Asian And Asian American Hermeneutics Section of the Society of Biblical Literature

Special Session to Honor Dr. Gale Yee

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**Remembrance in the Face of Erasure:**

**Exploring Autobiographical Exegesis and the Work of Gale Yee**

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Every year for about twenty years, I have had the distinct pleasure of meeting with Gale Yee for a meal during the SBL annual gathering. In one of our earliest conversations, she told me about her background. She said that she grew up in a poor family, where she was the oldest of 12 children, and that they lived in the territory of the gang, the Blackstone Rangers, on the south side of Chicago. Maybe it was just the dissonance of looking at Gale and hearing the words “Blackstone Rangers” come from her mouth, but I’ve never forgotten her words, and I knew that they had to be the basis for my remarks today.

Again, about twenty years ago, Fernando Segovia published an article with the title, “My Personal Voice: The Making of a Postcolonial Critic.” [[1]](#footnote-1) In that article, he situates his scholarship within the field of cultural studies, generally, and postcolonial approaches, specifically. To explain why the personal voice, the autobiographical, is important, he offers two insights that are my underlying assumptions here. First, he states that the development of cultural studies as a field means that “the scholar behind scholarship lies at the heart of a critical enterprise.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Second, after describing himself as a postcolonial critic, he writes the following: “A postcolonial critic such as I am is both born and made.” He goes on to explain:

In other words, the adoption of a postcolonial optic is not a given, even if the individual in question happens to be a child of imperialism and colonialism or of neocolonialism and postcolonialism, as I am, and in multi-layered fashion. It is an optic that requires a choice, and hence a process of conscientization and construction as well.[[3]](#footnote-3)

My remarks, then, will explore the connection between Gale Yee’s personal narrative and the choices *she* has made in her scholarship to become a feminist Asian American biblical scholar.

Gale’s family history is marked by adventure, courage, and creativity. Yet it is also shaped by restrictive immigration policies, racial hostility against the Chinese, and domestic violence. Her maternal grandfather left southern China around 1908, without his wife and son, and he went to Montana. It took him 15 years to save up enough money, earned from selling vegetables door-to-door (one of only two options allowed Chinese immigrants), to bring his wife and child to the United States. They went on to have 8 more children but, because of his abusiveness, Gale’s grandmother had to leave him, taking only the youngest children with her. She had to leave Gale’s mother and two of the older children with guardians. Her grandmother landed in Chicago and as Gale describes it, “my illiterate but economically shrewd grandmother opened a restaurant across the street from the Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago” and she was later able to send for Gale’s mother to join her. Given this personal narrative, Gale observed that her Asian American identity meant that “the personal is interlocked with the political in a very real way.” Stated another way, she recognized that her personal narrative is not separate from the sociopolitical realities in which that narrative took place.

Furthermore, she recognized that her identity, after being shaped by those sociopolitical realities, was not what is thought to be the “typical” American story. As stated in her own words: “’[t]he holy Trinity of gender, race, and class—my Chinese identity, my lower-class status, and my female gender—impinged upon my Asian-American identity to put me outside of the mainstream of American society.”[[4]](#footnote-4) As we celebrate Gale today as the first women of color to be the President of the Society of Biblical Literature, it is important to acknowledge that these same identity markers also put her outside of so called mainstream biblical scholars (who are predominantly white and male) and their supposedly “objective” historical-critical methods. With the same sense of adventure, courage, and creativity that is woven throughout her personal narrative and through her scholarship, Gale made space within the academy for those of us who are also outside of the mainstream, whether because of gender, racial/ethnic identity, or class. In the following section of my remarks, I will illustrate how she created these spaces through her scholarship.

Gale Yee as an Asian American scholar

We would be mistaken if we thought that Gale had always incorporated her racial/ethnic identity in her scholarship. Instead, there is a clearly identifiable trajectory through which Gale became aware of her identity as an Asian-American scholar. In the beginning, there was no awareness at all. In 1997, she wrote the following words:

How my Asian-American identity affects my scholarship is a difficult question for me at this point. I cannot divide myself, my identity, into compartments focusing on that which is female, that which is Asian-American, that which is Roman-Catholic, that which is trained in Canada, etc. I know where my gender affects my biblical studies, but I have not yet figured out where my ethnicity affects my biblical scholarship.[[5]](#footnote-5)

She revisited the issue of her Asian American identity about 10 years later, in her article, “Yin/Yang is not me: An Exploration into an Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics,” that appeared in the volume, *Ways of Being Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation,* edited by Mary Foskett and Jeffrey Kuan.[[6]](#footnote-6) In that article, Gale comes to grips with all of the ways in which she does not conform to what she describes as “some preconceived script of what an Asian American woman should be” because, as she recognizes, although she looks Chinese, “she does not have the usual markers of Asianness.” She is a third-generation Asian American so “she cannot draw on immigrant experience” and neither can her mother who is a second-generation American and, although her parents spoke Chinese in their household, they did not teach their children to speak Chinese, she does not have a Chinese accent when speaking English, and she didn’t grow up in Chicago’s Chinatown. Remember? She grew up on the south side, in Blackstone Ranger territory.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the same article, Gale mentions that reading Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir, *The Warrior Woman*, in the late 1980s was a formative experience for her. As Gale describes it, “she was attracted by the concept of a powerful Chinese woman, embodied in the woman warrior.” She then compares the Chinese woman warrior, Fa Mulan with Jael in Judges 4-5. She asks the question: how does gender intersect with ethnicity in the woman warrior? She finds that “Fa Mulan used deception and *disguised* her gender to become a military hero for her country against *foreign* invaders;” whereas “Yael also used deception, but she *exploited her gender* as a *foreign* woman to become an Israelite military hero.”

Less than 10 years later, Gale returned to Jael and the legend of Fa Mulan in her article, “The Woman Warrior Revisited: Jael, Fa Mulan, and American Orientatlism, which was her contribution to the Joshua and Judges volume in the texts@contexts series that Athalya Brenner and she edited. In this article, Gale puts the stories of Jael and Fa Mulan in conversation with both feminist criticism and the popular Disney movie, Mulan. Gale notes that both Jael and Fa Mulan “transgress the societal dictates of their gender while remaining paradoxically within their confines,” and she considers a queer analysis by Deryn Guest that suggests Jael resists binaries altogether. When analyzing the Disney movie, Mulan, Gale expresses some ambivalence. Is it a sign that Asian Americans have now “made it” or is it merely the commercial exploitation of American orientalism? However, she admits that she liked the movie and that she would have loved having a Mulan action figure when she was ten years old.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Gale’s trajectory concerning her Asian American identity became complete in her most recent reflection on the woman warrior. In her article, “The Woman Warrior Within and About Me,” just published online in July of this year, she writes that, as a biblical scholar, she approache[d] her interpretation of the biblical text rather like a woman warrior in asking the ethical question, “Who does my interpretation help, and who does it hurt?” Then, In the final paragraph of the article she identifies with the woman warrior in the following way:

The Chinese concept of the woman warrior has been very formative in my own identity as an “anomalous” Asian Pacific Islander Christian. It resonated with my own independent spirit in my educational advancement from grade school all the way to my Ph.D. and in my biblical scholarship. The woman warrior will continue to be my avatar as I continue to fight injustice and work for a compassionate and *shalom*-filled world.[[9]](#footnote-9)

At this point, Gale is not just writing about a warrior woman, she recognizes that she is one.

Gale Yee as a Feminist scholar

From today’s vantage point, it would be easy for us to assume that Gale has always been a feminist. If we assume that, however, we would be wrong once again. Gale’s conscientization took place in two ways. First, she became “quite aware of and negatively affected by the systematic sexism and clericalism of the traditional Roman Catholic college where she taught in the early 1980s, a place where she was the only woman on an all-male Theology faculty.” Second, she became friends with women who were in the English Department and they introduced her to feminist literature. It was at this point hat Gale thought about “applying a feminist critique to the Bible.”[[10]](#footnote-10) It was later in the 1980s that she signed the contract for her book, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* and it was published in 2003.[[11]](#footnote-11) Of course, the topic itself implies a feminist commitment that would have a gender analysis at its center but, for me, it is the methodology she employs that deserves attention.

In this work (as well as some of her other work), Gale’s ideological criticism allows her to bring together her interests in gender, race/ethnicity, class, and colonial status. As she describes it, her methodology “takes seriously the nexus of discourse and power—namely, ideology itself which gives meaning and coherence to material reality while concealing the fact that it is also produced in gendered, racial, economic, and/or colonial sites of struggle and competing claims.”[[12]](#footnote-12) For her, ideological criticism is a two-pronged inquiry that includes both intrinsic and extrinsic analysis. She defines extrinsic analysis as “the complex interrelationship between material modes of production and ideologies in the society that produces the biblical text” and intrinsic analysis as “the rhetorical strategies of the text itself to ascertain the different ways in which the text inscribes and reworks ideology.”[[13]](#footnote-13) In re-reading this definition for today, I thought immediately of her observation concerning her own autobiography that “the personal is interlocked with the political in a very real way.” In other words, her family’s autobiographical narrative is a text that reflects gender, class and racial ideologies, and it is itself directly connected to the immigration policies, discriminatory hiring practices and sexism that impacted the shape of this text. Gale’s family narrative is the personal text (the intrinsic) that has been shaped by the broader political context of the United States (the extrinsic). It seems safe to say that Gale’s ideological criticism is a way of situating all of our family narratives within the exclusionary dynamics of the United States, in the same way, as biblical scholars, we can use ideological criticism to identify the contextual dynamics of the texts we study.

Gale Yee as a scholar on economic marginalization

Gale’s work on economic marginalization is based on two premises. The first premise is that marginalization and its resultant poverty, whether in antiquity or the current era, are not natural phenomena; instead, they are caused by deliberate patterns of wealth distribution that benefit the few and harm the many.[[14]](#footnote-14) Second, although “mediated through the biases of its elite male authors,” biblical texts nevertheless contain signs of resistance that allow us to hear the voices of those who have been marginalized by virtue of gender and/or class.[[15]](#footnote-15) In this section, I will mention two articles as examples of her analysis.

In her article on Exodus 1-2, “Take This Child and Suckle It for Me:” Wet Nurses and Resistance in Ancient Israel, Gale considers both the practices of wet nursing in antiquity and how the term is used in other biblical texts. In the ancient context, she found that wet nurses, whether slave or free, were exploited for the benefit of the elite. In the biblical literature, she found references to reversals, as in Isaiah 49:3, where the prophet’s message to those in the Diaspora is that “kings shall be your foster fathers and their queens your nursing mothers,” where the verse “represents an ideological reversal of colonial relations through a gendered trope.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Based on this analysis, Gale is able to conclude that Exodus 2 is resistance literature where “the mother of the future hero of the Israelite nation saves her infant son from Egyptian slaughter,” and she is able to do this “through subversive means” that allowed her to nourish her own son, with her own milk, and get paid for it.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Yee discusses this same concept of reversals in her study of Hannah and Mary and the implications of these narratives for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Arguing against the use of the biblical text “to batter women,” she seeks readings that allow us to “hear the silenced speak.” In the stories of Hannah and Mary, Yee finds two significant models for today.

The two women I discuss not only speak, they sing! They sing of how God victoriously overturns social hierarchies, raising the poor from the dust and lifting the needy from the ash heap (1 Sam. 2:8), filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty (Lk. 1:53). And they sing their songs in contexts dear to the Millennium Development Goals; their pregnancy, motherhood, and empowerment in the midst of poverty.[[18]](#footnote-18)

For Yee, Hannah’s song takes place in a context “in which an exploiting class burdens its peasant classes with taxes and tribute that keep them barely at subsistence level” and it is a song that praises God for “overturning these oppressive hierarchies, taking power and wealth from the dominant and giving it to the poor and vulnerable.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Similarly, Yee admits that some may not be familiar with the Mary she is talking about: “a poor, brown-skinned teen-age unwed mother from the boonies” who was only later “depoliticized, spiritualized, and morphed into a blond, blue-eyed Caucasian.”[[20]](#footnote-20) She ends the article by asking us to “remember the lives of these women, their suffering and oppression, and their liberating songs of hope and thanksgiving, and [to] act upon them in a poverty-stricken world that sorely needs their message of liberation.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Conclusion

As she has written, Gale’s autobiography includes “the holy Trinity” of gender, race, and class, and I have argued here that these aspects of her identity are reflected in her work and in ideological criticism, her preferred methodology. Many years ago, Gale wrote about being reminded of the title of the first chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston’s book, *The Warrior Woman*. The title of that first chapter was “The No Name Woman,” and Gale wondered if the diversity of Asian and Asian American female experiences would ever allow them to have a collective term such as womanist or mujerista theology. She then wrote “I do not want to be known as one of the No Name theologians.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Without a doubt, Gale’s groundbreaking work and her having served as the President of the Society of Biblical Literature this year will mean that she will never be a No Name scholar!

1. Fernando F. Segovia, “My Personal Voice: The Making of a Postcolonial Critic,” in Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, ed., *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yee, “Inculturation and Diversity in the Politics of National Identity” *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 2 no. 1 (1997), 108-109. See, also, Yee, She Stood in Tears Among the Alien Corn: Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority,” in *They Were All Together in One Place* (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan, eds., *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation* (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yee, Yin/Yang is not me,: 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Yee, “The Woman Warrior Revisited,” 180-182, and 187-188. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Yee, “The Woman Warrior Within and About Me,” Inheritance #64: Milestones, July 19, 2019., 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Yee, “An Autobiographical Approach to Feminist Biblical Scholarship” (2006), 380-381. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 381. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve*, 4. See also, for example, “Ideological Criticism: Judges 17-21 and the Dismembered Body,” in Gale Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Yee, “Recovering Marginalized Groups in Ancient Israel: Methodological Considerations,” in Robert B. Coote and Norman K. Gottwald, eds., *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney*, 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Yee, “Take This Child and Suckle It for Me: Wet Nurses and Resistance in Ancient Israel” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* Vol. 39 no. 4 (2009), 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Yee, “The Silenced Speak: Hannah, Mary, and Global Poverty,” *Feminist Theology* 21 (4) (2012): 40-57, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Yee, “Inculturation and Diversity,” 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)