**Asian and Asian-American Hermeneutics / Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible / Minoritized Criticism and Biblical Interpretation**
**Joint Session With:**Ethnic Chinese Biblical Colloquium, Asian and Asian-American Hermeneutics, Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible, Minoritized Criticism and Biblical Interpretation
**11/25/2019**
**4:00 PM to 6:30 PM**
**Room:** 33A (Upper Level East) - Convention Center

Theme: *Celebrating Gale Yee*

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I. Introduction:

Allow me to begin with a word of thanks to Mary for inviting me to participate in today’s session celebrating Gale Yee and her scholarship. This is quite an honor.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Before I move on to the body of my reflections, allow me to first say a few words about my first encounters with Gale. I first met Gale in the early 1990s when I was a graduate student at Vanderbilt organizing the Social Location Conferences led by Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert. Gale’s paper, “The Author/Text/Reader and Power Suggestions for a Critical Framework for Biblical Studies,” from that conference appeared into the two-volume work on social location hermeneutics that many are familiar with here today.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since then, I have been particularly drawn to Gale’s cultural and Asian-American hermeneutics as a Latinx cultural critic of the biblical text. Her hermeneutics provides, for sure, an alternative vision of society (both past and present) and turns the spotlight on Asian Americans’, especially Chinese Americans’, history and culture and how such rich and diverse history uncovers the tropes of power hidden in and between the layers of texts.

Also, allow me to say a few words about my aims today.

I recently returned to a reading by Gale that explores the intersection of the Bible and the politics of belonging. It is from this reading that I will launch my critical reflections today. The reading I am speaking about is an essay that appeared in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* edited by Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, entitled “‘She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn’: Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority,” published in 2009.[[3]](#footnote-3) Today, I will refrain from summarizing the essay but focus instead on some other issues that are not only timely, given the hostility toward migrants and minoritized peoples in the United States, but also speak to Gale’s contributions to the field of hermeneutics in taking a critical honest posture, namely, the application of the social location approach that aims to be critically honest in how one reads the past as it re-presents the past and speaks to the present.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this way, Gale Yee has made a significant contribution to the field of biblical studies and interpretation by chipping away at the “wall” dividing the role of the reader from the analysis of a text that has reigned since the rise of modern biblical criticism in the nineteenth century, and, sadly remains in the present.

From a Latinx perspective, Gale’s work has also called attention to an issue that concerns many Latinx interpreters these days and that is the issue of migration, or what I would like to call the politics of belonging and not belonging. Like Gale, many Latinx interpreters were born in the United States despite the political rhetoric and the view that we are simply all foreign-born undocumented migrants just visiting the United States. And similar to Gale and other Asian Americans, the question “where are you from?” also resonates with Latinx critics, for many of us are also asked that question, thus suggesting our roots are somewhere else. Some Latinx might also be seen as the model minority when comments such as “you don’t speak like Latinxs” or you “don’t dress like them.” This is by no means suggesting that what Asian Americans experience and what Latinxs experience are the same, but I, as a Latinx, can relate to these stereotypes. For sure, both communities are very different with respect to our histories, cultures, and how society treats us, as Gale has clearly delineated in her essay “Tears Amid the Alien Corn.”

But I am not here to speak about the similarities and the differences between Asian Americans and the Latinx peoples. I would rather like to speak to the question of Latinx history in relationship to Asian Americans in the southwest borderlands of the United States that I have come to discover in my reading of the U.S. borderlands—the physical and symbolic space between Mexico/Latin America and the United States. I would like to do this, with some trepidation since Asian American studies is not my familiarity, as a way to celebrate Gale’s work in the Academy and society. Such exercise, I hope, will demonstrate how Gale’s work opens the doors to other paths in the field of cultural biblical studies.

**II. Asian-American Migration in Relationship to Latinx Migration**

In reading about the history of migration to the United States, it is not uncommon for people these days to look at this history from the optic of the Latinx populations currently in the nation, especially given the vitriolic rhetoric they have received from President Trump and his political and media allies. However, it would be a mistake in my opinion to think that such rhetoric is new. Many Asian and Chinese Americans have received such rhetoric ever since their arrival in the United States. To understand the history of migration to the United States, one has to examine all ethnic/racial groups entering the United States since the founding of the nation, but not forgetting the Native Americans already present in the United States and the African Americans brought forcibly to the United States. It is quite a task indeed, but a necessary one to maintain a critical narrative of migration to the United States against the uncritical ones out there. In other words, what I am saying is that to understand Latinx migration to the United States one has to understand Asian-American migration to the United States and vice versa. A community’s history is related and connected to how another community is seen and defined as belonging in the nation. This is my working position today. In what remains, allow me to give three historical instances of this position. I do so because this is the work that Gale has done so well when she reads from an Asian-American perspective. She is not only reading for Asian Americans; she is also reading for Latinx communities and all other minoritized and dominatized communities. I would like to reciprocate the gesture, I hope, in a satisfactory way.

**1.** The first historical instance begins with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act—the first law in the United States that codified a racial/ethnic group or national group from immigrating to the United States. Because of this restrictive policy, Chinese immigration was suspended for ten years and those Chinese immigrants already in the country were ineligible for naturalization. Subsequent anti-Chinese immigration laws were passed in 1892 and 1902, with Chinese immigrants finally becoming eligible for naturalization in 1943.[[5]](#footnote-5) What is quite interesting is that with this restrictive policy in place at that time, like restrictive policies today, Chinese immigrants entered the United States through Canada, but also through Mexico, living and working in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands in the late nineteenth century.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is this latter geopolitical space that piqued my interest of the Chinese borderlanders.

Prior to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, many Chinese immigrants entered the United States through the port of San Francisco and other west coast locations, ignited by the California Gold Rush in 1849, but they were soon unwelcomed in the territories where the gold was located. The Chinese were seen as a threat to Anglos competing for the gold and other jobs. Even before the Chinese Exclusion Act went into effect, Chinese immigration was already beginning to show up in the southern U.S. borderlands as result of the hostility along with the sense that they did not belong in California or in the nation. One only needs to peruse the many images by the print media during this period to witness the sentiment of many powerful people’s view of the Chinese immigrant—images that are seared in the minds of many Americans, unfolding into racialized practices and rhetoric toward Chinese immigrants and other Asian immigrants.

As a result, Chinese immigrants would enter the United States through the state of Sonora (Mexico), but many also came to the region through the United States as they built the railroads west into Tucson, Arizona, in the 1880s. They and their children would soon establish “roots” in Tucson and along the Santa Cruz River.[[7]](#footnote-7) They would also make their way to Tombstone and other locales in Arizona and in Mexico—where the border at the time was not strictly enforced (no border patrol until 1924) by the United States.

The history of the Chinese immigrant in the region of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is very rich and too complex to get into the details here. But it is also important to keep in mind that Chinese immigrants and their families also experienced discrimination in the borderlands. Just because they were away from the racialization they experienced in California, for instance, they did not avoid discrimination in the borderlands by both European-Anglo and Mexican borderlanders. When the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882, it was premised on an Anglo-Saxon superiority that extended into the Caribbean and the Pacific and would result in the Spanish American War in 1898.[[8]](#footnote-8) But to understand immigration issues today, the Chinese Exclusion Act is the precursor to many other racialized laws that would restrict immigration to the United States by race and ethnicity.[[9]](#footnote-9) Based on the flourishing nativism of the day, the Chinese Exclusion Act established what Hiroshi Motomura in *Americans in Waiting: The Lost Story of Immigration and Citizenship in the United States*, would call “immigration as contract.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In other words, immigration is seen as a contract; that is, the idea that immigrants are guests (not belonging) to be let in (no matter what their visa status might be), on the condition they are easily evicted.[[11]](#footnote-11) This notion and the reasoning behind it, emanates from the Chinese Exclusion Act, and it remains to this day—applied to many Latin American immigrants. Thus, for many immigrants who are in the United States no matter what their status might be, they are treated as not belonging nor equal to citizens with regard to rights. In other words, immigrants may be treated in dehumanizing ways as were the Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s up to the present.

**2.** One of the issues that Gale brings up in her essay is the question of citizenship, which contributes to the myriad of ways of belonging and not belonging in the United States. Her thinking on this matter prompted me to think about the argument that racial/ethnic groups, and how they are portrayed, are linked across time and space.[[12]](#footnote-12) How one racialized group is portrayed impacts how another racialized group will be seen and seen as either belonging or not belonging. Since the Chinese Exclusion Act, and most likely prior, U.S. born or non-U.S. born Chinese were depicted as sexually deviant. What do I mean? Because of the outright racialized hostility that the Chinese experienced, a community-based economy emerged. The virtual absence of women, excluded because of patriarchal and sexist views about Chinese women, led many Chinese men into the sphere of labor characterized as being for women. Thus, Chinese men were seen as effeminate because of their domestic, laundry, and food service work traditionally assigned to women.[[13]](#footnote-13)

At the same time, Chinese men (U.S. born and immigrants) were also seen as deviant because they lived as “bachelors” and thus not with a woman. And Chinese women of all status were seen as amoral because many were forced into the world of prostitution and thus a threat to moral civil society.[[14]](#footnote-14) These views would be carried over to second generation of Asian-American citizens—yes, it did not matter if they were U.S. citizens. They would all be continually seen as the “perpetual foreigner”—this is a trope that Gale explores in her essay “‘She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn’: Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority.”[[15]](#footnote-15) She calls attention to this past; a past that should not be forgotten and a past surely linked to the present issues of immigration today.

These racialized and sexualized fears were generated because more and more people of Chinese and Japanese descent were perceived as not belonging in the nation. The fear was that they were going to change the way of life of the United States and its composition: from an Anglo-Saxon dominant society toward a new community consisting of Asian Americans. Linked to this sense of not belonging is the history of migration related to Latinx peoples. That is, the nativist sentiments and restrictionist immigration policies applied to Asian immigrations eventually would be applied to Mexican immigrants in the twentieth century to the present. For instance, as sexualization of Asian women was employed, it also happened to women of Mexican descent in the claim that they were having too many children. Besides needing charity from the nation to care for them, if they continued to have too many, they would

overtake the Anglo-Saxon population and way of life. Natalie Molina in *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*, documents this fear in the nation: Molina, quoting C. M. Goethe, California philanthropist, conservationist, and eugenics advocate warns that Mexican women were “a group that is most fecund.”[[16]](#footnote-16) She cites Samuel Homes, a Berkeley zoologist and eugenics advocate who says, “The menial laborers of today produce the citizens of tomorrow.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Race suicide, the fear back in the past toward Asian and Mexican descent women, is no different today from nativist views. Accordingly, the same arguments used to stymy Asian American women as not belonging carries over in time and space with Mexican American women as not belonging then and now.

**3.** One final illustration I wish to speak to that supports the idea that one immigrant group’s history of belonging (or not belonging) is linked to another immigrant community’s sense of belonging in the nation. Returning to the topic of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, another result of this Act was the hiring of 75 Mounted Guards, headquartered in El Paso, Texas, detecting Chinese immigrant and others trying to cross over from Mexico into the U.S.

In 1924, when the U.S. Border Patrol was officially established by the Department of Labor, many of the (Anglo) *supervisors* previously worked as the Mounted Inspectors of the Chinese Division of the United States Immigration Service.[[18]](#footnote-18) And the first (Anglo) men hired as Border Patrol *Inspectors* were transfers from the Mounted Guard of Chinese Inspectors. In fact, 24 of the original 104 border patrolmen (23%) were transfers from the Mounted Guard. All of these new border patrol inspectors were originally hired to enforce the Chinese Exclusion Acts. And the first area where the newly formed U.S. Border Patrol Inspectors were sent to was the southern border of the United States—a border than spans four states, approximately 2000 miles, and binds two nations. By the way, in the 1940s, as a result of the war between the United States and Japan, the scope of the Border Patrol broadened. They were given new responsibilities to transport Japanese Americans to camps and patrol them.

Border Patrol responsibilities gradually expanded, but for the most part remained to determine who belongs and who does not belong in the nation. Along with this continual controlling of access on the part of the Border Patrol comes a certain ideology, an ideology that espoused by political leaders (President Trump) to deter immigration, to deter asylum seekers (actually by Customs and Border Protection) from Latin America and other places, to return immigrants (actually by Immigration and Customs Enforcement)—sending the message to all ethnic/racial groups that they do not belong—even if you are citizens.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**III. Conclusion**

On August 18, 1971, some 40 years ago, U.S. First Lady Pat Nixon visited Border Field State Park—a 372-acre of land in Imperial Beach, California that is about 16 miles from the Convention Center and which I visited on Thursday when I arrived. Mrs. Nixon said, “I hope there won’t be a fence here too long.”[[20]](#footnote-20) First Lady Nixon also shook the hands of some Mexican nationals saying, “I hate to see a fence anywhere.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Imagine First Lady Melania Trump doing this today. The vitriolic reaction she would receive would be immense.

I call attention to this event because such divisions among nations and ethnic/racial groups cannot last—nor should it from an ethical perspective. Gale Yee’s work diminishes “borders.” Her work in Cultural and Asian American Hermeneutics, for me, like Lady Pat Nixon, is a counterscript to the immigration regime pushing racialized and sexualized borders and scripts about the Other. Gale’s work as a counterscript teaches us about the possibilities of transformation when ALL groups who are pursuing a common cause across identity and ideological causes and across citizenship lines. Immigration is not a Latinx issue alone. It cuts across a range of communities. We often fail to link these communities and we often allow these connections to remain hidden. When multiple groups or sessions come together as we have today, the racial scripts that are so deeply embedded in how we do and practice biblical criticism and interpretation are likely to appear. Gale’s scholarship has worked to denaturalize these scripts and, in the process, challenge the dominant narratives and power structures they support. This is what her reading of Ruth from an Asian-American perspective does. It challenges the racial scripts of “perpetual foreigner” and “model minority” that the text advances but also how readers have advanced through the text’s history of scholarship. In exchange, she offers a different reading; a reading that is more nuanced and one that is closer to reality. It is critical honest reading—a reading that does not trivialize the politics of belonging and not belonging, but one that attaches itself to the present, to real people, which includes the analysis of racialization, sexualization, and representation of the Other.

For these reasons, Gale’s work is pioneering and will have a lasting effect upon the field for years to come.

1. This is a work in progress. Please do not cite. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place,* volume 1: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* and Reading from This Place, volume 2: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995a, 1996b). Gale Yee’s essay is found on pages 109–118. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The volume is published by Society of Biblical Literature (Atlanta), 2009, 119–140. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Michel-Rolph Trouilot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of* History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hiroshi Motomura, *Americans in Waiting: The Lost Story of Immigration and Citizenship in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Samuel Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes: The Forgotten History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. H. Motomura, *Americans in Waiting*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Natalia Molina *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014) who advances this line of argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Esther Ngan-Ling Chow, “Family, Economy, and the State: A Legacy of Struggle of Chinese American Woem,” in *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in* America (eds., Silvia Pedraza and Rubén G. Rumbaut; Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996), 110–124. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Molina *How Race Is Made in America:* 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See <https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/along-us-borders/history> where most of this history is documented. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Border Patrol agents are more like surveillance on the border, the Customs Border Protection (CBP) officers work ports of entry, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) work inside the nation to deport undocumented immigrants. They all assist in enforcing the border of the United States and they are all under the Department of Homeland Security. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Quoted in Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2010 [2002]). 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)