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Review

Katherine Clay Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2010; 180 pages; 44.95).

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The questions and problems addressed by today's scholars increasingly require layered approaches of study. This convention manifests most conspicuously in academic quibbling about affixing disciplinary descriptors (e.g. "multi-," "inter-," "cross-," or "trans"). But true exemplars of this sensibility remind of the incredible yield that such works can bring to learned consideration. Katherine Clay Bassard's *Transforming Scriptures* presses the need for greater appreciation of a phenomena too-often overlooked. Implementing literary criticism, historical studies and bib-

lical exegesis, Bassard examines the relationship between African American women and the Bible. Her layered study creatively regards the reading of a text, a people and their interfacing.

Transforming Scriptures displays the complex ways that African American women have read and been read by the Bible. Bassard compares the writing of black women to observe the contours that emerge out of this transformative relationship. She demonstrates the varied strategies employed in black women's Bible reading. And she reveals how their writings evidence slavery's diachronic determinism. Both observations result in a kaleidoscope of rich reflections about race, gender, and scriptural engagement.

"Part One: Troubling Hermeneutics" establishes an intricate theoretical structure for thinking about her topic. In the first chapter, Bassard lays out the theoretical framework for understanding the conditions under which African American women read biblical texts. Their entrance into the Western scriptural economy came via slave ships. This passage coded them as *cursed* (e.g. descendants of Ham, Genesis 9:22-25), *marked* (e.g. descendants of Cain, Genesis 4:15), and *pained* (e.g. daughters of Eve, Genesis 3:16) (13-16). And upon arrival to the New World, they stood as an object of Western reading practices. But a socio-intellectual turn occurred when black women began subjecting the Bible to what Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza terms a "hermeneutics of re-vision" (17). They recast the Bible as an instrument of *blessing*. Balaam's prophetic mule (Numbers 22) and the beautiful, black Shulamite woman (Song of Songs 1:5-7) became standards for African American women's negotiation of identity.

The second chapter trellises Bassard's established theoretical framework by placing the aforementioned turn in a history of the Bible's place in 19th century America. The rise of scientific reasoning, common sense philosophy, and naturalism challenged the Bible's role in mediat-

ing the post-Enlightenment lifeworld (30). The Bible's role shifted from being prescriptive of human behavior to being descriptive of the natural order. Thus abolitionists and advocates alike ascribed to the Bible their respective views on slavery. Nevertheless, the Bible still held authority as a defining document. For instance Frances Harper cites passages like the Syrophonecian woman's repartee with Jesus (Mark 7:25-31 and Matthew 15:21-28) to show the Bible as explicitly imbricated with a subversive social agenda (45-47). Harper knows that slave advocates consider Jesus on their side, but she talk back to them through the Syrophoeneican's retort. The ambivalent 19th century readings beg the slave question and the question of biblical authority (42-47). But subtending these fights lay a crucial, historical axiom: contestation of one issue necessarily translated into contestation of the other.

In "Part Two: Transforming Scriptures," Bassard posits the relationship between African American women and the Bible upon this theoretical structure. "Rather than engage in the type of point-by-point debate held by Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, and other black male abolitionists," black women read the Bible and the 19th century quite differently (48-49). They "chose to dismantle the Bible defense through literary representation in genres like poetry, fiction, and even spiritual narrative and written prayers" (49). The proceeding three chapters point to the literary textures indicative of this engagement. Her final chapter moves to 20th century, highlighting how these same textures pervade the later writings of African American women.

Bassard's third chapter demonstrates the power of Maria W. Stewart's performative prayers. Lacing verses from all throughout the canon with her own writing, Stewart endows her work with scriptural import. This "literary sampling" enables Stewart to convict her readers simultaneously with social justice jeremiads and motivational *Meditations* (51, with an appendix

of samplings on pages 108-131). As I read Bassard's explanation, this simultaneity is what distinguishes sampling from similar appropriative renderings of the biblical text (52). Whereas signification often deals with subversion, deconstruction, and dismissal of the original, sampling promotes more of a simulacra or new creation out of older material. And whereby proof-texting would have involved the decontextualized derivation of the King James translation, Stewart skillfully uses the scriptural libretto to voice her own song.

Sampling's descriptive nuances are best understood when Bassard compares Stewart's prayers to the intertextuality in the writings of David Walker and James Weldon Johnson. But I wonder how much the distinctions between literary sampling, signifying, and proof-texting depend upon the critic's appraisal of the Bible reader. For instance, Bassard says that few can match the type of cultural performance present in Stewart's sampling of the Christian scriptures (66). Yet signification is described as "against the grain" and proof-texting as "ignorant of context" (52). Unpacking the politics of reception history could provide greater clarity on the differences and similarities between these intellectual tropes. Although her argument remains within the confines of this book's specific project, I hope that her future work will elaborate on the concept. Her deep observations here engender further consideration.

In chapter four, Bassard suggests that African American women employ the contours of biblical narratives to display story arcs that would otherwise be filtered by America's discriminatory superstructures. Hannah Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (c. 1860) functions as exemplar here. The story examines slavery as 19th century America's curse. In her preface, Crafts frames her intent with a rhetorical question evocative of the Shulamite woman: "Have I succeeded in portraying ... that institution whose curse rests over the fairest land the sun shines

upon ... how it blights the happiness of the white as well as the black race?" The Shulamite woman's "black but comel[iness]" lends room to Crafts' description of the castigating features of race and gender in America (71). The novel revolves around a betrothed mistress who learns that she is a *mulatta*. She is forced into hiding while facing the trauma that accompanies the revelation of her race. Her saving grace is her female slave, who runs from the authorities as companions. In order to delve fully into the harrowing account, Bassard recommends that the reader take notice of biblical antecedents that resemble and likely influence Crafts' characterizations because Crafts' contemporaries could not help but to sense the similarities. The mistress goes from being the exotic (Shulamite woman) to the exalted (Queen Esther) to the excommunicated (Jesus Christ) (75). Thus Bassard dubs *the Bondsman Narrative* as a twofold passing tale. Inside the text, the protagonist spends time traversing the liminal space between racial absolutism. Outside of it, Crafts' dramatic social criticism passes as biblically-inflected musings.

Chapter five looks at Harriet Wilson's use of the Joseph cycle (Genesis 37-50?) to offer a gender-sensitive critique of slavery. Similar to Crafts' *Bondsman*, Wilson's *Our Nig* samples from the imprisonment of the Joseph story to tell a parable about the insidiousness of slavery. *Our Nig* (1859) follows the life of a young mulatta named Fradao. While Fradao was born of a white woman and a black father, the law of *partum sequitur ventrum* does not afford the child true freedom (90). Fradao's mother attempts to eschew the stigmas of miscegenation by selling Fradao into indentured servitude, a northern variance to slavery (86). The parallels to Joseph's descent into slavery continue as Fradao becomes an interpreter (cf. Genesis 40-41) of the gendered violence that remains part of the North's American dream. The story of Fradao uses parable to speak truth to power much like Tamar's reposte to Judah, the father-in-law who impreg-

nated her (cf. Genesis 38). Wilson aims to enable other black women to follow Joseph in his ascent out of despair and into the ranks of civility.

In lieu of a formal conclusion, Bassard closes her analysis with a gesture toward the transformative scripture readings in two 20th century authors, Toni Morrison and Sherley Anne Williams. The authors stand upon the shoulders of their forebearers in shaping the biblical text to craft literary models of complex, active, black women that readers can genuinely love (94). Like those that came before, the private interpretations of Morrison and Williams necessarily engage with the legacies of slavery and the Bible. But 20th century protagonists can explore, experience, and embrace a sexual potency less available to the previously discussed writer (95). Since their time, the comeliness of the black Shulamite woman has enjoyed biblical blessings, literary support, and increasing socio-political agency. As black women have understood themselves as liberated by the scriptures, they have mutually liberated the hegemonic readings of their oppressors.

Katherine Clay Bassard's *Transforming Scriptures* is a timely contribution to the critical study of scriptural practices. She builds off the work of Wesley Kort and Vincent Wimbush to show the constants and fluidity of scriptural engagement. Her historical outlook provides a salient critique of simplistic and deterministic views of African American women, their writings, and their strivings. Those readers accustomed to definitive disciplinary statements on her subject may be challenged by her "eclectic" method and lack of a formal conclusion (2). But her masterful prose will keep students and scholars engaged. Bassard's work would be especially welcome in studies on race, ethnicity, religion, and American literary theory. I look forward to the dialogue that will ensue around this thought-provoking and multivalent piece.

