Asian American Hermeneutics Response

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Believe me, when I decided to embark on a PhD instead of joining the convent, when I decided after a Masters and five years of the doctorate to move from New Testament to Hebrew Bible, when after fourteen years of undergraduate teaching at a university, moving to graduate teaching at a seminary, after all of this, little did I know that I would become the President of the Society of Biblical Literature. Nor would I have realized after I “came out” as an Asian American Feminist Biblical Scholar in 1994 that I would be the first Asian and woman of color prez. I certainly was not groomed for this position, attending the right grade schools, colleges, and graduate schools. Back when I started teaching in 1984, little did I think I would end up in this particular social location.

But here I am. What you have done for me this afternoon is to make me realize that what I have done for and with students, my colleagues, and my guild did not come from nowhere, but were milestones parts of a journey that took many decades involving very dear relationships, with many who are sitting in this room, dear relationships of support, encouragement, and, in particular, love. I deeply thank the Asian and Asian American Hermeneutics seminar, the Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible Section, and the Minoritized Criticism and Biblical Interpretation Section for this joint program. I was a little stunned when I saw the title of this program, “Celebrating Gale Yee,” because who I am is mainly the result of my long-time relationships with you and the many others I have encountered on my journey. I am really celebrating you! I am very appreciative of the kind words you have offered this afternoon and I wish to respond to them with pleasure.

Dr. Cheryl Anderson asked me to be one of her mentors about twenty years ago. I do remember that I was a little taken aback, wondering Why would anyone want me as a mentor? A little example of internalized oppression here, that erupts in many women of color during the course of their academic journeys. However, it has been with much joy that I have been able to meet her for dinner at our annual SBL meetings, where she mentors me, just as much as I mentor her. Cheryl and I were both consultation members for a two-year project sponsored by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, entitled: “Reading and Teaching the Bible as Black, Asian American and Latino/a Scholars in the U.S.” As its name implies, the project was a geared to create a dialogue among black, Asian American, and Latinx biblical scholars about the problematics of race and ethnicity within other differential relations of power, such as gender, class, and those et ceteras of our discipline. We met in Indiana, I think, in 2004 and 2005, with the intention of creating a minority biblical criticism, where we read the foundational text of the Bible alongside and with each other as minoritized persons. This gathering produced the influential volume, *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (2009).[[1]](#footnote-1) This project produced the article in the volume that sparked the response of Francisco Lozada whom you heard this afternoon. My article, “`She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn,’” was my attempt at an Asian American reading of the biblical Ruth as a model minority and perpetual foreigner, two stereotypical syndromes that encumber Asian Americans.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I first met Dr. Kwok Pui Lan in 1994 when she invited me to be part of a panel sponsored by the Women and Religion Section of the American Academy of Religion at its annual meeting in Chicago, IL. The theme of the session was “The Impact of National Histories on the Politics of Identity.” It was in this session that I reflected on how my own autobiography was shaped the by national politics of U.S. history.[[3]](#footnote-3) Cheryl related a part of that autobiography in her remarks. I had described an incident where a Jewish rabbinic scholar wanted to eat some of the more exotic dishes that this Chinese restaurant did not offer to its “white” patrons. He berated me for not being able to read the Chinese menu. He could read Hebrew, but he was a rabbinic scholar! Pui Lan in jest said that no one could ever take me to a Chinese restaurant and that was true. When I wanted to eat my favorite Cantonese noodles, which were not on the English menu at the Chinese restaurant in Harvard Square, she had to order them specially for me.

I had never reflected on my Chinese ethnicity in an academic way before this panel. It was rather transformative for me because this was my starting point for becoming an **Asian American** feminist biblical scholar. I argued on that panel that one cannot generalize about the construction of identity for Asian American women, because being Asian was quite diverse among these women. It included Chinese, Japanese, Sri Lankan, Korean, Filipina, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, Thai, East Indian, and a host of others under the umbrella rubric “Asian American.” I also said that Asian American experience in the U.S. was far from homogeneous. Besides the different Asian ethnicities with their own distinct immigration experiences, these groups settled in different regions of the U.S. The construction of an American identity for a Hmong woman growing up in Minnesota, or a Korean woman adopted as a child by a Southern white couple, will be completely different from that of a Taiwanese woman growing up in San Francisco’s or New York’s Chinatown. I myself, as Cheryl said, grew up in the slums of Chicago, and I currently live in Southern California, which contains a totally different breed of Asian Americans.

I think it was my remark about a Korean woman adopted by a southern white couple that prompted Mary Foskett to come up and introduce herself to me at the end of that session. Mary was born to an ethnic Chinese woman living in Japan, placed in a baby home managed by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, adopted as an infant by a Caucasian American family, was raised in Japan and then brought to the U.S. Mary encouraged my reflections on being Asian American by inviting me to write for the first anthology of Asian American biblical hermeneutics, *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading*, which she co-authored with Jeffrey Kuan. In my own contribution, I was able to declare “Yin/Yang is Not Me,” highlighting the specific ways my Asian-Americanness did not conform to what is usually considered to be culturally Asian.[[4]](#footnote-4) Pui Lan has already mentioned this article. Differentiating me from Asian Asians is the virulent racism that assaults those of Asian descent here in the U.S. Also, what distinguishes me is that what I grew up with and learned about Asia was through American Orientalism seen in movies where Chinese characters were stereotypically played by white people. I also joke that differentiating me from Asian Asians are the facts that Asian American women are taller, louder, and more Rubenesque in their bodily shape than Asian Asians.

I am very humbled by the accolades my former students have given me through Pui Lan’s essay and what several of my students have communicated regarding me on Facebook and in other venues. One always wonders at the end of each semester if you actually got through to your students and made them not only love learning about the bible, but also wrestling with the difficult issues the bible raises. I would like to respond to Lynn Jacobson’s reference to the “groan” I had remarked on her paper. In my defense sometimes it just comes out spontaneously, when there is no other response to give to what I read. I often did regret that I had written this spontaneously uninhibited response, but it was already out there. I am sure other faculty members in this group have been tempted to write “groan” in response to some of the curious things students come up with. I am gratified that in spite of my “groan,” Lynn found my class valuable for her ministry. Hearing these wonderful praises really warmed my heart and convinced me more than ever that I chose the right vocation of learning about, teaching, and writing about the Bible. (I would have made an awful nun.)

Francisco Lozada spoke to the “question of the Latinx history in relation to Asian Americans in the southwest borderlands­—the physical and symbolic space between Mexico/Latin American and the U.S.” Now, I knew that one of the main entry points for the Chinese was Angel Island in San Francisco, but I actually did not know that many Chinese immigrants snuck into the U.S. through Mexico. There is so much about our racial/ethnic histories that not only do we not know, but also how they intersected with other racial/ethnic groups. So, the academic in me had to find out more about these Chinese/Mexican interrelations. There are actually books written on the Chinese in Mexico.[[5]](#footnote-5) And the Chinese not only immigrated to Mexico, but also as coolie labor in the Latin American countries of Cuba and Peru. In the age of abolition, new channels of labor migrants flowed into Latin America to supplement or replace African slaves on plantations. The Chinese immigrants were one of the main sources of non-white labor, but also what developed were versions of the model minority and perpetuate foreigner stereotypes in these Latin American countries. The Chinese were promoted as efficient workers for progress and prosperity and criticized at the same time as harmful to the physical and moral well-being of the nation.[[6]](#footnote-6) What Francisco’s and my responses reveal is how much we don’t know about our intersected and intertwines histories as racial/ethnic minoritized critics. We have so much to learn and sometime relearn about each other. I am rejoicing that I have the time in retirement to explore these interconnected histories at greater length.

Cheryl mentioned that the Chinese concept of the woman warrior has been very formative in my identity as an Asian Pacific Islander Christian. Now here is an example of how I am continuing to learn about Asian American identities. You often see in Asian American studies the acronym API, which is usually rendered Asian Pacific Islander. However, it is only when I was preparing for a talk at Union Theological Seminary this past September, that I learned that the designation, Asian Pacific Islander, is problematic for Pacific Islanders. Many Pacific Islanders will insist that they are indigenous peoples, not Asian. For them, the acronym API erases the **differences** among Asians and Pacific Islanders, because it marginalizes the indigenous struggles Pacific Islanders have under Asian American politics. The acronym API should be rendered Asian **and** Pacific Islander.

It is important to understand the context of the Pacific Islanders, because Hawaii is the only U.S. state geographically in the region known as Oceania. One of the reasons that Hawaii is typically identified with Asian Americans rather than with Native Hawaiians is the history of many generations who descended from plantation labor that primarily came from Asia. But there were indigenous peoples already living on the islands! Imperialism, war, capitalist expansion, and settler colonialism facilitated this transnational movement of Asians to the Hawaiian Islands. Furthermore, a combination of white supremacy, capitalist development, settler colonialism, and racism created structures that rewarded Asians for civic participation and cultural assimilation, while ignoring the genocide and slavery of Native Hawaiians. It was sobering for me to learn this. Asian Americans are complicit in this genocide of Native Hawaiians, just like all Americans are complicit in the annihilation of our Native Americans, because we are structurally embedded in a racist system.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Mary Foskett has asked me to address where do I see Asian American interpretation heading, and whether there are gaps that I recommend that we address, or whether there are new questions emerging for me? First of all, it is clear that the different ethnicities that come under the umbrella term “Asian American” need to learn more about each other and their intersected and intertwined histories. This will be a huge task. Asian countries that produced the many different immigrants who come to the US have their own complex histories of inter-Asian conflict, colonization, cooperation, and complicities. For examples, Japan’s colonization of Korea and China. In this era of globalization, we need to have knowledge of the larger global interrelations of these Asian nations, to understand some of the dynamics of different groups of Asian American immigrants.

Second, in his article in the Foskett/Kuan anthology, Frank Yamada was correct in his observation that the discourses of the Asian American *immigrant* generation are different from those who are second, third, and fourth generation Asian Americans.[[8]](#footnote-8) Themes of marginality and liminality characterize immigrant populations of Asian American writers. These writers had to assimilate a previous Asian context in which they were the majority, into a new and often hostile one where they are a minority. Yamada argues that these themes do not really characterize second, third, and fourth generation Asian Americans. Unlike my grandparents, I as a third generation Chinese American was not “assimilated” into white society. I was born into this society and had to come to terms with it straight away. I really was an “American” before I became and Asian American. My racial formation was produced by a qualitatively different history of unequal power relations than my grandparents. So, I will be intensely interested in reading the biblical hermeneutics of these second, third, and forth generations of Asian American biblical scholars. How will these generations interpret this foundational text that we call the Bible?

Third, we need to develop coalitions with African American, Latinx and Native American biblical scholars, by first knowing their histories in the US and their complex interrelations with us Asian Americans. As I mentioned, until Francisco spoke about it, I did not know about that the Chinese often came into the US illegally through Mexico. The more we can learn about the historical intersectional relations of power among Asian nations, among Asian Americans themselves, and with other racial ethnic groups, the better position we will have in developing our Asian American biblical hermeneutics further. We need to develop that coalition work that began in that Wabash workshop where African American, Asian American and Latino/a American were brought together to create what we now call minority criticism.

I hope that the kind and thoughtful presentations of my work and teaching that you have heard today reveal that I have been and always will be a life-long learner, even though I supposedly reached the summit of my career as president of the Society of Biblical Literature. I had to learn over many decades to become a feminist and become an Asian American biblical scholar. I’ve had to keep up with the developments, not only in my field of biblical studies, but also in feminist and critical race theory, and in Asian American studies. Keeping up with all these developments continually changes who I am and who I will be as an Asian American feminist biblical scholar. I haven’t seen these lately, but sometimes you would find SBL and AAR sessions of senior white male scholars sitting around and musing on “How My Mind Has Changed and How It has Stayed the Same.” Well I can tell you right now that my mind will be continually changing as I encounter new knowledge and experiences. If I ever have one of these sessions in my older age, my session will be titled: “How My Mind Has Changed.” How I am continually transformed in my identity as an Asian American feminist biblical scholar.

1. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gale A. Yee, “‘She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn’: Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority,” in *They Were All Together in One Place: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 119–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Published in Gale A. Yee, “Inculturation and Diversity in the Politics of National Identity,” *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 2 (1997): 108–12. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gale A. Yee, “Yin/Yang Is Not Me: An Exploration into an Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian-American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey K. Kuan (St. Louis: Chalice, 2006), 152–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robert Chao Romero, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010); Jason Oliver Chang, *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico, 1880-1940*, The Asian American Experience (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kathleen López, “In Search of Legitimacy: Chinese Immigrants and Latin American Nation Building,” in *Immigration and National Identities in Latin America*, ed. Nicola Foote and Michael Goebel (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014), 182–204; See especially, Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) on the interconnections among settler-colonialism, the African slave trade, and trade in Asian goods and peoples in the Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Stephanie Nohelani Teves and Maile Arvin, “Decolonizing API: Centering Indigenous Pacific Islander Feminism,” in *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Politics*, ed. Lynn Fujiwara and Shireen Roshanravan, Decolonizing Feminisms (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 107–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Frank M. Yamada, “Constructing Hybridity and Heterogeneity: Asian American Biblical Interpretation from a Third-Generation Perspective,” in *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian-American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey K. Kuan (St. Louis: Chalice, 2006), 164–77. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)