

## Talking Back in 2021

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Gale Yee responds to Greg Cuéllar, Mary Foskett and Monica Melanchthon

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agency, “beating the system,” default position

It’s been two years since I gave that [Presidential Address back in November 2019](#). Much has happened, providing food for thought in reflecting on intersectionality as a heuristic prism for our textual and social analyses of the Bible and the society in which it is embedded. Personally, I had hernia surgery and then developed double vision due to a thyroid condition. A plague called Covid-19 came upon us globally, and, although we have excellent vaccines to counteract it, very contagious variants have developed. Unfortunately, availability of, and access to, vaccines vary greatly, especially in poorer countries. We moved all our classes online during 2020, but as of this writing, campus classes are very slowly filling with vaccinated and masked students as the new academic year begins in 2021. We had Black Lives Matter protest marches, catalyzed by the brutal death of George Floyd; we impeached a U.S. president twice, and we lost Ruth Bader Ginsberg who was replaced by conservative Amy Comey Barrett on the Supreme Court. We elected a new U.S. president, but the old one unleashed a violent riot on the Capitol building as the electoral votes were counted to legitimate the new one. Republican governors are now doing their best to restrict voting rights to keep their grip on power. As their latest football in the U.S. culture wars, they kick around a totally inaccurate understanding of Critical Race Theory, out of which the term “intersectionality” springs (Crenshaw 1989). Incredibly, they are banning masks in schools, jeopardizing the health of children, while making abortions impossible, producing more unwanted children in the world. Et cetera, et cetera.

Since that address, I was able to immerse myself in Patricia Hill Collins’ landmark book on intersectionality many years in the making (Collins 2019), and publish *Towards an Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics: An Intersectional Anthology*, a collection of my own intersectional essays over 30 years in the making (Yee 2021). I now look forward to “talking back” to Mary Foskett, Monica Melanchthon, and Greg Cuéllar and thanking them for taking time in their exhausting schedules to respond to my Presidential Address on thinking intersectionally. And I also thank Jione Havea for editing these responses for *The Bible & Critical Theory*.

Monica Melanchthon incorporates the category of caste in the *et ceteras* of intersectionality. Caste has become a hot topic in the U.S. with the publication of Isabella Wilkerson’s book *Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents* (Wilkerson 2020).

Melanchthon insists that, while the term “intersectionality” may be a recent import in India, the notion of “multiple identities” and “co-constructing marginalities” have been part and parcel of feminist research, especially on Dalit women. Both male and female Indian social reformers have analyzed the interconnections of caste, sex, gender, culture, faith, and tradition in the marginalization and denigration of Dalit women. I appreciated Melanchthon pointing out this important fact. Patricia Hill Collins has also insisted that intersectional work has been done by African American feminists long before the term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1989). Moreover, it would be the height of imperialistic arrogance to assume that U.S. theorists had a monopoly on thinking intersectionally. Indian scholars have been thinking intersectionally about women’s rights and anti-caste ideologies since the 1800s.

Dalit feminists highlight the differences in the ways multiple social identities intersect at both the intra-group and inter-group levels. At these various levels, categories such as “woman,” “individual,” “caste,” “race,” or “class” are neither homogenous nor stable. Among Dalit feminists there is debate on the usefulness of the term “intersectionality,” derived from “Euro-American” rather than Indian experience. I must point out here that intersectionality specifically arose from the theorizing of African American or black women’s experience. “Euro-American” is often a code word for “white” and it is important to make this distinction about the African American racial origins of intersectionality in the U.S. Nevertheless, analyses of the interconnections of caste, gender, and power are at the forefront of the writings of Indian women, whether using the term intersectionality itself or its Indian iterations and definitions.<sup>1</sup> The same is true for biblical studies in India, where the terms “intersectionality” or “intersectional approach” are not used. Rather, there is a definite commitment to address the caste, gender, religion, and class, utilizing the language of “marginalization,” “the oppressed,” “the minorities.”

Melanchthon then turns to her discussion of the widow in India and two widows in the biblical text, Tamar and Judith. The descriptions of the humiliation, alienation, suffering, and non-personhood of the Indian Hindu widow in a patriarchal society were excruciating to read. I appreciated how Melanchthon situated the life of an Indian high caste widow within Patricia Hill Collin’s four domains of power: the structures of Brahmanical patriarchy; the disciplinary priestly caste that manages and implements the caste system and the social exclusion of widow; the ideological hegemony of religious texts that legitimate her oppression and unjust treatment; and the day-to-day suffering in her interpersonal relations.

Melanchthon differentiates upper/dominant caste widows from lower caste ones. Property issues prevent upper caste widows from securing a share in

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<sup>1</sup> The work of Indian women could also be labeled Transnational Feminism, which incorporates intersectional issues of global capitalism, such as gender, race, class, poverty, colonization, and war, in the experiences indigenous third-world women. (Tong 2014: 231–54).

inheritance. She must stay in her dead husband's household as part of his property, be deprived of her jewelry, and forbidden remarriage or independence. Because lower caste women were wage earners contributing to the family's economy, she has some power within her natal and marital homes. Her economic value affects how she is treated by men. They can work on upper caste lands, but some may be sold or pimped by men in their community. Unlike upper caste widows, lower caste widows can remarry and have sexual relations. However, whom she marries must be restricted and determined by her dead husband's family. Although it might be tempting to believe that lower class widows have it easier than upper class ones in India, allowing lower caste widows to remarry while forbidding remarriage for upper caste widows are dominant caste strategies to preserve upper caste purity, while reinforcing lower caste impurity. The control of the dominant class in India is perversely hegemonic.

What I wished to see in Melanchthon's essay was any agency for Indian Hindu widows to alleviate or deal with the suffering and oppressions that afflict their lives. How did they cope or how did they resist, consciously or covertly? How did they attempt to beat the system? We do see this agency at work in the stories of the two biblical widows that Melanchthon analyzes, Tamar and Judith. Tamar's life was marked by the intersection of her identities as a twice married, twice widowed, childless, Canaanite female. She was female, foreign, widowed, and childless in Israel's patriarchal society. Tamar's lack of a child was a particular liability in a society that sees motherhood as the apex of womanhood. In contrast to upper caste Indian women, Tamar had a right to remarry the brother of her dead husbands, because the levirate law operated in ancient Israel. Remarriage to the third brother, however, was thwarted by her father-in-law who thought that Tamar brought about the deaths of his first two sons. To become a mother and bear a son who would secure her place in her father-in-law's household, Tamar used the male practice of visiting prostitutes to her advantage. She pretended to be a hooker sitting on the road to Timnah and slept with her father-in-law, but not before she obtained tokens of their sexual transaction. Melanchthon described Tamar's collaboration and resistance as elements of the subaltern mentality. I do wish Melanchthon had elaborated more on this mentality. It seems like James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak*, beating the system by manipulating levirate practice (Scott 1985). In any case, Tamar was able to exert agency in a cleverly unorthodox manner to fight the intersectional invisibility arising from her ethnicity and gender as a childless Canaanite twice married, twice widowed woman. She beat the system by using men's access to prostitutes as a disguise to get pregnant and used the levirate laws of ancient Israel to legitimate her devious sexual procurement of her father-in-law's sperm to have a son.

The second widow Melanchthon takes up is Judith of Bethulia, whose agency resides in her beauty, wealth, upper class status, chastity, and Jewishness. For Melanchthon, Judith is a good example of intersectional privilege, in that she has

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advantages of class and wealth, despite being disadvantaged as a widow. She uses her intersecting privilege for the safety of the city. Melanchthon follows Musa Dube in regarding Judith as domesticated and colonized in the end because she doesn't resist patriarchy or racism (against Gentiles), nor class within her own community (Dube 2003). However, I beg to differ with respect to Dube's remarks about Judith.

Judith was not domesticated or colonized in the end but expressed agency in her privilege. She used her beauty to manipulate Holofernes and get him drunk and into bed. She used her faith to eat kosher food to avoid eating and drinking at Holofernes' banquet. She used her nightly prayer time to leave the camp to pray, giving her cover to escape after beheading Holofernes. She was not domesticated at the end of the story. She stayed on her estate and actually refused to get married again, even though she had many suitors. She grew old and more famous, and she eventually freed her slave. She distributed her property to her next of kin. No armies ever attacked the Israelites during Judith's lifetime. This does not sound like a domesticated and colonized woman. She used her privilege on behalf of her people. She was an agent, not a victim as a widow. I was tantalized by Melanchthon's remark that Judith was similar to the Rajput women and widows who picked up the sword to defend their communities. I would like to know more about these Rajput widows who were woman warriors, because of my own interests in the woman warrior (Yee 1993; Yee 2013; Yee 2019; Yee 2020).

Melanchthon asserts that biblical studies in India must address contextually the intersection of at least four significant axes: caste, gender, religion, and class. Even though Indian biblical scholars may not use the term "intersectionality," their default position is thus intersectional. This insight helps me to respond to Gregory Cuéllar's question at the beginning of his response: Why did it take 139 years for the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) to elect its first Asian American and first woman of color as its president? This question is also relevant for the other first-time milestones, such as the 107 years before the election of SBL's first woman president, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and the unbroken lapse of 130 years before its first person of color president, Vincent Wimbush. The answer, for me, is the white male sedimentation of biblical scholars in SBL's membership, governance, and leadership since the 1800s. SBL's scholarship mainly reflected white, male, elite, ethnocentric academic concerns and issues for a very long time. Unlike biblical scholars in India (or those of color in the U.S.) who usually address other identities of their social locations, whiteness, maleness, elitist, and ethnocentric were their actual default positions. That there was any other position than a white, male, elite Euro-American academic one did not occur to them. There was no acknowledgement or knowledge of differences in gender, race, class, culture, etc. other than their own narrow ones. If there was, you have demeaning remarks, such as those [David G. Lyons' 1910 presidential address](#) describing the southwest Asian natives as ignorant, superstitious, sneaky, selfish, and unable to be schooled working with modern tools—the typical default view of white-supremacist thinking about and attitudes

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towards the Other. Such elitist outlooks led to the sedimentation of value-neutral, objective forms of historical criticism, the exegetical method in which biblical scholars of my generation were trained. I still value this training because it has helped me uncover marginal populations in my study of the biblical text (Yee 2007; Yee 2009a). However, I learned very quickly that interpreters using historical criticism were hardly value-neutral and objective. Their sexism, racist, ethnocentric attitudes were often apparent in their interpretations. I remember researching works on the prophet of Hosea for my doctoral thesis. Theories of Hosea's wife Gomer as a foreign Canaanite prostitute, who joined in their orgies and promiscuity in the high places abounded in the sexual fantasies of these male interpreters. White, male, Euro-centric biblical scholars will have to undergo a painful examination and reflection on their particular social locations that have given them advantages socially, politically, economically, and educationally. There will be denials, blaming, shaming, and guilt before this white, male, Euro-centric entrenchment is broken through. Only then will "thinking intersectionally" become the default of biblical scholarship.

Mary Foskett asks how explicitly intersectional analysis might advance Asian American biblical interpretation. I recently did a Zoom talk on intersectionality in biblical interpretation for a conference that Monica Melanchthon held in Australia. While writing that talk, I used my article on Ruth as a perpetual foreigner and model minority as an example of an intersectional analysis (Yee 2009b). Now, when I wrote that article, I did not realize that it was an intersectional analysis. For me, it was explicitly an Asian American interpretation. It was only when I was explaining the different power analyses of gender, race, and class in this Asian American reading of Ruth for this Zoom talk that I recognized the intersectionality of that article. I had begun with the quote by Asian American lawyer, Mari Matsuda, that I used in my presidential address:

When I see something that looks racist, I ask, "where is the patriarchy in this?" When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, "Where is the heterosexism in this?" When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, "Where are the class interests in this?" Working in coalition forces us to look for both the obvious and non-obvious relationships of domination, helping us to realize that no form of subordination ever stands alone. (Matsuda 1991)

"Asking the other question" in our biblical interpretation, specifically from our Asian American social locations, is a good starting point in answering the question that Mary Foskett poses: how explicitly intersectional analysis might advance Asian American interpretation. Other readers have asked the other question about the book of Ruth, often regarded as a delightful, positive story of female empowerment and romantic heterosexual love where Ruth gets the guy in the end. In contrast, to its heteronormativity, lesbians have asked the other question by observing the homoeroticism in the text (Duncan 2000; Alpert 1996; Jordan 1994).

Asking the other question, Asian feminists have pushed back against the interpretations of mutual and warm relations between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in Ruth. They emphasize the often and hostile relations between Asian daughters-in-law with their mothers-in-law (Kwok 2005, 111; Pa 2006, 49, 57–58). My own analysis asked the other question of Ruth’s assimilation into Israelite society, comparing it with the stereotypes of Asian Americans as model minorities and perpetual foreigners. The core construction of intersectionality is *relationality*, underscoring the reality that race, gender, class and other systems of power do not stand alone, but are organized and sustained through their interconnections and interacting process (Collins 2019, 44–45). Asian American biblical scholars must “ask the other question” as to how they “relate” to the power structures that impinge, oppress, assist, or obstruct their lives, and then apply the “answers” to their interpretations of the text. As is well known, Asian Americans are not homogenous. A number of diverse Asian ethnicities come under the Asian American umbrella, each with their own immigrational histories and generational and cultural differences in the U.S. Biblical scholars from these varied Asian ethnicities will have their own particular ways of “asking the other question” when they approach the biblical text.

It was very enjoyable for me to read these insightful responses to my presidential address. By default, biblical scholars of color have been examining the text intersectionally if they have been struggling with the racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other oppressive systems and structures that they encounter in the text and its interpretations within the various societies in which they teach, minister, and carry out their lives. May they continue their intersectional work and writings productively and with verve!

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