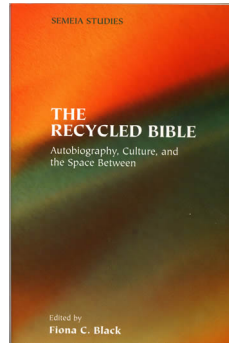


○ **REVIEW OF FIONA BLACK (ED.), *THE RECYCLED BIBLE: AUTOBIOGRAPHY, CULTURE AND THE SPACE BETWEEN***

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There are 8 articles in this collection, introduced and edited by Fiona Black, and discussed by Erin Runions and George Aichele. All in all it is a slender, but sophisticated and thought-provoking volume, which touches upon many aspects of self, Christianity, and Bible. It also contains a number of disclosures, not to mention surprises. The rich nature of each article, as well as the thorough responses given by Runions and Aichele means that I have chosen two articles to engage with at length, thus completely bypassing the work of Krause (I really liked that one, though, with Pastorals as a mimo-textual Pauline hypertext), Wilson (that one too – I love what he does with gender and the three Marys), Pippin (am still haunted by it and thinking of lambs, God, Jesus and consensual cannibalism), Pypier (emphasises the imagination in the reader as a child or what the child reads or how the biblical text is a parent) and Black (gender patterns in Song of Songs); and only vaguely deploying that of Boer (leaving out the awful jokes).

After finishing Tina Pippin's article on vampires and the bread of life discourse in John, I turned to the next in the volume: James Smith's article 'Outside In: Diabolical portraits'. Compared to Pippin's, which was brief, provocative and to the point, Smith's is 40 pages long, with different fonts and a number of illustrations. Admittedly, I groaned inwardly at the length but forced myself to get going. After I finished, I resolved to hunt down whatever else he had written, as soon as I came within 5 metres of an internet connection. Smith masterfully weaves in and out of childhood memories, issues of belonging, as well as writing an article on autobiographical criticism using the devil as the red thread. Smith has inserted a dialogue between the scholar Jamie and his demon, Esbeelbezub into childhood memories of growing up with the devil, his brother's suicide, analyses of Simpson episodes, and various evangelical Christian engagements with the devil. The dialogue discusses the prolegomena to this article, such as some of the problems

with getting started, autobiographical criticism and its position within or outside of conventional biblical studies and the illusion of the stable self. This ‘outside-in’ topic is what seems to govern the article. It underlies the discussion of whether autobiographical criticism is outside biblical scholarship, or really contained within it, with the position of non-institutional against-the-system scholarship being a false speaking position. This echoes Smith’s observations on the presence of the devil within Christian congregations as a means of defining and sustaining the Christian identity while this very presence ‘belies the stability between devil and church’ (119). Smith’s brother, Gary, embodies this position between inside and outside, ending up killing himself because he could not beat Satan.

Ela Nutu’s article, ‘Red Herrings in Bullet-Time: The Matrix, the Bible, and the Postcommunist I’ is also heavily autobiographical. The subtexts of Nutu’s narrative are communist Romania and Christianity. Both subtexts seem to be the reason why she refuses to see the Bible as ‘the operative subtext’ of *The Matrix*. For Nutu, the struggle against the Matrix in *The Matrix* is political, while Christianity is not. Thus Nutu sees Jean Baudrillard’s theory of neocapitalist operational simulation and its aim at total control as the subtext, control being the operative word. In this way, she can draw parallels between communist Romania and the Matrix of *The Matrix* and thus identify with the Resistance in the movie and grasp the political allusions because her life has ‘been taken through the Iron fist of Control and for whom overthrowing such a system has a precedent’ (85). Westerners – by contrast – can only see the spiritual elements, and thus blindly connect the movie with the Bible. However, although Nutu is dismissive of the relevance of the Bible to the movie, Christianity is never far away at a personal level, as George Aichele also observes in his response (196). Christianity, in fact, is that which provides Nutu with an identity, which enables her to resist or rather transcend the apparently rigid demands of communist identity (82).

As Fiona Black’s introduction, Erin Runions’ response, and Roland Boer and James Smith’s articles discuss, there are some methodological issues inherent in autobiographical criticism. The execution of autobiographical criticism lays claim to an interpretation as completely subjective and thus irrefutable; or, as Boer states, there is an implicit claim to truth (60). And whatever is within this sphere of the I is beyond criticism, especially when it comes to devastating experiences, such as the suicide of one’s brother or the horrors of war. As Boer puts it: ‘most of us hesitate for a moment or two before responding, especially where the writer seems to be speaking about the deeply personal’ (60). Accordingly, it is exactly when the writers become most intimate and genuine, that our suspicions should be at their sharpest and ask why the personal voice is invoked in this interpretation (61) or in the slightly more aggressive version, why the self is constructed or fabricated like this (61)? But in engaging with Smith and Nutu, this is where Boer’s first mentioned observation kicks in. My brother has thankfully not killed himself, nor have I grown up within Communist Romania. So yes, I do hesitate before launching into probing the I’s of Smith and Nutu. But only for a moment.

Nutu has, as mentioned above, driven a wedge in between Christianity and *The Matrix* and instead foregrounded *The Matrix*’s affinities with communist Romania, which gives her a privileged insight into the true meaning of the movie. Taken to the extreme, this means that only people who have grown up in totalitarian states can understand the political innuendo of the movie. When Nutu then notes that *The Matrix* is the bestselling DVD in Britain, may we then assume that the Brits have not understood what the movie really is about, or should we place

ourselves on an Agambenesque ‘threshold of indistinction’ between democracy and totalitarianism? Nutu’s achievement to uncover the real subtext of the movie (Baudrillard) behind all the biblical red herrings seems to be a way of reinserting a divide between high and low culture, or rewriting a popular cultural text through an advanced theoretical apparatus, available for the few – of which Nutu is a part. Another problem is that Nutu relies on Christianity to make her point. If Neo and his posse can see behind the Matrix to the true real, through a freeing of the mind, then Nutu realises her resistance position to the Communist regime within a Christian identity. Thus Nutu seems to see herself as Neo, freeing her mind and letting herself be embraced by Christianity. Here it does for a brief moment sound like Christianity and not the Communist matrix is that from which one needs unplugging (which I think is what Runions is getting at (186)). But then again, Nutu’s conception of Christianity seems to be robbed of any connection to the world, to politics and to control, and thus is the most suspicious of the lot, especially the Neo-orthodox version of Christianity with its sheer and spiritual truth which for Nutu seems to be the Real behind the Matrix. With these spectacles I can see why there is no place for the Bible in Nutu’s matrix. As Aichele aptly puts it, paraphrasing Hugh Pyper’s article from this volume: ‘Nutu is willing to play with the movie but not with the Bible’ (196).

Smith’s I is thrown around on another threshold, that of the inside and outside group. And Gary, his brother, seems to embody this threshold, as mentioned above. However Gary’s inside-outside position, which at first glance seems to be entirely theological, is also underscored in a fleshy sense, as that of belonging and not-belonging to the family of exorcists. Gary was Smith’s adopted brother, which is mentioned a number of times (103, 111), in contrast to Smith’s sister, who is only mentioned as sister (108, 140), but never in the same segment as Gary. In one of the stories embedded in the article, we find Gary disturbing Smith in the middle of a Scooby Doo show, where the younger brother was staging a house haunted by evil spirits and ghosts to scare off the older brother. Smith concludes that ‘the outside was the inside all along’ (111). In the staging of the story of Gary, the inside was the outside all along. Gary is always the one from outside, who came in. So, if we look at how this has a bearing on the production of the I, then Gary’s outsider status is emphasised alongside his battle with Satan, and thus becomes yet another way for Smith to keep Satan at arms length, or keeping the inside free from evil, for now, because as it is clear throughout the article, this is an ongoing struggle.

If I had never read this article, and ran into James A. Smith and he told me, over a beer, that his (adopted) brother Gary had killed himself, I would hardly respond in the same manner as I have above. But when lives and bodies, dead or alive, are transformed into text, and embedded within a critical framework they are out there to be discussed and criticised. And as Jamie says to Esbeelsebub, it is the appearance of vulnerability that is the most dangerous: the more open the text appears the more closed it is (114–16).

Nutu and Smith write their interpretations into experiences into their interpretations and so on. In the same breath that the interpretations are made subjective, the traumatic experiences are made text, they are flattened, laid bare, decontextualised, depersonalised. And insisting on a suspicion of the traumatic seems to me somehow dehumanised, dehumanising, and yet necessary.