and tensions of the biblical texts to a univocal and universal message of liberation. As R. S. Sugirtharajah has argued, this has led some liberation theologies to make the Bible the ultimate authority, creating the impression that liberation is intrinsic to the Bible (2002).

When assumed uncritically, this view of meaning may lead to the illusion of accessing some pristine land of interpretative solace beyond the limitations imposed by particularity. This mindset haunts interpretations that, while accepting the uncertainties and multiplicity of biblical interpretation, construe the knowledge that they produce as a secondary knowledge. Primary knowledge was once available, it is assumed. However, having acquired the knowledge of good and evil and sadly banned from re-entering the garden of Eden, humans are imagined to be condemned to desire the fullness and security of the divine Truth that they can no longer touch. Immediate, full knowledge is no longer possible, but, even in its inaccessibility, the imaginary space of stable independent meaning continues to function as the guiding utopia of reading.[1]

In Christian theology, the foundation of determinate meaning has often been identified with God. This is a God imagined as an external reality, absolutely unaffected by creation. This is a God "for whom it would be unworthy to get mixed up in the squalor of our lives," as Ivonne Gebara describes it (1999). Just as God is conceived in his [*sic*] total independence from creation—even as he manifests himself in it—scriptural truth is detached from the contingency of its context, even if it is through its finite words that we gain access to truth. Revelation is in this view the removal of a veil that hides the totality of truth, its full presence. The logic of externality is only reinforced by modern notions of subjectivity and the concomitant illusions of pure objectivity. After the age of reason, "God's epistemological function passed to man, initially by means of the Cartesian cogito and subsequently by means of the Kantian transcendental subject" (Hart 1989, 29).

1. The pervasiveness and effects of the dream of full knowledge as it relates to the idea of full presence has taken center stage in the works of postmodern critics influenced by Jacques Derrida's attention to what he calls "logocentrism." As Gayatri Spivak describes it, in Derrida's use of the term *logocentrism* means "the belief that the first and last things are the Logos, the Word, the Divine Mind, the infinite understanding of God, and infinitely creative subjectivity, and, closer to our time, the self-presence of full consciousness" (1998, lxviii).

The external God and the modern man mirror each other. Heretofore a self-present interpreter (like God) stands in utter independence from the text being read and the context from which the interpretation springs.

In this worldview, words and contexts have a secondary status in relation to truth. This hierarchy is another expression of the Platonic dualisms that are deeply ingrained in Christian theology and in dominant Western thought, where all finite things are thought to have their truest reality outside of themselves. For Plato, according to John Peter Kenney, "true being" was "an epithet that belongs to that which 'is what it is' without alteration, cessation, or relativity." Thus, on this ontology, true being belongs to the eternal forms: "Those entities that exhibit complete predicative stability have the strongest claim to metaphysical preeminence, and this entails, in Plato's analysis, that they be transcendent of this world, qualified as it is by instability and flux" (1991, 7–8). Bodies, words, and contexts belong to the realm of created things that are changeable and are thus deemed inferior both ontologically and epistemologically. At the heart of dominant Western culture, meaning and being interlace. Daniel Boyarin describes the effects of this paradigm in textuality thus: "Words are bodies and meanings, souls" (2005, 132).

That which escapes or triumphs over materiality, bodies, and their particularities is deemed a more suitable foundation of knowledge.[2] Thus, locating scriptural meaning in the unchangeable truths behind the finite unreliable signs betrays the desire for a paradise of unmediated knowledge of God. In this world of uncertainty, God is the exception: a God who has withdrawn and can only be accessed through signs. As Hart puts it, "Whether in nature or scripture, these signs must be interpreted, yet only in ways which acknowledge that timeless truths wait behind them and can be separated from them" (1989, 4). The cosmological structure ordered by the external, unaffected divinity and the epistemological hierarchy are interdependent.

Resisting the tendencies to bypass the particularities and dynamism of bodies, words, and the societies in which they live entails a theological challenge to the subtending cosmological framework that splits divinity from creation, transcendence from immanence. These theological challenges shall be explicated, for, in the absence of an explicit discussion of the theological grounds of contextual interpretations, unconscious metaphysical presuppositions stay in place. Besides, I suspect that, unless we deconstruct the absolute externality and self-enclosed independence of God, the practices of contextual interpretation will continue to be relegated to the realm of lower truths always overshadowed by avowed disembodied universalities.

2. For Christians, only in Christ, both Word of God and God, is there a perfect coincidence of the sign and that which is signified, as of body and spirit.

To move away from the idealism that subordinates the particularities of words, stories, and bodies in search of disembodied truths does not entail being abandoned in a self-enclosed realm where words and readers are imagined as repetitions of determinable sociopolitical systems, just as the lack of appeal to an external God does not leave us with a world of God-less immanence. What is in question here is the assumed dichotomies between truth and contingency, meaning and relationality. The Enlightenment tendency to exile God from the world—limiting God to a self-contained outside realm where it cannot undermine but founds the power and stability of "natural laws" (the cosmology that we questioned above)—produced a thoroughly predictable mechanistic worldview in which things are self-enclosed and manipulable. We shall resist both reductions: of God and of cosmos. To assume that meaning is fully contained within unchanging self-enclosed texts reverses the logic of the externality of meaning but retains the subject-object structure that construes signs (and created things) as self-enclosed entities. In this case meaning is locked in self-enclosed changeless scripts. Thus conceived, interpretation aims at its own closure. This tendency is found, for instance, in the attempts to find a full and final message in the true "intentions of the narrative"—whether that message is one of liberation or oppression. In this hermeneutics, scripture is an object to be analyzed and stabilized: as dead letter, soul-less bodies, spiritless words.

Highlighting the significance of race and ethnicity in biblical interpretations entails an explicit turn to the material realities of bodies, texts, and contexts. However, this hermeneutical turn is not equivalent to reducing bodies to predictable characteristics, nor is it conceiving the Bible as a lifeless object. Situating bodies in their matrices of social relations, particularly those that define relations of race and ethnicity, seeks not merely to describe their social inscriptions but also to move beyond them, to affirm both their specificity and their potential for transformation in relations. Such modes of interpretation depend on a rejection of the epistemological split between words, contexts, and meanings, and thus of the hierarchical cosmology on which such epistemological structure rests.

Meaning in Relation

> Contrary to what is generally believed, meaning and sense were never the same thing, meaning shows itself at once, direct, literal, explicit, enclosed in itself, univocal, if you like, while sense cannot stay still, it seethes with second, third and fourth senses, radiating out in different directions that divide and subdivide into branches and branchlets, until they disappear from view, the sense of every word is like a star hurling spring tides out into space, cosmic winds, magnetic perturbations, afflictions.
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> José Saramago, *All the Names*

The epistemological world that Saramago describes in this passage mocks the paradise of interpretative stability described in the previous section. Saramago names "sense" (*sentido*) what I have been calling "meaning." Indeed, I wonder if the very diffraction of "sense," as he describes it, threatens the stability of the distinction between "sense" and "meaning" (*significado*) that he proposes. However, the infinite radiations of Saramago's images do illuminate a postmodern vision of textuality toward which we now move. That this transition towards views of interpretation that emphasize dissemination and multiplicity invokes images of spring tides and cosmic winds already suggests the broader context of hermeneutics that flows from contemporary (post-Newtonian) worldviews—where ideas such as evolution, genetic mutations, psychic transferences, and so on have gradually replaced the more predictable systems of modern sciences.

Postmodern theories of language stress that meaning is never merely contained within words or signs or rests securely in an essential link between signifier and signified. Meaning is rather produced by complex relations between signs through processes of differentiation: signs only mean in relation to other signs; words acquire their meaning by virtue of their difference from other words. These relations between signs form the context within which words mean. Yet contexts do not constitute an alternative stable foundation for meaning: contexts are open and fragmented. Furthermore, words, like all signs, are repeated in different contexts where their meanings are displaced. Thus words are inherently polysemic: they are open to a multiplicity of interpretations. It is, of course, possible to claim that contexts and texts are closed, but such a claim is always already affected by the inherent uncontrollability of language.

In biblical scholarship an understanding of language that emphasizes the "polysemic nature of all signs" has led to an increased emphasis on the irreducible plurality of possible interpretations as part of the very nature of texts. In contrast with the tendency to search for meaning behind the text, approaches in literary and cultural criticism locate meaning either in the text—in its structures and word choices—and/or between the text and contexts, scriptures and readers (Segovia 2000, 14). Relationality is here broader and more complex, connecting not only the biblical texts to their ancient contexts but also readers to their (multiple) present contexts—and to the future communities to which interpreters seek to contribute. In contrast to the images of meaning residing in a pure external realm, here meaning is very much "mixed up in the squalor of our lives," hurling spring tides, winds, and perturbation throughout. And so is, I would argue, God.

To say that meaning is produced between texts, contexts, and readers is a deceptively simple statement for a very complex worldview. Contexts open infinitively and endlessly. Histories are multiple and conflicted, and potentially open to the new. Readers are no longer seen as passive recipients but rather as active—though not necessarily conscious—participants in the production of meaning. Attention to the role of the reader in the production of interpretations also highlights the multiplying effect of reading perspectives. The interpreter's

participation does not imply that meanings (by interpreters any more than by authors) can be controlled: they will continue to branch out in different directions. The interpreter does, as Origen suggests, "labor diligently" as a "skillful farmer" and hope for fertile ground in which scriptural seeds will multiply. But rather than identical repetition, these seeds will yield infinitely varied vegetation. The power to bring forth lives somewhere between the farmer, the seeds, and the earth.

Interpretative power is not controlling power, and this affects authors as much as it affects texts. Emerging from worlds linked by endless ties of relations, texts are excessive, their meaning extending deep into their past and far into the future possibilities of interpretations. In the case of scriptures, the excessiveness is intensified when they are considered as a (potential) site of revelation: where the finite encounters the transformative energies of the divine-in-the-finite. (I will return to this point.) But, as historical objects, they are also fragmented. Where textuality is not unilaterally controlled by the intentions of the author or by an omnipotent unaffected God, texts are, as the world, internally multiple and potentially conflicted. This absence of a homogenizing and stabilizing force has been seen as a curse of a God offended by the arrogance of its creatures exemplified in the tower of Babel. But oppressed communities have long depended on the impossibility of total homogeneity and of closure for their very survival. For instance, it is significant that practices of linguistic displacements ("Spanglish" and "signifying") were discussed during our consultation as hermeneutical lenses for Latina/os and African Americans, respectively. What these linguistic practices bring to the fore is not merely that languages compete with the hegemonic one but also the mobilization of the internal fractures in the dominant voice by subaltern voices.

Attentiveness to the failures of power within hegemonic structures and texts also grounds hope of encountering nearly erased stories, traces of the past, and of those who had been rejected by history still found in the biblical texts. It is this hope that Hélène Cixous holds on to:

> The only chance remaining to the dead whose death we have stolen is the rock on which one day we may stumble. If we have no ear for what the rock, become naked, smooth, mute, tells us, then all that has been silenced and assassinated will die again. The ones who have died alone on the frozen boulder will die again for eternity ... if we do not lay our hand on the stone, so as to blindly read the tale of a solitary death. May the reader come forth, may the ear, the hand come forth to hear so much silence. (1994, 17)

For those seeking to respond to past injustices, speech can be a "testimony to the silence," as Victor Anderson argues (2001, 89). To blindly read the tale of solitary death, perhaps between the triumphalistic lines written by the victors, is to seek to turn the failure of hegemonic closure into a subversive strategy.

Deconstructive and postcolonial reading strategies seek to make visible the ruptures within the text that undermine the closure of meaning, interrupting, shaking the illusions of absolute coherence, completeness, and finality. Magnifying the volume of otherwise weak voices barely recorded in the text, or uttering the call for the erased others whose exclusion is necessary for, but foreclosed by, the text's dominant voice(s), are part of these strategies of interpretation. Misplacing another story—our story—in the text dramatizes not only the possibilities that ancient texts might mean today but also the iterability (and vulnerability) of texts: the condition of possibility of meaning that is also what allows it to be read in changing contexts—to be read differently.

This does not mean that the past can be accessed as such. To attend to past oppressions cannot bring about the resurrection of others, if that means to bring them back in full presence. Therefore, those of us who trace our history to those excluded in past colonial encounters are warned against the illusion of bringing our excluded (or even killed) ancestors back to life, to full presence. We are reminded of the impossibility of re-presenting them. Attempts to call back into existence a dead past, which characterized many nationalist projects, rely on the assumption that one can access the Other through representation and reappropriate her or him as a source of authentic identity and authority. What Victor Anderson observes in reference to the use of black sources for religious insight can be extended as a warning for all uses of testimonies from the past: "Preoccupation with distilling [from them] their clear, distinct, universal, and exceptional countercultural intentions and values put at risk ... their particularities, their historical creative testimonies to different worlds ... and creativity" (2001, 79). Instead of crossing over the limits of time, to be attentive to past encounters is to bear witness to others in the present and, perhaps, the future.

Interpretation will not produce its own closure, nor will it reduce the ambiguities of scripture. Without recourse to the externality of meaning firmly established in the being of an external God, its "Archimedean point of refuge," we will not be able to avoid "laboring, actively and critically, in the legacy of the biblical to articulate how the possibility of the very best is tied up with the risk of the very worst," from "engaging with the performative promise and threat of each and every text" (Sherwood and Caputo 2005m 232). The biblical interpretations in this volume seek wisdom (and revelation) in the midst of the messy realities of life: a light not overcome by shadows—not an absence of shadows.

A relational theory of interpretation—one that honors the past as it hopes for the future, that refuses to subordinate concrete realities to disembodied truths or reduce the ambiguities of revelation—calls for a relational worldview, one in which readers affect and are affected by texts in ways that ultimately "disappear from view." Relations between texts and their ancient contexts, between readers and their collectivities are, in this view, not only irreducible but part of the revelation brought forth by biblical interpretations. Not only shall we recognize the embeddedness of texts and readers in their contexts but also seek in interpretation

to illuminate those relationships. Whether they uncover "cautionary tales" of the detrimental effects of segregation (Cheryl Anderson) or the "fusion of sex and ethnicity" in the production of negative stereotypes (Randall Bailey), these interpretations place relationships at the heart of revelation.

The potency of suppressed stories is only actualized in its relationship with the present. That is, we only see the past in relation to our present. Thus, rather than a retrieval of the past, interpretation responds to its call. This response is given from within the current contexts by those who turn their hearts to those calls. It is thus that current readers read themselves into the text. Rather than appropriating the texts as an object to be fully contained in consciousness, they offer themselves in their encounter with biblical texts. Thus the "methodological messiness borne out of the gnawing feeling" that James Kyung-Jin Lee describes in his essay for this volume.

In a tradition that has denied God desire, it is perhaps not surprising if confessing that desire infuses biblical interpretation is met with embarrassment: as a sign of an undeniable fall away from God into the depths of materiality and its passions. Perhaps this desire seems distant to the one expressed in the mystical theologies as ascent toward or union with the divine. The positive movement of contextual interpretations might look irremediable earthbound. But for those who seek divinity within creation and in the face of others, the desire for God leads us to multiple and diffuse places. This desire attempts to move beyond—beyond words without abandoning the words, beyond the world-as-it-is without escaping the world, beyond the limits of the self without ever detaching from it. As Laurel Schneider asks of queer interpretations of scripture: "Who is to say that that is not revelatory of something other than our own desire?" (2001, 213). And how can that boundary between God's desire and the desire for God, for the reign of God, be drawn?

The implication of the reader's desire in the reading is, of course, considered to be the case of all readers. But the readings of an "othered" subject "raise[s] the question of imagination and desire on the part of the interpreter more plainly precisely because such interpretations stretch the imagination and taken-for-granted conclusions about the whole text and its history" (Schneider 2001, 213). The singularity of each reader makes possible a unique event of revelation: a revelation of sociopolitical relevance, which is also divine. By revealing what has escaped the sociopolitical gaze, they also uncover the limits of what is otherwise claimed as universal.

Reading Identities

> I am a little discouraged: I shall never have the strength nor the time to write something worthy of you. Would I do better to remain silent? I know that in a certain respect it is easier to speak of God than to speak of You.... I cannot speak of you with the ease that divine mathematics provides, because it is perfectly

> simple, because absolutely without any relation to me, which is the true benediction. With God, I never risk anything, either mistake, or an aside, or truth, and I do not make him take any risk.... This is really without relation to the torments that bring the need to speak to you absolutely non-absolutely, but absolutely faithfully.
>
> Hélène Cixous, "(With) Or the Art of Innocence"[3]

The God that Cixous is describing in this passage is the external unaffected God to which I have been referring as the very foundation of ideas of interpretation that transcendentalize meaning and obscure the implications of readers in their interpretations. A God who is absolutely without relations is, for some of us, no more than a caricature of the God we risk speaking to. However, by invoking this caricature of God, Cixous draws our attention to a crucial point: the complexity of subjectivity is in stark contrast to it. Furthermore, with delightful irony, Cixous reverses a common tendency of many mystical theologies that dwell on the mystery and the torments of speaking about God and yet reduce the human Other—indeed all creatures—to quasi-mathematical categories. While, as it is often observed, modern subjectivity mirrored a self-enclosed God of mathematical certainties, today that mirror has shattered. The visions of subjectivity that emerge from perspectives that emphasize the development of personhood in its complex relations to context and power mock the absolute independence and coherence of the Universal Man—and of the God of which that Man was an image.

Refusing the Universal Man as a caricature of persons, the interpreters in this volume seek to foreground the embodied, socially located, and unavoidably interested readers of scripture. These are readers who belong to specific ethnic/racial groups and are in touch with the distinctive experiences of those groups. They are interested in particular peoples: in the significance of their bodily existence and in what those bodies have come to "represent" in our societies. But the specificity of the perspective thus described does not erase the complexities of speaking "absolutely non-absolutely, but absolutely faithfully" to and about the groups that we identify with and yet will never fully represent. The stories that we read into the biblical stories, our "communal" stories, are as multiple and as internally conflicted as the ancient texts being read, and so are our readings of them. Being alert, for instance, to the connections between the epistemic paradigms of transparency in the claims of "correspondence" between narratives in the text and our experience, or of the immediacy between the interpreter and her or his "community," is a consequential challenge faced by these interpretations.

Racial and ethnic readings of scripture are interested in deconstructing the ideological apparatus that supports (and is supported by) racism and ethnocentrism. They thus seek to refute the assumed correspondence between racialized

3. I am grateful to Krista Hughes for bringing this passage to my attention.

bodies and their stereotypical images. But they do so by deploying categories of race and ethnicity as "perspectives," or, as James Kyung-Jin Lee puts it, "telling the stories through the fiction of race." In doing so, the interpreter places herself in an ambiguous position, for she claims the power of the very structure of representation that it seeks to unravel.

Postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak explores this problematic of representation as it affects what she calls the migrant (or minority) critic. "No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the marginalized other into a self," she argues. Notions of identity that fail to challenge the coherence of the "self," that assume its full correspondence with an Other (as the signifier to the signified), are inherently flawed. On the one hand, assuming the Other as a self can only be accomplished by suppressing the heterogeneity of the identity it "represents" under discretely defined categories, mirroring the very logic of hegemonic power. On the other hand, the strategy will always fail "because project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely other into a domesticated other that consolidates the imperialist self" (Spivak 1999, 130). Indeed, "It is the very kind of colonized-anthropo-logized difference the master has always happily granted his subordinates," as Trinh Minh-ha observes (1989, 101). Simply claiming this kind of othering as identity may even end up objectifying subjects, locking them in categories of cultural representation.

However, the deconstructive impulse that leads to challenge "the illusion of precision about race categories," as Fumitaka Matsuoka calls it (1998, 38–48), shall not obscure the significance of the subjects' relation to categories of race and ethnicity. While suspicious of the ontologizing logic that undergirds the notion of "correspondence"—the same logic that founds the logic of truth (and thus interpretation) as correspondence—we cannot escape, nor would we deny, the effects of the "fiction of race" (James Kyung-Jin Lee) in our subjectivity. We cannot accept the reduction of racialized subjects to the representations that the dominant system produces of them, nor can we entertain the fantasy of an essential identity outside body and culture, or external to power and resistance. We are partly the effects of those fictions and something more than the signs by which we name ourselves and others. Critique entails both naming and deconstructing the logic of the name to signal the excess that overflows the names and the mystery that they never illuminate.

In his discussion of the problem of theological method in African American religious studies, Victor Anderson argues for the need to respect the mystery that infuses its historical sources. He uses the phenomenological hermeneutics of Charles Long to "accent the opacity of religious insight into the study of black religion" (2001, 79). Using the metaphor of opacity, Anderson seeks to "transcend the Western epistemic paradigm" of transparency by highlighting the irretrievable aspects of experience, which are not the effect of cognitive failure but rather an identifying characteristic that affects both racial symbolism and theological method. He writes, "[I]f the relationship between the signified and

the signifier is arbitrary, then the religious significations are open to changes, transformations, and reconstitution as the relationships are altered through the various exchanges of power" (88). History and experience are untotalizable, and taking into account their opacity opens theology to encounter the wide variety of its sources and their unresolved ambiguities.

Attention to the opacity of experience may also help us affirm the profound mystery that envelops human experiences—an aspect of subjectivity that shall never be obscured by emphasis on social construction. Rather than contrasting language about that divine with language about the human Other, we might allow them to come closer—to touch each other—so that respect for the divine mystery infuses our discourses about the created world (Rivera 2007). Anderson's use of a metaphor commonly deployed by Christians to focus on the mystery of the divine—"We see through a glass, darkly"—hints at this constructive possibility. Allowing the divine mystery to infuse our understanding of the created world at all levels entails developing a thoroughly incarnational theology as a ground for a truly embodied hermeneutics.

While the "torments" to speak about others that Cixous witnesses to are "really without relation" to absolutely-self-certain theologies, they are not unrelated to the struggles with language to which apophatic theologies witness. These theologies foreground the limits of their own language and representations. In contrast with the theologies that trust "the ease that divine mathematics provides," apophatic theologies fence off the temptation of "easy reference," of thinking that the name has the power to fully capture the One whom it names, considered as dangerous as "cheap grace" (Sells 1994, 11).[4] Like Cixous, they occasionally wonder: "Would I do better to remain silent?" But theology can never renounce names, images, symbols, logos. It is only through images that we can speak or even think about the ineffable. Even "apophatic" theologies write; they inscribe the very negation of the divine attributes that they affirm, thus rebelling against the idolatry of names or images. Negative theology both makes reference to the Other, to the name God, and appeals to that which "the name supposes to name beyond itself, the nameable beyond the name, the unnameable nameable ... as if it was necessary to loose the name in order to save what bears the name, or that towards which one goes through the name ... to loose the name is ... to respect it: as name" (Derrida 1995, 58). Through endless negations and denegations, renunciations and denunciations, negative theology attempts to address that which is beyond representation, while realizing that its speech can never escape the limits of representation.

Postmodern attention to the problematics of representation has led to a renewed interest in the insights of apophatic theology and to the infusion of self-

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined the phrase "cheap grace" to refer to grace that does not entail discipleship.

conscious negations of the referentiality of theological language—indeed, of all language. This generalization of negation beyond the limits of theological language entails, as we have seen, not only a critique of conceptions of the divine mind as the unchanging foundation of meaning but also of the idea of a transcendental subjectivity as the modern substitute for theological foundationalism.

These critiques are crucial for ethnic/racial readings of scripture, not only for their deconstructive force but also because they offer valuable insights for rethinking subjectivity beyond the confidence of dominant Western models in the powers of representation. There are resonances between the dilemmas and strategies of negative theology just described and those of scholars of color. As I said before, these critics are challenged by the limitations and dangers of the language with which they seek to speak to/about others. While acknowledging the violent history of categories of exclusion, they desire to point to meaning beyond (but not outside) those categories. Never free from implication of language in the histories of exclusion and oppression they critique, they nonetheless seek transformation rereading and rewriting in the interstices of hegemonic discourses. Furthermore, like negative theologians, they must always attend to the links between God-talk and human-talk, for in reading scripture such a relationship is always at stake. However, the discussions of apophatic language frequently ignore questions of enfleshed differences and contextual subjectivities. Through their silence about systems of sociopolitical power—and their potent machines of representation—postmodern retrievals of apophatic theologies still risk reproducing the illusion of detachment between God/human relations and human/human relations.[5]

Resisting reductionist visions of persons (and thus of "the reader") entails developing models of subjectivity that foreground relationality and dynamism. I have argued elsewhere that the notion of relational transcendence—both incarnate and dynamic—can help us envision a subjectivity as both ineradicable from and irreducible to categories of gender, race, ethnicity, and so on (2007). The notion of relational transcendence links together freedom, indeterminacy, and dynamism with social specificity, embodiment, and history, as mutually imbricated axes of human development and transformation. Although as people living in societies permeated by racism and ethnocentrism, we will always be identified according to categories and those categories do affect who we might become, we are not reducible to them. No name or category can possibly describe all a person is. Not because we are absolutely separate from the system or from one another, but because of the complex and infinite relationality of creatures. The transcendence of the person is that which exceeds all systems. It is neither abstract nor otherworldly, but openness at the heart of relation.

5. A recent colloquium at Drew University entitled "Apophatic Bodies: Infinity, Ethics, and Incarnation" (September 2006) is a hopeful sign that this shortcoming might begin to be addressed.

Each aspect of a person's identity develops in relation to realities that transcend her particularity, but which she also transcends—community, country of origin, sexual identity. For instance, the realities of my own community—its past history, its language, the geography in which I feel most at home—all embrace me, not only as a past reality but as something that I continue to relate to, be transformed by, and transform. Yet I never grasp it, just as it never completely defines me. These transcending realities exist only in particular persons. That is, they are never fully present, as such, and never appear in isolation from other aspects of a person's life. Our encounter with the Other touches and is touched by realities that transcend us both. In each person different realities meet and transform each other in unique ways. The unique outcome of these multiple relations accounts for each person's "radical singularity," to use Spivak's phrase. This radical singularity, this transcendence, is a function of relations rather than separation. It is a relational transcendence.

A Hermeneutics of Hope

> Theology is truly a hermeneutic of hope.
> Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Theological Language: Fullness of Silence"

The goal of biblical interpretation, especially for readers concerned with issues of race and ethnicity, is not to stay locked in a system of representation. Both scriptures and the collectivities in relation to which they are read are seen as inextricable from sociopolitical matrices of power, yet they are ultimately untotalizable. From their complex webs of relations, interpreters seek openings to liberate readings and readers from the "fate of language that serves the exercise of power, control, and possession" (Soelle 2001, 63). The interpreters in this volume have not renounced the hope for transformation in which biblical interpretation may participate, the expectation that the texts may still yield blessings, new revelation—even truth.

Revelation is not to be imagined as the unveiling of what was already but as an opening for new worlds. This is consonant with the goals of postcolonial criticism as Homi Bhabha describes it: "If the epistemological tends towards a reflection of its empirical referent or object, the enuntiative attempts to reinscribe and relocate the political claim to cultural priority and hierarchy" (1994, 177). In so doing, such criticism hopes for the transformation of "the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment" (4). Or, as James Kyung-Jin Lee puts it, quoting John Edgar Wideman: "To start a story so that an old story can end." Truth is here inseparable from ethics. Revelation is not the acquisition of cognitive data or evidence but, as Juan Luis Segundo describes it, a "difference that makes a difference" (1993, 330)—a difference in relation. To seek that truth is not to subordinate culture and embodiment but to transcend without escaping.

In many of its Christian versions, transcendence depicts a rift between cosmos and God that equates God's transcendence with exteriority. In such views social transformation and divine transcendence belong to different realms. But this hardly exhausts Christian interpretations of the relation between God and the cosmos. Other voices proclaim visions of the cosmos as a divine reality and thus of transformation as the outcome of the unfolding of God in creation. Creation is figured as the "infinite in the garb of the finite." Far from resembling the homogeneously simple entity of classical theology, or the coherent image reflected on the mirror of the Universal Man, God is envisioned as a multiple singularity that relates without homogenizing. It is a physical matrix of complexity and differentiation where "every real thing ... is intrinsically and constitutively" linked "to every other" (Ellacuría, as cited in Burke 2000, 55).

Within this heterogeneity of life the event of revelation might occur: an event of a call and a response (Caputo 2006, 117). Between the call and the response, a reader allows herself or himself to be read, to enter into relation. Revelation does not have the force of an irresistible Truth or irrefutable evidence, nor is it extrinsic from the ethical demands of "this world." And thus the outcomes are not guaranteed. Indeed, the relational hermeneutics that we have been describing—issuing a multiplicity of readings in the encounters between the relational singularity of readers and texts—would be overwhelmed by a God who always had the last word. Instead of a controlling power to stop the multiplying flow of interpretation, God may be seen as the spirit of relations that cannot but continue to evolve and complicate truth: God with us and between us.

The truth of scripture is neither behind nor inside it, for it is not an object to be apprehended, nor is it ever independent from the words and bodies that participate in the revelatory event. The truth of scripture is "true with the truth of the event; it wants to become true ... to be transformed into truth" (Caputo 2006, 118). This truth might entail affirmation and frequently also negation. What is calling to become true might be the denunciation of scriptural claims, the suppression of voices or lives unaccounted for. In as much as it relates to the voices that shall yet be heard or lives that might still be saved, its truth shall become true in our relations. This will not come true once and for all but will always require participation in arduous processes of discernment fraught with uncertainties. Perhaps it is our blessing if the world does not receive truth in any other way.

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Atlanta

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

They were all together in one place : toward minority biblical criticism / edited by Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia.

p. cm. — (Society of Biblical Literature semeia studies ; no. 57)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-58983-245-9 (paper binding : alk. paper)

1. Bible—Social scientific criticism. 2. Marginality, Social—Biblical teaching. I. Bailey, Randall C., 1947- II. Liew, Tat-Siong Benny. III. Segovia, Fernando F.

BS521.88.T44 2009b

220.6'089—dc22 2009001212

17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, recycled paper conforming to ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R1997) and ISO 9706:1994 standards for paper permanence.