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**Connecting, Disrupting, and Transforming Stories through Imaginative Weaving:  
Asian and Asian American Women’s Power of Imagining in Their Postcolonial and  
Diasporic Reading of the Bible**

Abstract

The Bible has stories to be read along with other stories and we can weave imaginatively stories of our own heart into our reading of the Bible. This paper examines Walter Brueggemann’s understanding of biblical imagination, provides examples of Kwok Pui-lan’s imaginative story-weaving, and intends to model how Asian and Asian American women connect, disrupt, and transform stories, both biblical and other, in their postcolonial context and diasporic social location. It is this paper’s contention that Kwok’s use of “critical incidents” and her “parallel processing” reading strategy will offer a theoretical as well as practical roadmap for the development of narrative religious education.

“The heart of teaching is imagination.” With this bold statement, Maria Harris starts her reflection on the theology of teaching that sees teaching as “not only an act of the imagination, but of the *religious* imagination” (Harris 1987, 3, 10). “Practical theology and theological education as a whole, rightly conceived and well practiced,” states Craig Dykstra, “draw on and serve in profound and powerful ways both pastoral and ecclesial imagination” (Dykstra 2008, 59). To put it in a nutshell, education in general and religious education in particular, *critically understood and creatively practiced*, cannot do without imagination.

Then my question is: what kind of understanding and practice of imagination would be required of the religious education, especially teaching the Bible, in the postcolonial and diasporic context?

To answer this question, I examine the meaning of biblical imagination and the method of story-weaving, paying attention to a biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, and a feminist theologian, Kwok Pui-lan.

**Walter Brueggemann’s Understanding of Biblical Imagination: Prophetic Imagination**

Brueggemann contends that the Bible, of which life-world(s) or, better put, story-world(s) is extremely strange and fundamentally confessional, does not make sense to outsiders but only to insiders and, accordingly, that it is necessary to cultivate a *historical imagination* in order to read, study, and interpret the Bible meaningfully as an insider. By historical imagination he means “not just any innovative thinking . . . [but] inventiveness driven and shaped by particular historical experiences,” while acknowledging the dialectical relationship between historicity and imagination, which “must be kept in tension, always correcting each other” (Brueggemann 1977, 33). He takes historical imagination to be the Bible’s own imagination, for biblical symbols are “firmly rooted in history, but inviting full play of imagination,” and, what is more, “the process of the Bible itself is *a process of historical imagining* exercised on [what he calls ‘the *primal narrative*’]” (Brueggemann 1977,

42, 35[45ff], my emphasis). In other words, biblical imagination is an imagination shaped by the historical traditioning process of “the root story which is most deeply and consistently believed and recited” by the community of faith (Brueggemann 1977, 46, à la Gerhard von Rad). Throughout this process, “the *old primal story* is [retold and] supplemented by an *ongoing tradition*” (Brueggemann 1977, 53).

Brueggemann illustrates this ongoing biblical *practice* of historical imagination with the uses of one of the root stories in the Bible: the story of the bread in wilderness (Exodus 16). He maintains that the manna narrative was “remembered imaginatively” by the hopeless Israel in exile who were “starved for the faith as well as for the bread” (Isaiah 55:1-3) and by the earliest disciples when they reported on Jesus’ feeding of the hungry multitude in all four Gospels in such ways that this primal narrative could make *connections* with stories of the hungry and the hopeless, *disrupt* “every presupposition and self-interest they [had],” and *transform* their “situations from hunger to fullness, from death to life” (Brueggemann 1977, 34-43, quoted respectively from 37, 36, 38, 39). In terms of connecting, disrupting, and transforming stories in the Bible, he notes that “all parts are related to and informed by the primal narrative,” that “our hardness of heart (cf. [Mark] 6:52) sometimes blocks us from full appreciation of our historical imagination,” and that “serious Bible study done by insiders expects these texts will affect our lives so that we see things differently and are required to make fresh decisions about our values and priorities, about our fears and hopes” (Brueggemann 1977, 57, 38, 39). In the face of the dominant narrative of scarcity that dismisses God and disregards neighbors, he observes, “it is *the work of endless reperformance* to continue to make this alternative account of reality available and persuasive” (Brueggemann 2012, 13, my emphasis). In this regard, one could argue that our historical imagination concerns an art of weaving the contemporary narratives into the primal narrative and, as Brueggemann sees it, the foremost biblical artisans of historical imagination are “the prophets who insist that the primal narrative has power, authority, and relevance in all kinds of new situations” (Brueggemann 1977, 57).

The prophets, biblical or not, are those who are “imagining possibilities” and it is the power of imagining an alternative world that makes us “[act] as prophets of our own existence” (Harris 1987, 3, 10, à la Paul Ricoeur). The contribution by the biblical prophets to the prophetic task of imagining what is humanly possible, notably, is their “very practice of remembering” that “gives Israel power for a faithful life in a context of accommodation” (Brueggemann 1982, 38) and their concurrent “epistemological break with the assumed world of dominant imagination” (Brueggemann 2012, 39). The biblical prophets’ *imaginative remembering of the primal narrative* aims at power encounters through the dispute between narratives; the power of the primal narrative in the Bible *speaks to, challenges, and transforms* the power of the dominant narrative of the present world (Brueggemann 2013, *sic passim*). As Brueggemann puts it, “the Bible itself is a sustained contestation over truth in which conventional modes of power do not always prevail” and, subsequently, its readers and interpreters are “always contestants [for truth], whether [they] recognize [themselves] as such or not” (Brueggemann 2013, 6, 8).

Among other things, the task of the contesting biblical prophets and subsequent prophetic preachers in history is to make “a sustained effort to imagine the world as though YHWH were a real character and the defining agent in the life of the world” (Brueggemann 2012, 132, cf. 2, 23, 45, 71) and “to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around [them]” (Brueggemann 2001, 3). Faithful to the primal narrative in which YHWH reigns and “[bearing] witness to reality that falls outside the purview of the [dominant ideology],” they contest the dominant imagination’s false consciousness, i.e., “a misconstrual of reality to serve particular interest,” which has “narcotized its adherents to the realities of life in the

world around them” (Brueggemann 2014, 17, 7, 15). They are, above all, “voices of unrelenting realism in the face of deceiving ideology” (Brueggemann 2014, 19).

What Brueggemann emphasizes in his study of *prophetic imagination* is that the Bible is, by nature, is countercultural. Consequently, his reading of the Bible is a countercultural reading. In his recent book, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (2014), he parallels the story of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. to the story of September 11 in 2001 C.E. and finds a compelling analogy between these two stories: the prophets/poets/artists, old and new, are called to counter the ancient ideology of Jewish chosenness as well as the contemporary ideology of American exceptionalism. He argues that prophetic imagination debunks false consciousness promoted by the governing ideology, helps the disrupted reader to grieve over the loss of the distorted reality created by this deceiving ideology and to get connected with the reality of the lived “real” world, and, in the midst of despair, envisions hope for a transforming future that comes only from God.

### **Kwok Pui-lan’s Practices of Postcolonial Diasporic Feminist Imagination: Story-weaving**

Like Brueggemann’s prophetic imagination, Kwok Pui-lan’s postcolonial diasporic feminist imagination is critical of the dominant ideology both in the Bible and in the contemporary society, pastoral to the deceived and the oppressed, and affirmative of the hope found in Jesus Christ. Kwok’s contribution to biblical imagination, I dare say, is to make genuinely balanced Brueggemann’s position that “the Bible is not a closed object [for us to study] but a dialogue partner whom we must address *but which also takes us seriously*” (Brueggemann 1977, 153, my emphasis).

Let me show three examples of her story-weaving:

First, Kwok began a sermon, preached in December 1991, with the following words: “I will retell the story of the promised land, while adding a few stories of my own. I invite you to think about your stories too” (Kwok 1995, 96). The contemporary stories that challenged her to reread this primal narrative are three. Two of the stories are related to historical events: the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre and the United States bombing in the Gulf War in that year. And the third comes from a book: *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* written by Paul Monette, whose lover Roger died of AIDS. In Kwok’s storytelling, these stories became what Kathleen Talvacchia calls “critical incidents, an educational tool for uncovering assumptions and acknowledging the emotionality of learning.” “Critical incidents,” Talvacchia holds, “foster analysis of [one’s] experiences in concrete, contextually specific ways that can serve to highlight the possible contradictions between the assumptions that one brings into a learning context and the realities of what is present” (Talvacchia 2003, 14). The sufferings of Chinese people, coupled with those of war victims and AIDS patients, challenged the way she had read “one of the most powerful symbolizations of hope in the religious traditions of humankind” (Kwok 1995, 99) and enabled her to have a new reading of it. She said, “I could never read the Bible in the same way again. . . . It is when we can no longer read the Bible in the same way that all of a sudden we discover something new, something fundamental, that we had not seen before” (Kwok 1995, 96, 97).

What she uncovered from her new reading of this biblical story with her non-biblical, postcolonial, and diasporic eyes was the awareness that different “ways of being” necessitate different “ways of reading” (Foskett and Kuan 2006). In the light of her critical incidents, Kwok began to read the liberative Exodus story not with Jewish eyes but “with Canaanite eyes,” not with the eyes of the conquerors but with the eyes of the vanquished. Postcolonial readings of the Exodus story from the perspective of the tribal people in Taiwan, the Maoris in New Zealand, the Aborigines in Australia, the Native Americans, and the Palestinians “all

of a sudden” made sense to her. She confessed ashamedly, “I had never read the story from the perspective of the Canaanites, and the experience was shocking to me” (Kwok 1995, 98). As she concluded her sermon, Kwok proposed that we should move beyond the traditional Jewish and Christian understanding of the promised land as a symbol of hope, see the “future of our hope” in the light of a universal vision of “a new Exodus” in Isaiah 55 that includes all people, and “make a new covenant with one another and with God” to “prepare ourselves for this new Exodus” (Kwok 1995, 99, 100). With this sermon, she helps us to see that certain stories that we call “critical incidents” can not only help inform us about the Bible and our faith but also help us form a better understanding of the Bible and our faith.

Second, in a dramatized Bible study she offered on the theme of “God’s mission among the suffering and struggling peoples of Asia” at the 1989 Asian Mission Conference in Indonesia organized by the Christian Conference of Asia, Kwok masterfully weaves the biblical story of the women in the ministry and passion of Jesus with the political story of the 1989 massacre of Chinese students at Tiananmen Square. Believing that biblical interpretation is “conditioned and influenced by our backgrounds,” she attempts to “reread the gospel story in light of the historical crisis of [her] people” and asks her audience “to listen, not only with your ears, but also with your hearts in order to discern what the gospel event means for us today” (Kwok 1995, ix).

After making a brief socio-political analysis of the critical incident that she calls “the Chinese Crisis” and identifying women’s influences in the identity-formation of Jesus who was described as being “repeatedly challenged by the women he met during his ministry” (Kwok 1995, xii), Kwok moves to a retelling of the story of Jesus’ Passion *in parallel with* the story of the Beijing students’ passion. This reading strategy is an elementary form of what she calls elsewhere “parallel processing, taking the cue from computers which are linked up to process vast amounts of data.” This reading strategy requires the reader to read the Bible from multiple perspectives rather than from a single perspective. Kwok regards this reading strategy as “one of the most effective ways to debunk the authority of the [colonial] ‘master’s’ framework” in biblical interpretation. Its purpose is to “challenge the arbitrariness of assigning one interpretation as the normative one” or to show that “alternative readings are indeed possible” (Kwok 1998, 80-81).

Moving back and forth between the two paralleled stories, Kwok opens a space for our creative imagination with regard to reading the passion story with the eyes of the mothers of the Beijing students. Those women in the Bible story, who were, like all mothers at home in Beijing, busy preparing the last supper meal for Jesus, might have asked, *Why would Jesus risk his life?* Kwok finds a probable answer to this question in the “Declaration on Hunger Strike” written by the Beijing students on May 13, 1989: “We do not want to die; we want to live, because we are in the golden period of our youth. . . . But if the death of one person, or a group of persons, can make the lives of people better and the motherland more prosperous, we do not have the right to live” (Kwok 1995, xiv). *What, then, would Jesus’ mother Mary have said to her beloved son as he struggled to “stand up to the test” for “the cause of the people”?* In this regard Kwok refers to what the mothers of the Beijing students said with heartrending cries: “Children, we wish to keep you at home. Do not go to Tiananmen Square. Yet we understand that you must go” (Kwok 1995, xv).

Third, we have seen that, moving freely back and forth between the scenes of the biblical world and those of the contemporary world, Kwok weaves stories of her heart on the loom of her critical and creative imagination. The biblical passage about Jesus’ encounter with a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30) is another case in point.

In a homily preached at Harvard Divinity School’s noon worship in 1986, Kwok, together with three other Asian women, artfully wove stories of “the multiply oppressed people in the Third World” with the story of a Canaanite woman (Kwok 1994). The main

question of this homily, from the beginning to the end, is not “Who is this Jesus?” but “Who is this Canaanite woman?” This woman is a foremost witness (Sadako Kurihara) to “the Hiroshima Tragedy” who would go anywhere in the world in order to proclaim and protest its misery and sing forever “no more wars on the earth.” She is a prayer warrior (Kurinji Thennavan) who pleads with God/Goddess: “Hearest thou not this pitiful crying echoing through these valleys and hills? Babies sucking at breast without milk. Thousands of little ones calling thy name; come now as their mother and save them at thy feet we humbly pray” (Kwok 1994, 238). She is a hopeful theologian/poet (Elizabeth Tapia from the Philippines) who speaks proudly of her integrity as a person:

I am a woman  
    I am alive  
        I am struggling  
            I am hoping.  
I am created in the image of God just like all other people in the world.  
I am a person with worth and dignity.  
I am a thinking person, a feeling person, a doing person.  
I am the small *I am* that stands before the big I AM.  
...  
I am hoping  
    I am struggling  
        I am alive  
            I am Filipino [*sic*]  
                I am a woman. (Kwok 1994, 240-241)

And she is a grateful theologian/song writer (Kwok Pui-lan from Hong Kong) who holds the hands of African American writer Alice Walker who “flew to see us” in China, “ten thousand miles away.” She listens to the latter’s poem “Song” with joy and gratitude. “Immersed in the sea of yellow faces,” Kwok sings, “happily [Walker] sang: Colorful people, people of color, Tra-la-la-la-la.” Kwok continues to sing,

Across the ocean I came,  
To see people like her,  
Fierce fighters for justice,  
Yet a mother,  
In search for the mothers’ gardens.

Today we have met,  
A moment is eternity.  
Witness a new force,  
A new bonding forming.  
We are sisters, black, brown and yellow,  
Tra-la-la-la-la. (Kwok 1994, 241-242)

To the list, she could have added other Third World women and minority women whose social locations and lived experiences of suffering in hope would shed new lights on the question of who the Canaanite woman was, is, and will be, and the question of who Jesus was, is, and will be in relation to her self-understanding.

### **Towards the Transforming Narrative Religious Education**

In conclusion, we should pay full attention to what Brueggemann calls the “*primal mode of education* in the church, derived from the Torah” (Brueggemann 1982, 22, my emphasis): story. Due to its “narrative particularity,” the biblical story cannot be told once

and for all. Brueggemann says, “One can only tell the [biblical] narrative again, each time with yet another act of *interpretive* imagination” (Brueggemann 2013, 149, my emphasis). Kwok regards our biblical storytelling as an act of *transformative* imagination (à la Karl Marx). In order to transform the readers of the Bible, our biblical imagination need to be transformed first, for “people are changed, not by ethical urging but by transformed imagination” (Brueggemann 1986, 25, à la Paul Ricoeur).

It is my contention that, by her practices of story-weaving, Kwok shows us a way of transforming imagination. Kwok’s story-weaving practices suggest that postcolonial diasporic feminist imagination should incorporate *new modes of discourse* into scholarship as more scholars attempt to *connect, disrupt, and transform* stories daringly and artistically. What is needed most for the field of religious education for Asian and Asian American women is a scholarly, imaginative story-weaving art that relates Asian and Asian American women’s social construction of multiple narratives to their theological construction of Christian narrative identity.

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