

A Case for Asian American Posthumanist Hermeneutics

Dong Hyeon Jeong
Drew University, Madison, NJ

In their editorial book, *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, Randall C. Bailey, Benny Tat-siong Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia premised their collaborative work by celebrating and expounding upon W. E. B. DuBois' book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).¹ In order to discuss the importance of alliance between minority groups, the editors introduced Du Bois' "double consciousness" not just as explicit critique against black-versus-white racial antagonism or "color line" happening in the US, but also as a call for "universal" approach in resolving racial divide by necessitating the inclusion of other racial-ethnic minorities in the conversation.² Working with Du Bois' "double consciousness," the editors of *They Were All Together in One Place?* sought to explore how they, biblical scholars of race-ethnic minorities, could also cross the "color line" in order to turn, overturn, and even disrupt the biblical field through their alliances.

Then comes the posthumanist question: are there still places at the humanist table for alliance with nonhuman-animals?³ Posthumanism, according to Jennifer Koosed, is "a catchall of disputed definition that points beyond various human-centric ideologies."⁴ Posthumanism is a process of deconstructing human-animal hierarchy by questioning the presumptions of human superiority and "divinely mandated" human domination. Since my field is in the biblical studies and I am Asian/Asian American, I seek to push the boundaries of approaching "Asian Americanness" in biblical studies by envisioning "multiple consciousness" in which racial-ethnic issues are intermingled with posthumanist agendas. When they were all together in one place (Acts 2:1b), could we imagine that those who were waiting for the spirit were not just human-animals but also the whole creation waiting eagerly, speaking in "tongues of fire" as they groaned for the coming *apokalypsis* (Rom 8:18-22)?

The turn to posthumanity began its crawl into the field of humanities in the 1990s and started to blossom in the field of biblical studies in the beginning of twentieth century.⁵ And yet, few Asian/Asian American religious scholars worked with

¹ Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, ed., *They Were All Together in One Place?: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 3.

² Bill V. Mullen, and Cathryn Watson, eds. *W. E. B. Dubois on Asia: Crossing the World Color Line* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2005).

³ In posthumanist animality studies, the preferred terms of reference are human-animal for "humans" and nonhuman-animals for "animals" because this nomenclature is premised with the idea that humans are animals as well; by doing so, the nomenclature somewhat places the two groups as equals. However, this nomenclature is still not optimal since "non" is placed for those who do not have "human traits."

⁴ Jennifer L. Koosed, ed., *The Bible and Posthumanism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013); cf. Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Due to my limitations, this article will focus upon biblical studies and animality studies.

⁵ Stephen D. Moore, ed. *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 1.

posthumanism, most of them being theologians. For example, Yountae An dialectically reread “the intersectionality of politics, spirituality, and identity of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *mestizaje* consciousness” not just with postcolonial hybridity and ambiguity, but also with Anzaldúa’s animal imagery as the gateway for re-liberating consciousness by forging new alliance of humanity, the world, and the divine.⁶ Moreover, postcolonial ecotheologian Salimist (*Salim* means enlivening) Jea Sophia Oh re-intersected process theology and *DongHak* (eastern learning) with the intention of recognizing “life” as a theological theme that re-centers the importance of sustained existence of every creation.⁷ Furthermore, Eleazar S. Fernandez narrated his nostalgia for and the loss of his old hometown in the Philippines due to human greed as a canary in a coalmine for the need to detoxify theology from anthropocentrism through green spirit and consciousness.⁸ In other words, there are further need for racial-ethnic minority biblical scholars to participate in ecological, animality, and other posthumanist discussions because of the growing realization that racial-ethnic biblical interpretations are not and should not be limited to humanist predilections.

One of the theories that support the need for transdisciplinary work between Asian American studies and posthumanism is the theory of intersectionality, coined by Kimberly Crenshaw. Intersectionality muddies and complicates subjectivity by recognizing the matrix of identifications/sites of oppression such as race/(ism), class(ism), sexuality/(ism), and colonization(ism) an individual (or community) might have at any given point.⁹ Intersectionality seeks to illuminate the unintended blindside of looking at subjectivity and human relations from just one identification point. Wo/men are not just oppressed by (hetero)sexism but could also be oppressed by colonialism and classism. Moreover, intersectionality rejects dualistic tendencies such as all heterosexual men are oppressors and all minorities are victims. Rather, it cautions that male minorities could be victims in terms of racism but oppressors in terms of sexism/patriarchy. Instead of equating kyriarchy with just male-female binary, Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza suggests that the better way to interrogate kyriarchy is through “superiority-inferiority, dominance-subordination.”¹⁰ For Asian Americans, the question then becomes, what does it mean for us to claim victimization through racism, colonization, and other forms of domination but we ourselves sometimes (or in many times) dominate through neglect the animals, nature, and the ecosphere of this world?

What if being Asian American entails posthumanist turn? The exposition of Asian American subjectivity/ies in the name of intersectionality interrogates the possibility of unintended Cartesian Asian American anthropocentrism. Cartesian dualism stems from Descartes’s famous line, “I think, therefore I am.” As liberating as this statement sounds, its unforeseen consequences created human-animal hierarchy in which humans epitomized rationality, maturity, and civility; meanwhile, animals are equated with derogatory characteristics. In this regard, Jacques Derrida retorted against Descartes with

⁶ Ibid., 162.

⁷ Jea Sophia Oh, *A Postcolonial Theology of Life: Planetarity East and West* (Upland, CA: Sopher, 2011), 12.

⁸ Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Burning Center, Porous Borders: The Church in a Globalized World* (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 237-63.

⁹ Laura Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 5.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

his article (now a book), “The Animal that Therefore I am.”¹¹ In this article, Derrida deconstructed human-animal binary by dismantling the fences that created the illusion that humans are absolutely different and superior from animals. In this regard, Asian American biblical studies will have to deconstruct its Cartesian dualist premise by including, and even re-centering, the unnoticed nonhuman-animals and nature in its fight for representation, identity politics, and other issues.

And yet, the idea of equating oneself to animals is an uneasy concept to swallow especially for Asian Americans (or for “Asian-Asians” like me) because of the history (and even until now) of orientalism in which Asians are derogatorily called with negative symbolisms such as “monkeys” in the US.¹² The unfortunate dilemma is trying to reconcile the posthumanist desire to equate humans with animals as fellow creatures; meanwhile, Asians are put in precarious positions trying to distance themselves from animals as a means to overcome negative signification. I argue that instead of approaching this dilemma from either-or situation, one could “resolve” the situation from the point of power struggle.

Immanuel Kant, one of the successors of Cartesian thought, defined “minority as self-incurred inability, immaturity, and lack overall.”¹³ Being a minority is not just population count; it is rather a question of power and perception. When people of minority see themselves as dependent upon the majority or the so-called “mature mainline group,” this very perception of minorities about themselves reinforces the systemic oppression. But if, as Bailey, Liew, and Segovia state, one redefines minority rather as a place of power because one could traverse in and out of the dominant culture and the same with one’s minority culture,¹⁴ this fluidity or marginality becomes, as bell hooks¹⁵ argues, sites for transformative power that produce radical perspectives that could imagine an alternative world.¹⁶ If Asian Americans are “living on the edge,”¹⁷ having the identity of “selvage” or on the frontlines of transdisciplinary, creative, and imaginative biblical interpretations and perspectives,¹⁸ then to be a minority is to be constantly searching for the oppressed others who we neglected so far or “minoritized” inadvertently. To be a minority with power is to be in solidarity with nature, animals, and all of those who never had a place. At the borders of the “new” selvage called

¹¹ Marie-Louise Mallet, ed. *Jacques Derrida. The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

¹² Jonathan Green. *The Cassell Dictionary of Slang* (London: Cassell, 1998), 799. According to this dictionary, “monkey” was a slang used in the US to call a Chinese person (during 1900-40s), a Japanese person (1940-50s), and a Black person (from late 17th century until now). I personally think that this labeling is still being performed until now.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 17.

¹⁴ Bailey, Liew, and Segovia, *They Were All Together in One Place?*, 7.

¹⁵ bell hooks does not want her name to be capitalized for it is submitting to “the rule of patriarchy,” and she wants to be known by her work and not her name.

¹⁶ bell hooks calls marginality as a site that “offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds.” Cf. bell hooks, “Marginality as Site of Resistance,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (New York: New Museum of Art, 1990), 341.

¹⁷ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End, 1984), ix.

¹⁸ Bailey, Liew, and Segovia, 8.

posthumanism is where powerful, transforming, and creative biblical interpretations will happen.

There are many ways to be in solidarity with or care for the earth. For biblical scholarship, posthumanism should not be treated like “an adopted pet sub-discipline;” rather, animals and nature should be upheld as key partners/sites of interpretation. It will not be enough to approach posthumanism from a safe distance, as Cary Wolfe argues.¹⁹ Instead, Asian American biblical interpretation should first of all learn the lessons of posthumanism’s “embodied finitude” that disrupts the subconscious desire of interpreters for biopolitics - conquering and controlling all aspects of life. As Donna Haraway critiqued Derrida for only being mesmerized at his cat’s gaze, Asian American biblical interpretation should interact, research, and be in harmony with the world of nonhuman beings as a way of re-liberating oneself from (un)intended desire for “fixed reference” of being Asian Americans. Posthumanism helps us from being too enmeshed with defining ourselves because the boundaries of (human) identity is blurred once again as we need to reconfigure what it means to be “human species.” Moreover, with all the power discourses that revolve around Asian American biblical hermeneutics for the good reason of trying to give voice to those who are voiceless, posthumanism checks the desire to mimic domination by Asian American interpreters even if this power struggle is with the alliance of various racial-ethnic communities and is done to fight racism. As Wolfe invites us to “passivity” or the acceptance to the inability to know all things, the vulnerability that posthumanism brings help Asian American biblical interpreters curb ethnocentrism from its absolutizing tendencies. By doing so, posthumanism keeps Asian American biblical interpretation grounded to the material realities and unforeseen trails of destruction that happen to nonhuman-animals when human to human power struggles occur.

In the end, Asian-American posthumanist biblical interpretation does not pretend to “see or understand” the world from nonhuman perspectives. As humans, we will always be humanist at our core as we are limited by our human communication capabilities. Nevertheless, it is about giving a place for the “true” subalterns who do not operate with human language, as Kari Weil argues.²⁰ It is about reading Amitav Ghosh’s seminal book, *The Hungry Tide*,²¹ as a must read for Asian Americans because the book helps in entangling, blurring, and negating the often assumed distinction between human-animal-divine. It is about being haunted by the gaze of animals and nature as we continuously fight the oriental gaze master-colonizers stare at us from their lofty seats of power.

¹⁹ Cary Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human: ‘Animal Studies’ and the Humanities,” *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009): 569.

²⁰ Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 4.

²¹ *The Hungry Tide* explores a dilemma between caring for endangered species, on the one hand, and the subalterns of the Sundarbans, on the other. Amitav Ghosh. *The Hungry Tide* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006).