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Reading Scripture in a Post-Apartheid South Africa

Re-Imagining Gendered Identity Hermeneutically

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Abstract

While the Bible continues to fund the religious imagination of the community of faith, the church has often been found guilty of reading the Bible oppressively. Such readings emerge because of a general ignorance of the layered traditions that reflect diverse social locations, and a complex transmission and interpretive history. This essay is particularly concerned with reading practices which both remains faithful to ancient biblical contexts, as well as to how gender identity, as a fluid construct, is continually negotiated in post-apartheid South Africa. By employing postcolonial optics, this paper hopes to re-imagine gendered identity in a post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords

postcolonial biblical criticism – gender-criticism – Ricoeur – gender theory – masculinities – femininities – South Africa – apartheid

1 Introduction

Despite boasting one the most progressive constitutions in the world, South Africa continues to register some of the highest statistics of abuse and violence against women and children (including: “sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, particular kinds of murder such as witch burning, rape-murders, sex-

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ual serial killings and intimate femicide").[1] While there are multiple factors contributing to the high incidence of violence against women, these figures raise an even greater concern for a country where "77–80% of the total South African population of 49 million claim affiliation with some form of Christianity."[2]

The crisis of gender-based violence in South Africa is complex because it cuts across social, economic, political and even theological lines. Where these categories intersect, it becomes clear that gender-based violence is scripted; that is, it is informed and shaped by a dominant narrative that is a carry over from the colonial and apartheid days. The dominance of this script, or indeed multiple scripts, perpetuates, normalises, and frequently sanctions violence as an appropriate means of dealing with women, and children. In an attempt to respond to this crisis, our paper seeks to draw attention to and engage with the hermeneutical practices of the church and the academy, identifying the biblical text and its interpretation as at least partly to blame for the crisis. We thus seek to trace out how hermeneutical practices can sometimes serve to underwrite gender-based violence.

It is our contention that reading practices both in the church, with its pre-critical hermeneutical engagement, and in the academy, with in its critical hermeneutical engagement, have tended to construct gendered identity in heteronormative and heteropatriarchal ways. Constructed genders of this sort, whether feminine or masculine, fail to recognise gender as fluid, open to re-negotiation, re-imagination, and re-configuration in response to evolving and changing contexts.

Considering the role of hermeneutical methodology for the re-imagination of gendered identity, specifically masculine identity, our essay proposes that when it comes to the interpretation of biblical texts, both the academy and the church, especially within a post-apartheid South Africa, need to engage in an exercise of hermeneutical reflexivity, and that such reflexivity is brought into sharper focus by employing a postcolonial optic.

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1 Kennedy Owino, "'Maleness' and Its Possible Influence on Abuse and Domestic Violence in South Africa: A Critique of Some Expressions of Evangelical Theology Evangelical Theology Evangelical Theology Evangelical Theology," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 16, no. 2 (2010): 146–168, here 149. More recently the escallation of violence against women has made major headlines in the South African media with the brutal rape-murder of Anene Booysen, a seventeen-year-old girl from Bredasdorp in the Western Cape. The incident highlights the urgency of the debate around gender identity in a post-Apartheid South Africa.

2 Owino, "'Maleness'," 149.

2 Theoretical and Contextual Frameworks

2.1 *Towards a Theory of Gender*

Before locating our discussion on male gendered identity within the concrete realities of a post-apartheid South Africa, it is important to briefly survey the academic landscape as it pertains to gender theorisation.

Working from Freud's psychoanalysis, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann proposes that the human self is "thick, layered, and conflicted."[3] These three adjectives bring the debate about sex, gender, and social roles into sharper focus. The debate coalesces around the following critical questions: Does the "sexed body"[4] determine the gender of a person? Or, does gender determine/inform the configuration of the sexed body? What is the function of social roles in the formation of gender identity? Is gender identity fixed and dictated by social structures? Or, is gender identity fluid and informed by multiple, and changing, discourses? Is gender identity rooted in biological essentialism, so that the biological ontology of a person is not only determinative, but also binary, presenting a binary division of men and women?[5]

These questions, and many more besides, potentially find answers in the following theoretical frames and are premised on the notion that gender is constructed. What follows, then, is a basic, and by no means comprehensive, taxonomy of gender theories.

Gender theorists are divided, at the macro-level, into theorists who operate with the notion of gender as fixed and determined, based on an essential quality (a kind of ontological notion of gender) and those who operate with the notion that gender is constructed and is therefore fluid. The former rely heavily on the biological essentialist argument – women and men each have essential biological features – that establishes a binary division into women and men.[6] The latter are further divided into those who root their understanding and investigation of gender identity in either materialist (structuralist) or discursive (post-structuralist) theories.

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3 Walter Brueggemann, "Where is the Scribe?" Conference paper, 41st Trinity Institute National Theological Conference: Reading Scripture Through Other Eyes (New York, 2011), 9.

4 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 174, Kindle.

5 See the important contribution to this debate by Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

6 Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons, and Kathleen Lennon, *Theorising Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 65.

Under the rubric of materialist/structuralist theories, gender is constructed in either essentialist or non-essentialist ways. Structural essentialism, which is reliant on "residual biological essentialism,"[7] "accepts that all women, for example, share characteristics as a consequence of adopting the same social role, being placed within the same kind of social structures or being subject to the same symbolic order."[8] Materialist/structuralist theories draw attention to the structural makeup of the social world (e.g., concrete social relations in the work place, the home, and sexuality [i.e., sexed bodies]) and the influence of these structures on the construction of gender identities, ensuring "that women and men are fitted into distinct pathways within the society."[9] Ultimately, these discussions are contingent on power, which for material feminists results in women being exploited and oppressed by men.[10]

Under the rubric of discursive/post-structuralist theories, gender is constructed by the *meanings* attributed to being male and female. Particular attention is given to the role of language or discourse in constructing gender identity and power relations.[11] Discursive theories of gender identity, then, highlight the multiple and intersecting discourses or scripts that inform gender identity. The chosen and/or received discourses create a matrix of meaning and contributes to the thick, layered and conflicted understanding of the human self. This approach, which signals a shift from the materialist/structuralist approach, emphasises the contextuality of gender construction, which in turn signals a shift from seeing gender as a role, to seeing it as a process or performance.[12] It is precisely this move that calls into question the pre-critical notion of gender as a role so evident within the church. Van Leeuwen reminds us that roles are fixed and as fixed imply definite actions "expected of people who occupy a certain social position."[13] Thus, Van Leeuwen contends that the notion of roles is precisely what sustains, drives, and motivates the Christian imagination, especially for those who believe that God has a "blueprint" for creation.[14]

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7 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 65.

8 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 65.

9 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 65.

10 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 67; Surya Monro, *Gender Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 19.

11 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 65.

12 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 79.

13 Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, ed., *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 41.

14 Van Leeuwen, *After Eden*, 41.

The post-structuralist approach, largely based on Foucault's notion of discourse which is defined as "anything which can carry meaning,"[15] maintains that discourse(s) do(es) not mirror reality, but construct(s) it. The multiple discourses, in other words, constitute reality.[16] As such, discourses serve as agents of normalisation, "they carry with them the norms of behaviour, standards of what counts as desirable, undesirable, proper and improper."[17] They are the scripts/stories, implicit or explicit, which inform individual and communal identity(ies).

The Foucauldian post-structuralist approach to the question of gender identity is not without its problems. While the approach contributes to the thick layering of our understanding of gender identity, it also proves problematic in at least two ways: for its almost exclusive focus on micro-power relations at the expense of making "global connections";[18] and, for its overly deconstructionistic trajectory that often fails to present any kind of constructive alternative. Drawing on the work of Hennesssy, Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon observe that since Foucault only addresses micro-power relations, he nullifies the role of "systemic hierarchies" – global power structures which affect gender identity – a critical lens which significantly emphasises the oppression of minority groups around the world.[19]

We have, in this section, surveyed the landscape of gender theory by presenting two approaches employed by gender theorists to understand the construction of gender identity – materialist/structuralist and discursive/post-structuralist. While neither of the approaches on their own present a more focused means of understanding gender identity, it is our contention that, strengths and weaknesses notwithstanding, when insights from both are integrated, the picture of gender understanding becomes a little more clear. Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon articulate the matter this way:

> What has become clear from attention to difference is not a privileging of discursive or material accounts but the necessary interweaving of both. What becomes problematic, however, are any universal theories of the workings of patriarchy or capitalism. Rather we need to trace the interwoven material and discursive elements in particular contexts.[20]

15 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 89.
16 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 82.
17 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 82.
18 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 89.
19 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 89.
20 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 93.

What also becomes evident in localised understandings of gender constructions is that the material and discursive factors are multiplied to include race, class, economics and politics (local and global) and that each of these at the intersection play a significant role in the construction of gender. Gender construction, then, is a complex negotiation, as these intersecting aspects "come into existence in, and through, relationship to each other, if in contradictory and conflictual ways."[21]

It is our contention that postcolonialism is able to effectively synthesise the materialist/structuralist and discursive/post-structuralist approaches, a point to which we return. For now, we turn our attention to the construction of *masculine* identities in a post-apartheid South Africa. This will give us access to understanding gender construction in local contexts which significantly influences how both the academy and the church construct gender identity within religious discourses.

2.2 *Vernacular Gender Identities: Men in a Post-Apartheid South Africa*

The focus of this section is not to articulate a comprehensive understanding of masculinities in South Africa; rather, we aim to analyse, using the influential work of Robert Morrell, what lies behind the construction of masculine identities in a post-apartheid South Africa.

In his book, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, Robert Morrell argues that masculinity "refers to a specific gender identity" and "belong[s] to a specific male person."[22] Although "gender identity is acquired in social contexts and circumstances, it is 'owned' by an 'individual.'"[23] It is precisely the interplay between the socially constructed and the personally adopted notion of masculinity that leads psychologists David Blackbeard and Graham Lindegger to critique the work of Australian sociologist, Bob Connell, for his overly structuralist assumptions in which gender identities are positioned within a hierarchical (read, structural) framework.[24] Blackbeard and Lindegger argue that masculine identities are always contextual and "plural," and that, "gender subjectivities occur in dialogical relation with gender ideologies and call for a

21 Monro, *Gender Politics*, 18.

22 Robert Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001), 7.

23 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 7.

24 David Blackbeard and Graham Lindegger, "Building a Wall Around Themselves: Exploring Adolescent Masculinity and Abjection with Photo-Biographical Research," *South African Journal of Psychology* 37, no. 1 (2007): 25–46, here 27.

multilayered understanding of masculinity as socially and subjectively embodied, enacted, and inscribed."[25]

Blackbeard and Lindegger's approach, which draws heavily on post-structuralist theories, leads them to "conceptualise masculinity as a performative social identity and subjectivity," in which "masculinities are self-narratives which are simultaneously instantiated through social discourse and subjective processes."[26] As a performative social identity and subjectivity, masculinities, as Morrell argues, are not only fluid, but are

> constantly being protected and defended, are constantly breaking down and being recreated. For gender activists this conceptualisation provides a space for optimism because it acknowledges the possibility of intervening in the politics of masculinity to promote masculinities that are more peaceful and harmonious.[27]

Furthermore, Morrell draws attention, especially with reference to masculine identities in the South African context, to "race and class as of major importance in determining how men understand their masculinity, how they deploy it …"[28] Lindsay and Miescher concisely summarise this perspective, "ideologies of masculinity – like those of femininity – are culturally and historically constructed, their meaning continually contested always in the process of being renegotiated in the context of existing power relations."[29]

Morrell, and others, are able to trace the multiple and intersecting contours of masculinity, cross-racially, to include violence, war, apartheid and other structural factors, noting their affects on cultural groups in Southern Africa.[30] He notes that in a post-apartheid South Africa, it is necessary to speak of "masculinities," precisely because in our fragile and often unstable context, "masculinity is always being done and undone in the sense that it is not fixed but fluid and so is constantly being rehearsed, moulded and enacted."[31] Gender identity is in the South African context, thick, layered, and conflicted, and it is contested. In response to the asymmetry and unpredicatability of the social,

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25 Blackbeard and Lindegger, "Building a Wall Around Themselves," 27.

26 Blackbeard and Lindegger, "Building a Wall Around Themselves," 27.

27 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 7.

28 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 10.

29 Lisa A. Lindsay and Stephen F. Miescher, eds., *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003), 4.

30 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*.

31 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 20.

political, and economic landscape of post-apartheid South Africa, men respond differently to change. Morrell proposes three general trajectories that reflect the attitudes of men to change, noting that there is a good deal of overlap between them. The first trajectory – "reactive or defensive" – refers to men who, in an attempt to hold onto power, revert to older forms of masculinity. This trajectory often refers, in a general way, to "white, middle class" men who vehemently resist change so as to "restore the tattered remains of the male image."[32]

The Mighty Men Conference (MMC) founded by Angus Buchan serves as a good example of this first trajectory. According to Buchan, masculinity is "being eroded and broken down."[33] For Buchan, male gender identity is in crisis and the MMC is an attempt to respond to the crisis. The response, however, serves only to entrench static notions of masculine identity and corresponds to Connell's hegemonic masculinity.

The second trajectory – accommodating – refers to men who seek to "resuscitate non-violent masculinities."[34] Drawing on Wardrop, Morrell notes that this kind of masculinity relies on a great deal on self-control and a good temperament.[35] Men who respond within this trajectory to change, often rely on traditional practices,[36] but recognise that there are other ways to resist violent subjectivities. In their study of male teens in Kwa-Zulu Natal, Blackbeard and Lindegger found that teens who resisted "normative discourses" had to rely on "narratives of maturity, academic success, vocational aspirations, or peer-negotiated alternatives."[37]

The third trajectory – "responsive or progressive"[38] – reflects men who consciously challenge violent masculinities by creating what Blackbeard and Lindegger call "counter normative discourses."[39] The masculine identity displayed here is what Morrell calls "emancipator masculinities."[40] A clear example of the "responsive or progressive" response to change as it relates to male identitiy are

32 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 26.

33 Cited in Sarojini Nadar, "Palatable Patriarchy and Violence Against Wo/men in South Africa – Angus Buchan's Men's Conference as a Case Study of Masculinism," *Scriptura* 102 (2009): 551–561, here 551.

34 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 29.

35 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 29.

36 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 29.

37 Blackbeard and Lindegger, "Building a Wall Around Themselves," 43.

38 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 26.

39 Blackbeard and Lindegger, "Building a Wall Around Themselves," 43.

40 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 31.

the many faith-based men's organisations cited by Ezra Chitando that are challenging the dominant violent masculine stereotypes, by encouraging men to fight for the liberation of abused women.[41]

It is clear, then, that masculinity in a post-apartheid context is fluid and negotiated in response to ever changing conditions. Furthermore, the negotiation of male gendered identity is dependent on a complex interplay between structures, culture, community, and individuality. And that in the South African context, men will have to continue to renegotiate what it means to be a male in the face of conditions "which undermine their economic condition and which are likely to cause them to question their masculinity."[42]

In this section we have attempted to get behind the complex and multiple factors informing and shaping masculine gender identity construction in a post-apartheid South Africa. In the end, masculine identities within a post-apartheid South Africa are still rooted in a heteronormative binary understanding of gender construction. While the theories discussed above highlight the thickly layered contours that build into gender construction, the construction of gender is still rooted in the sexed body, male and female. Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon note that despite the theories which undergirds approaches to gender, these approaches "assume *a priori* that the human species is unproblematically divided biologically into men and women."[43] Moreover, while these various approaches insist that gender is always constructed, "they do not question the binary division of people into two sexes."[44]

While the complexity of heteronormativity is acknowledged as critical to the question of gender identity, especially in the relationship between gender and sexuality, we draw attention to it in order to show hermeneutically how postcolonial biblical criticism is able to move beyond the static boundaries of binaried gender identity.

41 Ezra Chitando, "Men as Gender Activists: Opportunities and Challenges Within the Religious Sector," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 16, no. 2 (2010): 130–131.

42 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 33; Lilly Nortjé-Meyer, "Deconstructing the Heteronormative Image of the Early Christian Household: Reconsidering Gender as a Key Organising Concept of Family Functioning," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 21, no. 2 (2010): 141–151, here 148.

43 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 65.

44 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 66.

3 Hermeneutical Framework

In this section we frame our consideration of gender identity hermeneutically by employing, heuristically, Paul Ricoeur's proposal that hermeneutics moves from first naïveté to second naïveté, or from pre-critical to critical to post-critical. Meaning in these Ricoeurian terms is established and "animated" by the "willingness to suspect," which signals a move from pre-critical to critical, and the "willingness to listen," signaled by the move from critical to post-critical.[45]

3.1 *Gender Identity and the Move from Pre-Critical to Critical Hermeneutics*

A pre-critical mode of biblical engagement is evident within the church. This mode reflects Ricoeur's first naïveté; an innocence about the biblical text and its meaning and about textual interpreters and interpretations. Here the text is taken at face value because the text is taken as "the Word of God." To say that the biblical text is the "Word of God" is to say also that this text, unlike any other text, is divine revelation, is inspired, authoritative, infallible, inerrant, and therefore normative.[46] Within a worldview constructed in part by, and reflected in, these adjectives, there is little possibility of entertaining the notion that to say the Bible is the "Word of God" is to employ a metaphor. Sandra M. Schneiders argues that it is as a metaphor, by which she means to move beyond a purely rhetorical notion of metaphor (a contracted simile), that we are able to appreciate that metaphor "is perhaps our most powerful use of language, our most effective access to meaning of reality at its deepest levels."[47] And as Scheiders notes, "metaphors are very unstable linguistic entities. They exist in and even as linguistic tension involving a simultaneous affirmation and negation of the likeness between the two terms of the metaphor."[48]

45 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 27.

46 Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 27.

47 Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 29.

48 Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 29. Schneiders goes on to show that metaphors, "which are tensive language, tend to either banalisation or literalisation. A true metaphor is *banalised* when it has been repeated often enough that it loses its capacity to surprise, to tease the imagination into the engagement of new possibilities. Most live metaphors eventually die." On the other hand, "to *literalise* the metaphor is to suppress its negative pole, that about it that 'is not,' and to affirm only the positive pole, that about it that 'is.' But when

In an attempt to resolve the linguistic tension signaled by the metaphor – the Word of God – the church has generally tended to move towards *literalisation*, at which point the metaphor dies. Such literalisation has had far reaching implications for the church's reading of gender identity. Because the biblical text is literally the "Word of God," whatever it says is usually taken, unquestionably, as normative for the church, and therefore for all humanity. Little consideration is given to the fact that the Bible is itself a cultural artifact, reflecting a wide range of cultural norms and values that must be called into question. R.S. Sugirtharajah articulates it this way, "… the Bible is not merely a simple spiritual text but has the capacity to foster both spiritual and territorial conquest," and "The Christian Bible, for all its sophisticated theological ideals like tolerance and compassion, contains equally repressive and predatory elements which provide textual ammunition for spiritual and physical conquest."[49]

The "repressive and predatory elements" in a pre-critical mode rely heavily on binary constructions of gender identity. One may cite the following representative examples:

– Complimentarianism, a view which maintains that men and women are equal in their "essential dignity and human personhood, but different and complimentary in function with male headship in the home and in the Church."[50] This view, which seems to be gaining considerable traction in the Western Cape, is advocated by such influential and international figures as Mark Driscoll, John Piper, John F. MacArthur and Wayne Grudem. This view, in our opinion, represents a pre-critical mode of constructing gender identity and is really just "palatable patriarchy" (to borrow from Sarojini Nadar).[51] A national exponent of this view is Angus Buchan's Mighty Men's Conference which draws 200,000 men together to "restore masculinity," by returning to biblical manhood, which is a return to a static, closed, male identity.[52] Moreover, this construction of masculine identity is, according to

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we do this, the literalised metaphor goes underground and works on the subconscious level of creating vast reservoirs of cognitive untruth and distorted affectivity," Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 29–30.

49 R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 31–32, Kindle.

50 "Complementarianism," in *Theopedia*, http://www.theopedia.com/Complementarianism#note-9.

51 Nadar, "Palatable Patriarchy and Violence Against Wo/men in South Africa – Angus Buchan's Men's Conference as a Case Study of Masculinism," 555.

52 Nadar, "Palatable Patriarchy," 552. Cf. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 182.

Nadar, not only rooted in masculine hegemony, but requires the use of "relational and positional" power (which are essentially hierarchical ideologies), and "discourses of power" (which results in polar binaries).[53] Buchan maintains that according to the Bible, it is the divine role of men to be "kings, priests and prophets"[54] in their homes and in society.

– Drawing on a study of the abuse of women in the church, conducted at a large Full Gospel church in Durban, Owino argues that binary gender identities are constructed around the masculinity of God, which is "considered superior, while femaleness is associated with inferiority."[55] Citing the responses of the interviewed women who experienced abuse at the hands of their husbands, Owino notes that for these women, men were authorised, because they were male, to "do what they wanted within the marriage relationship."[56] These women also tended to cast their suffering in theological/biblical language, seeing themselves as suffering servants in the pattern of Jesus who gives them strength to face another day, but who never enacts a powerful liberation from domestic oppression.[57]

A critical mode of biblical interpretation, evident in the academy, draws attention to the naïveté of the church and its interpretation, already noted in Sugirtharajah's comments, and the examples cited above, and seeks in response to problematise the text and the naïve interpretation of the text. Such problematising of the biblical text precludes taking the text at face value as the "Word of God," but does not seem to offer any alternative in its place. The academy has succeeded, for the most part, only in problematising and in the process minimising, if not eradicating, the biblical canon from having any kind of role to play in human society.

The critical perspective, often marginalised by the church, offered by the academy is an important voice, especially on the issue of gender identity. The academy, however, has returned the favour and has succeeded in silencing the voice of the church. Perhaps the failure of both these institutions is the failure to recognise not only the difference in purpose for which each exists, but also the failure to recognise in a self-reflexive way that each, whether church or academy, has effectively rendered the other as *other*. The binary of male and

53 Nadar, "Palatable Patriarchy," 555.
54 Nadar, "Palatable Patriarchy," 554.
55 Owino, "'Maleness'," 146.
56 Owino, "'Maleness'," 156.
57 Owino, "'Maleness'," 156.

female, it turns out, is a binary of the church and the academy as well. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge puts it this way,

> Discussion about teaching the Bible in a theological seminary takes place in the midst of considerable strife about the perceived conflicts between the church and the academy. In polemical style the tensions between their values are posed as oppositions. … the extremes are articulated as "the Bible as cultural product" and "the Bible as scripture" or between "historical critical interpretation" and "theological interpretation."[58]

Briggs Kittredge's reflection on the challenges of teaching biblical studies for denominational ministry in the context of the seminary notes that the purpose for which these church affiliated institutions exist is to train leaders of communities of faith, communities "in which the Bible transforms people and institutions."[59] A seminary, she says, "prepares preachers and teachers of the Bible for communities of faith for whom the Bible is scripture, a source of tradition and teaching, and a force to shape its imagination and language."[60]

Stephen Fowl echoes this notion when he notes that the church reads the Bible, interprets these sacred texts, in order to provide "a normative standard for the faith, practice, and worship of Christian communities."[61] This purpose is further nuanced:

> The primary aim in all these different settings and contexts is to interpret scripture as part of their ongoing struggles to live and worship faithfully before the triune God in ways that bring them into deeper communion with God and with others. This means that Christians are called not merely to generate various scriptural interpretations but to embody those interpretations as well.[62]

A clear articulation of the purpose for which preachers and teachers are trained and for which the church exists does not, however, excuse the often hegemonic

58 Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, "Biblical Studies for Ministry: Critical and Faithful Interpretation of Scripture in an Either/or World," in *Transforming Graduate Biblical Education: Ethos and Discipline*, eds. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 294.

59 Briggs Kittredge, "Biblical Studies for Ministry," 293.

60 Briggs Kittredge, "Biblical Studies for Ministry," 294.

61 Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 2.

62 Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 2–3.

and oppressive ways in which the Bible has been read. Indeed, the history of Christianity is replete with examples of how the church has co-opted the Bible in a pre-critical mode as a means to

> justify such acts as genocide, slavery, war, crusades, colonialism, economic plunder, and *gender oppression*. Bible verses were quoted, sermons preached from pulpits, and theses written in theological academic centres to justify barbaric acts that were labelled "Christian missionary zeal" or "righteous indignation." Millions have unjustly died and perished in the name of Jesus and by the hands of those who call themselves his followers.[63]

As De La Torre notes above, the academy does not escape the critique it offers the church. It too has been put into the service of reading and interpreting the biblical text in hegemonic ways. Both the church and the academy are implicated in reading practices that fail to transform society and restore human dignity. In parabolic fashion, then, while the church/academy has been quick to draw attention to the speck in the eye of the academy/church, the church and the academy has failed to remove the log from its own eye.

Most biblical scholarship, while it has been critical of the pre-critical manner in which the church has conducted its reading practices, has also been implicated in reading gender against the binary backdrop. While the binary model for understanding gender identity raises some important questions about the relationship between sexed bodies and gender identity, what emerges as of critical hermeneutical importance is an approach that can perhaps transcend the current debate, or at least offer an alternative perspective. It is to this that we now turn as we attempt to bring the issue of gender identity, especially masculine identity into sharper focus through a postcolonial optic.

3.2 *Post-Critical Hermeneutics: Postcolonial Biblical Criticism as a Third Way*

The value of postcolonial biblical criticism, which first made its appearance in the 1990's[64] is evidenced in its ability to render interpretations of the biblical text that both deconstruct the politically hegemonic aspects of the text and its interpretation. But, it should be noted, postcolonial biblical criticism "is about more than ideology criticism, in that it specifically addresses the silencing of

63 Miguel De La Torre, *Reading from the Margins* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 38.

64 Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, 41.

the Other through the colonial strategy of posing the colonised as the inverse of the coloniser, requiring simultaneously the notion of emptying the colonised world of meaning,"[65] and as we will show in the recent work on Roman imperial ideology, the coloniser often casts the colonised as having a compromised gender identity.

Postcolonial biblical criticism is not only marked by deconstructing hegemonic hermeneutical practices. It is also marked by its attempt to present constructive counternarratives that "go beyond the narrow and restricted confines of theoretical parameters and the academic environment and to see a *connection between scholarly commitment and active involvement*."[66] Jeremy Punt pushes this notion still further when he offers a sobering post-critical voice on the matter:

> Globally, imperialism, neocolonialism and Eurocentrism are alive and well, and seldom denied, if not always acknowledged as such. The legitimating and totalising discourse of the Bible and its reception histories are also implicated in these hegemonies of imperialism. Postcolonial biblical interpretation provides the opportunity to investigate this entanglement of the biblical [*sic*] with colonising discourse and practice. Moreover, a postcolonial reading allows one to search for "alternative hermeneutics while thus overturning and dismantling colonial perspectives. What postcolonialism does is to enable us to question the totalising tendencies of European reading practices and interpret the texts on our own terms and read them from our own specific locations." In Africa, discursive imperialism bolstered by the Christianity project with a co-opted Bible was and is still rife, where "imperial travelling agents employ texts to subjugate geographical spaces, to colonise the minds of native inhabitants, and to sanitise the conscience of colonising nations."[67]

The search for "alternative hermeneutics" does not in and of itself solve the ongoing problem of reading the biblical text in hegemonic ways, it merely

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65 Jeremy Punt, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa: Some Mind and Road Mapping," *Neotestamentica* 37, no. 1 (2003): 59–85, here 63. Cf. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, 12, where the notion of critically representing the "other" is unpacked.

66 Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, 20, italics added.

67 Jeremy Punt, "Hebrews," in *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 338, Kindle.

serves to draw attention to this tendency. The dismantling and overturning happens not in the naming and shaming, but in the move towards the other, even the other guilty of reading the biblical text in hegemonic ways. To attempt a dismantling and overturning that simply pronounces judgment on the perpetrators of such diabolic and oppressive readings of scripture does nothing more than to cast out and to establish one's self as the new authoritative voice, the new centre.

Truth-telling must happen, but it must happen in ways that do not perpetuate the replacement of one hegemonic system with another. To read through postcolonial lenses, is to read towards restoring human dignity, to read transformationally, which we submit is to read openly, to read in the public space where both the church and the academy can wrestle with the realities of life in a post-apartheid South Africa.

Postcolonial biblical criticism, therefore, does not simply problematise the biblical text, it seeks to offer alternative readings of the text – however thick, layered and conflicted the text may be – that generates life. Joseph Marchal's attempt to draw feminist and postcolonial biblical criticism together because of their shared vision for liberation argues that "feminism should lead to a *substantial transformation of society*" which he links "to other struggles against systemic forms of oppression," and that "feminists [and postcolonial biblical critics] can and should work toward significant changes in the world."[68] Or as Marchal goes on to state it more explicitly, "both (feminism and postcolonialism) are seeking to critique oppressive forms and construct liberating options for the future."[69] Punt articulates it this way:

> A postcolonial study concerns itself with social formation and analysis as well as cultural production, and it is therefore an attempt to rewrite history. More than that, but not excluding the attempt at rewriting history, *postcolonialism posits a reflective modality which allows for a critical rethinking (thinking "through" and therefore "out of") of historical imbalances and cultural inequalities which were established by colonialism*.[70]

Marchal also proposes that Schüssler Fiorenza's *kyriarchy* proves to be a helpful catch-all term that

68 Joseph A. Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven: Women, Gender, and Empire in the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 7, Kindle.

69 Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven*, 9.

70 Punt, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa," 61, italics added.

> [h]ighlights how multiple and mutually influential structures of domination and subordination function together in pyramidal relations determined not only by sexism, but also by racism, classism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, colonialism, nationalism, and militarism. Thus, a feminist project that focuses its efforts on recognising, critiquing, and resisting kyriarchal structures (and their multiple effects) should find common cause with postcolonial efforts that grapple with gender, sexuality, and status alongside and within racial, ethnic, imperial, and colonial formations.[71]

Because the colonial/imperial project often constructed identity in ways that cast the colonised as barbarous, uncivilised, and a host of other binary opposites, postcolonial biblical criticism offers a new angle of vision, a critical rethinking, on male gender identity, especially within the South African context where gender identity is still constructed around binaries. Sugirtharajah notes that "transgressing the contrastive way of thinking" is one of the key themes/activities of postcolonialism:

> The binary categorisations include coloniser/colonised, centre/margins, modern/traditional, and static/progressive. It [postcolonialism] queries the presences of such dualistic thinking, and applies deconstructive techniques to show that though the histories and orientations of colonised and coloniser are distinct, they overlap and intersect. It encourages productive crossings between the two.[72]

The rewriting of history from a postcolonial perspective cannot result in a history that writes out the coloniser. While postcolonial biblical criticism seeks to *represent* the voice of the Other, the colonised, it must do so with reference to the coloniser who engages in the process of *othering*. Identity, as in all contexts, is negotiated. The coloniser needs the colonised for its own sense of identity, but by the same token, the identity of the colonised is now inextricably bound to the relationship between coloniser and colonised. Stephen D. Moore, employing Homi Bhabha frames it this way, "the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised is characterised by simultaneous attraction and repulsion, which is to say *ambivalence*."[73] In other words, the rewriting of the

71 Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven*, 6.

72 Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, 15.

73 Stephen D. Moore, "Critical Perspectives on Postcolonial Theory," in *The Colonised Apostle: Paul Through Postcolonial Eyes*, ed. Christopher D. Stanley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 11.

history of the other is a rewriting of the history of a now hybridised identity, identity "as hyphenated, fractured, multiple and multiplying, 'a complex web of cultural negotiation and interaction, forged by imaginatively redeploying the local and the imported elements.'"[74] Moore argues that hybridity "is never a simple synthesis or syncretic fusion of two originally discrete cultures, since a culture can never be pure, prior, original, unified, or self-contained but is always already infected by impurity, secondariness, mimicry, self-splitting, and alterity."[75] By rewriting history, postcolonial biblical criticism also attempts to affirm the agency of the colonised in the present.[76]

South African hermeneutics is important as an emerging theological voice within the academy, exerting a critical influence that challenges the global North to reconsider the Other voice. Moore puts it this way:

> While the locus of lived Christianity has moved decisively to the global South, the North continues to be the sanctioned training ground for academic biblical scholars, but students from the South in European or North American universities all too often experience their training in terms of arid irrelevance and even continued colonisation. Making biblical scholarship more relevant to a large portion of the planet's population is not the least significant benefit of postcolonial biblical criticism, whatever it is destined to become.[77]

As such, postcolonial biblical criticism presents an opportunity for the academy and the church to engage in the *contact zone* as "an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures," and we may add, theological and hermeneutical disjunctures, "and whose trajectories now intersect."[78] Of course, the notion of a *contact zone* is not, as Marchal notes, "meant to indicate a happy or uncomplicated exchange between equals; rather, it involves 'conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.'"[79] It is clear that both the church and the academy have an interest in gender identity, whether male or female, and that this interest represents an intersecting of trajectories.

74 Punt, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa," 66.
75 Moore, "Critical Perspectives on Postcolonial Theory," 11.
76 Punt, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa," 66.
77 Moore, "Critical Perspectives on Postcolonial Theory," 23.
78 Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven*, 95.
79 Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven*, 95.

We ask whether it is possible in the *contact zone* of the church and the academy, especially through the postcolonial lens, to generate an understanding of male gender identity with possibilities. Susan B. Abraham sums up the importance and value of postcolonialism when she writes:

> What postcoloniality advances for critical thinking is an analysis of conditions of unequal power that is not limited to the historical phenomenon of European colonialism over the past five hundred years. Consequently, postcolonial theory cannot be said to have a clearly identifiable object of analysis, since it engages in local and global critiques of power while seeking to represent, recognise, or subordinate agency. Precisely because it presents materialist critiques of power, postcolonial studies must remain both oppositional and self-critical.[80]

Moving beyond offering a critique of how gender has been constructed, either textually or socially, we offer in the final section of our essay an attempt to rethink gender identity with reference to the importance of hermeneutics in the context of the church and the academy.

4 Gender Identity Critically Re-Imagined

In this, our final, section we look to critically re-imagining gender identity in an open system in which there is fluidity and flexibility in the process of renegotiating gender identity. As a means of drawing the essay to a close, we briefly survey the *Paul in Critical Contexts* series, which we suggest presents some good examples of a post-critical (postcolonial) engagement with the biblical text, with some mixed results, but which moves beyond the church / academy impasse on gender identity.

4.1 *Exclusion and Embrace: A Hermeneutic of Suspicion and Retrieval*

The central question with which this paper has been occupied, is how we – as individuals and communities – can read the biblical text so as to re-imagine gender identities, as open to the *other*. We have argued that the church, in its pre-critical hermeneutical mode, constructs gendered roles which are static

80 Susan B. Abraham, "Critical Perspectives on Postcolonial Theory," in *The Colonised Apostle: Paul Through Postcolonial Eyes*, ed. Christopher D. Stanley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 32, Kindle.

and inflexible. The academy on the other hand, in its critical approach reads for deconstruction. This process, however, while essential in underscoring power and ideological idiosyncrasies, does not articulate or offer any counter-hegemonic discourses. Moreover, it is our contention that the biblical text will continue to exercise an authoritative voice within communities of faith and that the academy and church must therefore begin to listen and learn from one another, in the contact zone, if we are to make significant inroads into justice. Nadar argues that if gender violence is to be eradicated, the task of deconstructing and re-constructing masculinity belongs both to the academy and "popular" society.[81] She further asserts that, "[i]f serious academic reflection on masculinity is not 'translated' for men who are searching for positive masculinities, then Angus Buchan's mighty men will continue to flourish at the expense of wo/men."[82] As we have also argued, gender negotiation is complex and ongoing. Morrell argues that masculinity is not dominantly constructed by discourses. Rather, he notes that the construction of masculinities also exists in a complex interplay between "emotion, labour and work relations, family and other organisational structures, in disease and health."[83] While these comments focus specifically on men, it is clear from our discussion that these factors are true for gender identity in general.

If gender identity constructions are not only affected by structures and discourses, but also exist as vernacular expressions (as we have seen with men in post-apartheid South Africa), then what reading strategies can be employed to maintain stable gender identities, but simultaneously be open to the *other*? What kind of hermeneutic is required to take seriously power relations reflected in the text and in the interpretations of the text, but then also articulate gender identities which are embracing? Part of the difficulty, of course, is that the biblical text can easily be read in ways which construe gender identity as closed and exclusive. A deconstructionalist approach, however, often eradicates any normative discourses, important for identity formation. As part of moving toward such strategies, we find Miroslav Volf's notion of "exclusion" instructive and will use it heuristically.[84] Volf argues that the bedrock of modern Western democracy is based on practices of superlative forms of acceptance and inclusion.[85] Considering post-structuralist theories, specifically those of Foucault, Volf notes:

81 Nadar, "Palatable Patriarchy," 559.
82 Nadar, "Palatable Patriarchy," 559.
83 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 22.
84 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.
85 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 58–62.

> The pathos of his critique of the shadow narrative of exclusion is the obverse of a deep longing for inclusion – his own, radical kind of inclusion. The unmasking of "binary divisions," "coercive assignments," and of the "power of normalisation" all seek to broaden the space of the "inside" by storming the walls that protect it.[86]

This kind of inclusion, then, seeks to remove all boundary markers and all senses of normalisation. While this kind of approach has appealed to many in the academy, Volf asks a pertinent question: "Does not such radical indeterminacy undermine from within the idea of inclusion?"[87] In an affirmative move he argues:

> Without boundaries we will be able to know only what we are fighting against but not what we are fighting for. Intelligent struggle against exclusion demands categories and normative criteria that enable us to distinguish between repressive identities and practices that should be subverted and nonrepressive ones that should be affirmed.[88]

Moreover he continues to assert that the nonexistence of boundaries does not preclude exclusion, rather it signifies the "end of life."[89] Drawing on Manfred Frank, Volf substantiates by noting that such a ["non-ordered"] existence will always be indistinguishable, where "neither happiness nor pleasure, neither freedom nor justice can be indentified."[90] For Volf, then, boundaries are essential to ordering life. By insisting on boundaries Volf is not advocating for parochial exclusionary practices. Instead, for Volf boundaries are essential for healthy inclusion. He demonstrates this by relating it to the self:

> The human self is formed not through a simple rejection of the other – through a binary logic of opposition and negation – but through a complex process of "taking in" and "keeping out." We are who we are because we are separate and connected, both distinct and related; the boundaries that mark our identities are both barriers and bridges.[91]

86 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 62.
87 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 63.
88 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 63.
89 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 63.
90 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 63.
91 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 63.

Hence the self is always inextricably bound to the other but never collapses into an anonymous amalgamation. Similarly then, our reading strategies cannot negate all boundaries. It cannot be so inclusive that it validates forms of gender identity which oppresses, infringes upon or violates other forms. Our reading of the biblical text must then insist upon inclusion, which must always result in justice and equality. In order to read for legitimate inclusion, practices of exclusion must also be maintained. Volf proposes that for this kind of exclusion to result in healthy (that is, for social well-being) inclusionary practices, it must meet two stipulations.[92] First, it must "name exclusion as evil with confidence because it enables us to imagine nonexclusionary boundaries."[93] Second, such practices "must not dull our ability to detect the exclusionary tendencies in our own judgement and practices,"[94] hence the importance of reflexivity on the part of both the church and the academy. Moreover, such reading does not, then, only seek to exclude oppressive and violent agencies, but also seeks to underscore our own social locations, which are always important, especially when considering gender identity. It is precisely for this reason that postcolonial biblical criticism offers a significant insight into the importance of social location, though the construction of the other with reference to social location, whether in terms of gender or politics, or economics, etc., is never a straightforward matter.

For gender identities then to be re-imagined around openness and fluidity, it must be intentional about such exclusionary practices. Since gender identity is influenced by multifarious factors and forces, we come back to our initial question about reading for the other. Of course there is no one reading strategy, rather reading for openness to the other must be based on exclusion of oppressive forms of gender identity. This, however, can only be contextually negotiated.

A possible reading strategy that takes social location seriously and provides a platform for engaging the question of gender identity is *contextual Bible study*. It is envisioned that making use of the CBS approach with a group of men could lead to an interesting and fruitful conversation around what it means to be men and how men can read the Bible in ways that allows for a more open, flexible notion of masculine gender identity to emerge. CBS draws together the important role of the academy (with its critical mode of textual engagement) and the church (with its, often, pre-critical mode of textual engagement) on this issue,

92 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 64.
93 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 64.
94 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, 64*.

but can also be supplemented by the important work in postcolonial biblical criticism which, as we have suggested, moves beyond the pre-critical/critical impasse to a post-critical, second naïveté.

We turn now to briefly surveying the *Paul in Critical Contexts* series, highlighting the postcolonial approach of this series, especially with reference to relocating Paul within a quite specific social location, from which we draw some possible avenues for engaging the gender identity question in the post-apartheid South African context.

4.2 *Paul Critically Re-Imagined*

The *Paul in Critical Contexts* series claims to offer "cutting-edge reexaminations of Paul through the lenses of power, gender, and ideology." The series is currently comprised of ten volumes. While each of the volumes in the series attempts to explore Paul's letters within the context of the Roman Empire, employing a postcolonial optic to do so, the outcomes of each range from presenting Paul as working towards creating anti-imperial communities who seek in their communal life to subvert the empire, to presenting Paul as emperor-like figure who simply reinscribes Roman imperial ideology.

The series is a good example of postcolonial biblical criticism that creates options for re-imagining gender identity, not because each of the volumes addresses this issue explicitly, but because the hermeneutical trajectory of each illustrates wider possibilities for reading Paul and for reading gender identity.

One example in particular is noteworthy, Davina C. Lopez's contribution, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission*.[95] Lopez notes in her preface the range of responses to Paul's letters: "Some love Paul, some hate him, and hardly anyone is neutral about him. Misogynist, homophobic, racist, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, elitist – Paul seems to serve as a mirror for our own anxieties about religion, politics, domination, and justice."[96] She then moves to articulate the purpose of the book, "this book seeks to re-imagine Paul's consciousness and communities as critically liberationist in orientation and transformative in potential."[97]

For Lopez, Paul should not just be tossed aside, but she does not simply propose a rehabilitation of Paul either. Instead, she seeks to

95 Davina C. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

96 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, xi.

97 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, xi.

> re-imagine Paul as occupying a vulnerable, subversive social position of solidarity among others and as part of a useable past for historically dominated and marginalised peoples in the present. Such attention to the past is not in the service of what some might dismiss as a rehabilitation of Paul and old Pauline hierarchies. I contend that it is a critical re-reading of Paul, and not the refusal to read Paul, that is actually a more potent tool for holding dominant and oppressive interpretations of Paul accountable for injustices. Blaming Paul for various tenacious damages takes some of the weight off of our shoulders for unfortunate histories of Pauline interpretation, particularly around contemporary political issues, where marginalised peoples are made more so. Building what seems unimaginable at this contemporary juncture – a more just human and earth community – is largely why I attempt to re-imagine Paul.[98]

Lopez's commitment to still do business with Paul and his letters, especially since Paul has often been at the centre of hegemonic and oppressive readings is refreshing. Her re-reading of Paul, in typical postcolonial fashion, draws on a wide range of disciplines and results in a thickly textured reading of Paul, especially by drawing attention to Paul's compromised gender identity as it is reflected in Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Moreover, Lopez is interested not just in a critical re-imagination of Paul, but seeks "a viable future, a future that does not stop with acceptance and tolerance for the marginalised. It is a hope for another world and the excavation of a New Testament that gives a glimpse at hope for that world."[99]

That viable future is a future that has far-reaching implications for how we understand gender construction and seeks to call into question the church with its fixed, static understanding of gender, the academy with its tendency only to problematise the question and consequently to exclude the role of the Bible on this issue. Lopez's reading, then, continues to emphasise the place of the biblical text, but in her presentation of Paul, works through the often ambiguous layers, both within the text and within the history of reception of the text, to uncover a Paul that is cast with the *others*, a Paul that is in solidarity with the poor, the impoverished, "those who are the subjects, not objects, of biblical consciousness."[100] And,

98 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, xii.

99 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, xiv.

100 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission*, xv.

> by going to the defeated nations and meeting them where they are – in the dominated places all over Roman territory – Paul recognises their humanity in a context that has chronic dehumanisation as divine mandate. In our own context of chronic dehumanisation orchestrated by divinely ordained empire, and in our own acceptance of its terms in many subtle and often undetected ways, I ask us to be challenged again and again by Pauline imagination.[101]

Lopez establishes her case for Paul's identification and solidarity with the other by looking to the powerful sculptural programme employed by the Roman Empire. It is her contention, as it is Briggitte Kahl's,[102] that art, architecture, sculpture, and inscriptions are important intertexts for making sense of the New Testament. Moreover, these visual aids in the first-century are perhaps the only mode, given the low levels of literacy, of conveying, and in the process shaping the colony, the ideology of the empire. Of significance for Lopez is the manner in which the defeated nations are depicted in Roman sculpture. She writes, "The nations, who had been defeated and enslaved by Roman military power, were displayed as part of the sculptural programme of a public space honouring the emperors as gods."[103]

Against this visual backdrop, Lopez contends that

> [i]f we examine Paul's rhetoric in light of such images, we can see that his "good news" to the nations is that they no longer are captive and enslaved to a victorious general or raped and killed by divine emperors, but are (re-)born as children of Abraham and belong to the God who brought the Israelites (and others) out of Egypt.[104]

Surveying the images of the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias, Lopez fixes our gaze on the conquered, defeated nations' *female* bodies, which she argues lies at the heart of Roman imperial visual representation, "notably personifications of conquered nations as women's racially specific bodies, sometimes in poses of deference toward Roman emperors or soldiers."[105] Thus, her trained eye guides us away from what she calls "idealist" scholarly approaches to Paul that simply

101 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission*, xv.

102 Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), Kindle.

103 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, 2.

104 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, 3.

105 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, 17.

cast the Gentiles as a theological category and proposes, instead, “a gender-critical re-imagination of Paul as apostle to the defeated nations as part of a non-idealist framework that draws on elements from contemporary empire-critical, postcolonial, feminist, and queer theoretical contributions.”[106]

Lopez is thus able to “contend that, when examined in light of Roman imperial ideology, Paul’s mission to the nations [read: feminised, gender-compromised bodies] emerges not as a direct parallel, or even as an oppositional rhetoric, but as a counter-hegemonic discourse of exemplary imagination.”[107]

Imperial visual representation of conquered, defeated nations embodied in feminine bodies is ubiquitous and Lopez is able to draw a rich catalogue of images and archaeological artefacts together to carry her argument. One such example is the *Judea Capta* coin, of which Lopez writes:

> The coin captures the point well enough: Roman forces have defeated and *feminised* (i.e., placed in the subordinate female role) the people of Judea. Such feminisation articulates a position of lowliness and humiliation in a Roman-defined, male-dominated hierarchy. The people are a passive, penetrated object; they are rendered harmless by defeat and disarmament. The nations’ collective femininity is not only humiliating, but contributes to the definition and reinforcement of Roman masculinity. The soldier appears as a real man. Allusions to penetration and domination emphasise and reinforce his prowess. In this respect, the positioning of his dagger in his groin area appears to be no accident. This representation of territorial conquest thus renders as naturalised a potent pattern of gender relations.[108]

Through Paul’s identification with the conquered, defeated nations, feminised as they are through imperial visual representation, Lopez is able to suggest that

> [b]ecoming like Paul means giving up the dynamics of domination symbolised by impenetrable imperial masculinity, unveiling a larger umbrella of patriarchal power relationships. Disidentification with such hierarchy includes (re)turning to identification with the other, feminised, nations destined to be conquered by the Romans.[109]

106 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, 8.
107 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, 18.
108 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, 37–38.
109 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, 141.

Lopez continues: "Paul's masculinity changes from dominant to non-dominant and undergoes further shift toward femininity in Galatians."[110] It is this shift which signals for us the possibility of reading the biblical text with a hermeneutic that can move beyond the pre-critical, and idealist, lens that fixes gender identity, and towards a more flexible notion of gender identity, whether of male or female.

The world of Paul, the Roman world in which "the Romans represented themselves as the hyper-manly chosen race, destined to enact a specific fate for all the nations: conquest, capture, and domination,"[111] represented in clearly gendered ways, where masculinity, of a quite specific kind, wins the day through effeminising the other, is a world not too different from our own. Lopez's reading, we suggest, offers a postcolonial understanding of Paul and his identification with the feminised other that is truly able to break the carapace of binary gender identities in a post-apartheid South Africa. In the closing section of our essay, we venture into the new frontier of moving beyond the gendered lens, not in the hope of conquering and claiming, but in the hope of transfiguring and thereby liberating the many who do not measure up to the normative, universal notion of masculine identity.

4.3 *Moving Beyond the Gendered Lens: Dialectics of Power*

Ultimately this essay is concerned with gender equality in a post-apartheid South Africa. We have tried to unpack the complexities around gender construction in light of how we read the biblical text. For true equality and justice however, we believe it imperative that hermeneutics moves beyond the gendered lens. This move does not hail the absence of gender nor does it render gender construction insignificant, rather it seeks to place true gender inequality into sharper focus.

Any discussion on gender must also relate to power distribution across all macro and micro levels. Power relationships, however, are never situated along a strict gendered binary. That is, men do not simply exercise power over women as passive recipients. Quoting Stolen and Vaa, Morrell notes:

> For a long time, and especially in women's studies, power has been considered as repressive only. Women were claimed to be victims of the exercise of power by men. … However, the fact that women often agree with

110 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, 141.

111 Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, 165.

> practices that subordinate them, that they resist the exercise of power, and that there often exists friendly relationships between women and men, cannot be understood in terms of the exclusively repressive view on power.[112]

Power relations must then always be understood dialectically if we are to be truly attentive to gender inequality. Moreover, Morrell observes that only such an outlook "allows us to get beyond the *oppositional* binary in analysis and politics."[113] Just as gender identity is complex and fluid, so too is power relations. Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon correctly observe that many white women were in large parts benefactors of colonial structures.[114] Drawing on Johnson, they aptly note: "White women from colonial powers have both in the past and currently benefitted from the imperialist project and the economic structures of globalisation which followed it."[115] While these comments directly relate to macro socio-political structures, they further contend that such inequalities are present in "everyday" exchanges when "privileged women construct their femininity with clothes manufactured in sweatshops around the world."[116] It is clear then that power must be examined contextually and cannot be assumed to exist along a constructed gendered binary. If our hermeneutical practices are to shape and be shaped by both the church and the academy, we must begin to be sensitive to such dialectical power relationships. Morrell concisely summarises:

> Where research is sensitive to difference and to power inequalities but does not presume that these inequalities will determine gender relations and allows for the possibility that men and boys, women and girls will use accommodation, collaboration, compromise and negotiation in a process of power-sharing then the possibilities of working meaningfully for gender equity are greatly strengthened.[117]

112 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 22.
113 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 22.
114 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 75.
115 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 75.
116 Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, *Theorising Gender*, 75.
117 Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, 23.

5 Conclusion

The church in its pre-critical hermeneutical mode has silenced out the important, though critical, voice of the academy on the issue of gender identity. Consequently, it has presented a view of masculine identity, in particular, that is oppressive precisely because it is a narrative that universalises a narrow understanding of gender identity only with reference to the Bible, and a particular reading of the Bible at that. The academy in its critical hermeneutical mode has offered a thickly textured understanding of gendered identity that results in a fragmented and differentiated notion of how gender identity is constructed. In the process, it has also excluded the voice of the church. In fact, both the church and the academy have effectively *othered* each other, and by doing so have simply engaged in a colonising project of their own. For this reason, we have argued that postcolonial biblical criticism offers a way forward not only in reference to the question of gender identity, but a way forward for both the church and academy to meet in the contact zone from which gender identity can be reconfigured, re-imagined, and renegotiated. Postcolonialism also presents a way forward for the structuralist/post-structuralist impasse by showing how these two approaches vis-à-vis gender identity though highlighting different aspects of gender construction, together contribute to a more nuanced understanding that enables us to appreciate that the human self, the gendered self, the economic and the political self is a self that is thick, layered, conflicted and often contested.

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