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**BREATHING EMBODIED “DIVERSITY”
INTO THE BIBLICAL STUDIES MACHINE:
ENVISIONING TRANSGRESSIVE AND
DECOLONIZING CITATION PRACTICES**

Dong Hyeon Jeong

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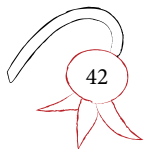
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Abstract

This essay critically reflects upon the well-intended and yet unfortunately insufficient push for more diversity in citation practices within biblical studies. Such insufficiency occurs due to the perfunctory act of breathing diversity into biblical interpretation without disrupting the colonial legacies and currents of the field of biblical studies. Moreover, such perfunctory citation practice deliberately overexposes the inclusion of minoritized scholarship in order to control their place in the narrative of the field. By doing so, the stranglehold of “whiteness” in biblical studies is unchallenged. How does then one disrupt such insufficiency? I suggest that genuinely diverse citation practices transgress the borders or limits of the textual by embodying activism. If one truly cares about diversity, then the writing scholar should also be an activist scholar. Citation is not just about making a list; it is a socio-ethical commitment to engage holistically the lived realities of the oppressed and silenced.



Cet essai propose une réflexion critique sur l'effort bien intentionné, mais malheureusement insuffisant, pour favoriser une plus grande diversité dans les pratiques de citation au sein des sciences bibliques. Cette insuffisance est liée à la volonté d'insuffler de la diversité dans les interprétations bibliques mais en évitant de perturber les héritages et les impulsions coloniales à l'œuvre dans les sciences bibliques. En outre, cette pratique de citation superficielle surexpose délibérément l'inclusion des chercheurs et chercheuses minoritaires afin de contrôler leur place dans la mise en récit de la discipline. Ce faisant, la mainmise de la « blancheur » sur les sciences bibliques n'est pas remise en question. Comment perturber cette insuffisance et y remédier ? Je propose que pour être véritablement diversifiées, les pratiques de citation doivent transgresser les frontières ou les limites du textuel et incarner l'activisme. Si l'on se soucie vraiment de la diversité, alors l'auteur ou l'autrice doit également être un·e militant·e. La citation ne consiste pas seulement à dresser une liste ; il s'agit d'un engagement socio-éthique visant à prendre en compte de manière holistique les réalités vécues par les personnes opprimées et réduites au silence.



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BREATHING EMBODIED “DIVERSITY” INTO THE BIBLICAL STUDIES MACHINE: ENVISIONING TRANSGRESSIVE AND DECOLONIZING CITATION PRACTICES

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Introduction

Can a scientific machine such as spirometer (an apparatus that measures the volume of air inhaled and exhaled by the lungs) become a device of racism and oppression? Can publishing and citation practice in biblical studies, academic machinations based on “science and logic,” become tools of racism and other oppressive systems? Lundy Braun in *Breathing Race into the Machine* (2014, xiii–xv) chronicles how an insulation manufacturer in 1990s somewhat protected itself from paying disability claims (due to asbestos-induced problems) to their (former) black workers using pseudo-scientific research. This research, which is published by the American Thoracic Society (ATS), argues that different races have different lung capacities. That is why the spirometer has to be “race-corrected” in order to “accurately and objectively” measure

the lung capacity of an individual. This research argues that a race-based corrective of the spirometer has to be made on the assumption that black persons have higher lung capacities. Knowing and thereby manipulating this pseudo-science, the insulation manufacturer abused the research by establishing a more difficult standard in claiming disability compensation for black workers. In other words, compared to their white colleagues, the black workers had to demonstrate lower lung capacities and worse medical symptoms before they were compensated at all. Unbeknown to many and still a surprise even today, users of the spirometer are finding that machines deemed “scientific and objective” can become a tool of oppression.

In the same vein, the machine that publishes biblical interpretations has recently been checked for its lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion. To respond to this corrective, many publishing houses and journals have tried to breathe into this machine an additive to make it “run smoothly,” lest they be accused of racism, sexism, classism, and/or other “isms.” And yet, this “resonance [biblical interpretation] machine,” a machine that echoes the hegemony of its time, still cannot untangle itself from the “imperial, capitalist white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal Christianity” (Hidalgo 2020, 630).

The journal *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* (AABNER) finds itself at an opportune moment in the history of biblical interpretation to fully live out its mission to showcase innovative, equal opportunity, non-discriminatory, academically rigorous, and accessible (no subscription needed) scholarship. Unlike certain journals that publish a “special forum” on diversity, equity, and inclusion only as a perfunctory nod to their blatant disregard for the same, AABNER has the possibility to become an international and intentional journal that truly responds to the needs of our time, liberating and empowering the voiceless within and without the confines of Europe. AABNER has the capacity and opportunity to heed Wil Gafney’s prophetic invitation to “look for those lives that are at risk, subject to oppression, relegated to the margins of the text, and/or discounted as disposable, particularly as a result of an intersecting element of identity” (2017, 206).

To respond to this prophetic invitation is to become a journal that embodies activism, where academic publication, which includes citation



practice, is attuned to the groanings of the world. I suggest this because the rise of Anti-Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) hatred during and after the COVID-19 pandemic made many AAPI (biblical) scholars, including me, realize that scholarship without even a modicum of desire to respond to the needs of the public should be questioned. Of course, I am not arguing that all scholarship should respond to the current news. Rather, I hope that personal interest and the needs of the public should at least overlap in ways that are flourishing. According to the Association of Theological Schools Faculty Development Study by Deborah H. C. Gin and Stacy Williams-Duncan (2017, 89), 80 percent of faculty members (in North American institutions) say that their research is based on “personal interest.” Only 11 percent of faculty members say that their primary motivation is the “needs of the public.” These faculty members are primarily non-Anglo/white faculty members. Here, as Cain Hope Felder stresses, we cannot minimize the need to “close the wide gap between those disciplines that focus only on the intrinsic value of merely acquiring knowledge for its own sake and those that are of immediate relevance to daily living” (2014, 10). In other words, I invite you all to become activist-scholars by delving into these four transgressions: engage existing network(s) of activism, hire and/or compensate minoritized persons, decolonize citation practices, and re-establish academic standards.



Engage Existing Network(s) of Activism

Inviting a minoritized person (for a presentation or publication) should come about after the organizers have done their due diligence of understanding and navigating the existing networks of the invited person. This due diligence is needed in order to avoid the trauma of tokenism, which is a product of the extractive system of academia. When you receive a response that says “I am too busy or unavailable,” this response could mean a few things. First, this response stems from the trauma of being burned by conferences or panels where they were invited to become the token speaker just to be neglected, abused (straw-person), or used by the organizers to make themselves look “diverse.” Second,

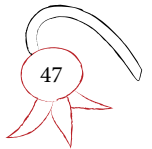
this response is asking the organizers to invite other minoritized persons because those other persons have something to share or should be heard by many. This scholar is aware that their educational pedigree and visibility, which are based on their elite status, have an influence on their being invited to speak at events. They hope to change this toxic preferential treatment based on educational class and status by suggesting persons who are less heard. Third, this response is an invitation to the organizers to critically reflect upon their intentions, and even on the composition of the event itself or the sponsoring organization. One does this critical reflection by engaging existing networks of the minoritized.

Here, engaging the existing networks of minoritized groups, which are predominantly activist in their own ways, is one of the first steps toward taking a humble, genuine, and diligent approach for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Engaging these networks assists one in learning the cultural sensitivities and sensibilities in embodied ways, something one cannot simply do from reading books and journals. Moreover, engaging these networks will prevent (hopefully) any inclination to “Columbus” ideas (i.e., assume that an existing idea is new or created by oneself) generated by and emanating from these groups. As Keeta Gladue,¹ a Cree and Métis graduate student and Indigenous student program advisor at the University of Calgary, teaches: “Indigenization can only be done by Indigenous people” (2020, 35:03), but “decolonization is the work of all people” (2020, 35:26). Of course, this decolonizing work is difficult because of the “numerous inequalities of power and resources [that] inevitably influence scholarly proceedings” (Brett 2021, 819). These inequalities keep minoritized voices “invisible,” particularly racially minoritized women in the academy (Kim 2021, 2–3). Recently, as Rhiannon Graybill noticed, several journals and groups have performatively included (trans/cis) women’s voices



¹ I am grateful and indebted to Sarah Elaine Eaton for sharing her life-changing experiences with one of her students and co-workers, Keeta Gladue. This quote comes from Eaton’s article (2022). Eaton is the Educational Leader in Residence in Academic Integrity at the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Calgary.

in their “project” (2021, 826–28)² without critically re-evaluating their missional trajectory and organizational power structure. The ensuing effect of this indifference is generally the continuation of the “manel” (all-male panels) or the “manthology” (all-male edited volume). And yet, journals such as AABNER have the opportunity to participate in this decolonizing work by breathing in the embodied activism air by engaging these networks. Out of the many groups I could mention here, I strongly endorse Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM).³ Since 1984, PANAAWTM has led the way in co-creating cutting-edge theologies, mentoring and supporting (trans/cis) women theologians and ministers, and sustaining transnational communities in the United States and beyond. They have demonstrated and proven time and time again *what* it means to be a networking initiative that truly cares for the other. PANAAWTM is a haven for activists, scholars, ministers, and educators from various fields, especially for trans/cis women of Asian descent. Cite them. Engage them.



Hire/Compensate Minoritized Persons

Representation matters, especially when finance and politics are involved. Scholars in religious studies are squirmish when it comes openly discussing finance and politics because they unravel the hidden oppressive dynamics sustaining the academy. As Brett reveals, “individuals are scrupulous in awarding honor to predecessors in their own research tradition and strategically citing the younger scholars, or new perspectives, they want to promote” (2021, 820). A case in point is the time a famous biblical scholar, in his retirement speech, argued that one has to hire scholars based on academic excellence, not on diversity. This famous scholar clearly thinks that academic excellence and diversity are mutually exclusive. Unfortunately, this famous scholar’s assumption is prevalent or considered normative logic among many (biblical)

² See also Ahmed 2012.

³ <https://www.panaawtm.org/>.

scholars. They wave the flag or hide under the veil of “objectivity and academic rigor” in order to sustain their perspective of acceptable biblical interpretation and interpreter(s). However, as many have already called out, one has to ask again: whose objectivity, whose rigor, based on what? As Wongi Park (2021, 441) points out, as of 2018 only 15 percent of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) are non-white. Women in the SBL represent only 25 percent of the total membership.⁴ It goes without saying that the number of racially minoritized women is borderline invisible (see Tilford 2019). This lack of diversity in the biblical studies guild is a manifestation of white supremacy and preferential treatment of white-male European and American scholars. Unfortunately, the publication of books and journals on “diversity” here and there will not change the status quo. These are just band-aids to the cancer corrupting the guild from within.



Hiring and properly compensating minoritized persons are forms of embodied activism. This embodiment goes directly to the heart or the locus of change and power. I believe in grassroots movements and in change from below. I also believe that it does not hurt to have persons in power who could champion grassroots movements. To have someone who has access to resources as an ally will assist in expediting and efficiently implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Of course, not all minoritized persons are attuned to the needs of the other. Moreover, minoritized persons are not unicorns who could magically solve all of the problems of the guild and of academia. That is an unfair expectation and a Sisyphean task meant for minoritized persons to fail to complete. And yet for positive change to happen, one has to be honest with the organization of one’s group and directly recognize whose identities are represented and whose are not.

⁴ SBL, “Member Data Report, 2019,” <https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/sblMemberProfile2019.pdf> (accessed on August 11, 2023),

Decolonize Citation Practices

In South Korea, many Korean biblical scholars believe that Eurocentric and US-centric publications are the best expressions of biblical scholarship. Publishing one's scholarship in a European or US journal or with a European or US publisher is considered more prestigious than to do so with local Korean journals and publishers. Doing so is also thought to increase one's chances of eventually being promoted. Moreover, quoting Bultmann and Moltmann over Kim and Lee is considered more academically rigorous. Such colonial indoctrination that worships Europe and the United States while belittling Asian scholarship is deeply ingrained in many non-European and non-American scholars. Doctoral students in South Korea must pass German and French language requirements even if they barely need them in their dissertation, if at all. They must quote or refer to European publications written a hundred years ago for their work to be considered "valid." My uncle left his family in South Korea so that he could study the New Testament in Germany.

AABNER has the chance to decolonize this oppressive indoctrination by declaring that the marginalized voices around the world will be uplifted and supported. What is at stake here is whether or not AABNER will perpetuate, as Willie Jennings argues, the whiteness standard of the "self-sufficient toxic white man" of academia (2020, 1–22; 2021, 837). Will AABNER open its doors for collaborative work with journals from marginalized places (Stiebert 2020, 8–9)? Will AABNER accept, for example, art pieces as critical conversation partners in biblical studies (Havea 2021, 82–89)? Will AABNER become a panopticon (in the Foucauldian sense), where the journal will act as the all-seeing eye that monitors and decides through hyper-visualization which articles are worth "reading"?

Moreover, AABNER has the capacity to provide spaces for minoritized voices to (re-)create and redefine their academic lineage. Tat-siong Benny Liew calls this "referencing without referentiality," to create a new lineage of scholarship without petrifying any name(s) as unconditional. The conditionality relies on the trajectories or issues of the time (Liew 2007, 7). Angela Parker (2021, 98–99; 2022, 473–76) and Mitzi J. Smith (2018) have also created their own versions of academic lineage



by focusing on womanist publications. These lineages, though, are not myopic or atomized; rather, they intersectionally and cross-racially support and cite other minoritized groups (Liew 2017, 243). Park insists on this “multiracial coalition of scholars,” because it combats whiteness and “provide justifications for moving from monoracial to multiracial biblical studies” (2021, 438).

Re-Establish Standard(s) of “Good” Scholarship

Activism is transgressive, even physically and emotionally taxing. As Sarah Elaine Eaton puts it, “academic work is advocacy work. Every day we are called upon to make ethical decisions in our daily lives and professional practices” (2022, 6). One of the most difficult struggles within the academy is formulating the standard of “good” scholarship. What is harder is transgressing the formulated standard of “good” scholarship by contradicting the gatekeepers and dismantling their “rubric towers.” This transgression is taxing and even dangerous for those who are still in their early career. Kwok Pui-lan voiced her concern about this transgression with the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion (JFSR)*. Inasmuch as the *JFSR* is liberating, decolonizing, and championing the cause of (trans/cis) women, they still have to face the difficulty of formulating the standards of acceptability to their journal. Kwok is concerned that the *JFSR* might become an “incubator of whiteness with a feminist twist” (2022, 20–21). Her concern stems from the dilemma of encouraging international submissions to the journal and the perceived sub-par nature of these submissions. This concern becomes exacerbated, as the editorial board has to determine the barometer of acceptability of these submissions with their European and American audiences in mind. Kwok invites the editorial board of the *JFSR* to critically reflect upon decolonizing the journal’s publishing standards, a difficult but necessary task that would hopefully transform it further as one of the most liberating and decolonizing journals today.

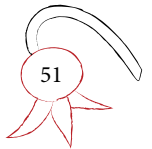
All this makes me ask: what if intersectionality could also be applied in deciding the standard of good scholarship? What if intersectionality is not just a transgressive “method” in interpreting the Bible and



other Ancient Near Eastern texts? As Gale Yee writes, intersectionality “impels us toward disrupting dominance and challenging systemic inequality in today’s world” (2020, 12). Could we imagine new standards of good scholarship in which the Eurocentric/US-centric standard(s) intersect or work with other standards from various communities of the world? If we, (biblical) scholars, insist on the production of knowledge from various communities (also known as contextualization), then we should also insist on decolonizing and transgressing the machines that measure the acceptability of a submission. Are intersectional academic standards a path forward?

Publishing as Activism

I am a board member of the Center and Library for the Bible and Social Justice (CLBSJ).⁵ It is a network hub for (biblical) scholars and activists who seek to bridge the gap between scholarship and activism. The CLBSJ’s synergistic efforts organize webinars and events that critically channel the Bible (and other sacred texts) in enacting and empowering social justice today. For networks such as the CLBSJ, biblical studies as activism is a given. AABNER is in a critical position to choose to become one of the catalysts for social justice. Here, I am not asking AABNER to fall into the trap of (white) saviorism or to develop a messianic complex. Rather, a relatively new journal has the capacity to bring about not just intellectual rigor but also societal healing. Smith shares that her book, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation*, is written as an “act of self-care, of political resistance to contemporary and ancient (con)texts that threaten, oppose, or are antithetical to the self-care and wholeness of the oppressed” (2018, 3). Could AABNER also become a journal where its readers, through its publications, are healed, empowered, and encouraged to resist oppressive structures?



⁵ <https://clbsj.org/>.

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