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Engaging Afro/black-Orientalism: A Proposal

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I want a home here not only for the negro, the mulatto, and the Latin races, but I want the Asiatic to find a home here in the United States, and feel at home here, both for his sake and for ours. . . . I hold that a liberal and brotherly welcome to all who are likely to come to the United States is the only wise policy which this nation can adopt. . . . Contact with these yellow children of the Celestial Empire would convince us that the points of human difference, great as they, upon first sight, seem, are as nothing compared with the points of human agreement. Such contact would remove mountains of prejudice.
Frederick Douglass, 1869

The Negro problem in America is but a local phase of a world problem.
W. E. B. Du Bois, 1905

I began to feel a terrified pity for the white children of these white people: who had been sent, by their parents, to Korea, though their parents did not know why. Neither did their parents know why these miserable, incontestably inferior, rice-eating gooks refused to come to heel, and would not be saved. But I knew why. I came from a long line of miserable, incontestably inferior, rice-eating, chicken-stealing, hog-swilling niggers—who had acquired these skills in their flight from bondage—who still refused to come to heel, and who would not be saved.
James Baldwin, 1976

Some theologians and religious studies scholars who have examined the relationships between religion, especially Christianity, and empire have noted that the imperialist role of the United States around the world is intrinsically related to its racist policy against people of color within its own borders. More than a century ago, African American political activists and intellectuals addressed the interconnectedness between the national and international contexts and critiqued U.S. imperialist expansion at the expense of colonized and marginalized people both locally and globally.

Scholars in Black Studies, American Studies, and cultural studies have recently paid close attention to a trajectory of what some call *Afro/black-Orientalism* or *AfroAsian encounters* in the work of African American intellectuals, writers, artists, and political activists from the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries.¹ Scholars in those fields have examined the various ways in which African American intellectuals and activists expressed political solidarity between people of African descent and people of Asian descent by denouncing the Western imperialism, colonialism, and racism that had created what W. E. B. Du Bois called the “world color lines.” What scholars now call Afro/black-Orientalism or AfroAsian encounters is not only anti-colonial, antiracist, and anti-imperialist in its stance but also a search for Afro-Asian connections and coalitions.

¹ Some scholars call it *Afro Orientalism*, while others call it *black-Orientalism*. See Bill V. Mullen, *Afro Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xv. Some scholars also call such trajectories *AfroAsian encounters* or *Afro-Asian connections*. See Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen, ed., *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 1-2. See also Andrew F. Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh, eds., “The Afro-Asian Century,” special issue of *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2003). I use the term *African American* interchangeably with *black American*.

What does Afro/black-Orientalism have to do with religious/theological studies? Can engaging Afro/black-Orientalism provide a new direction for religious/theological studies, in general, and Asian/Asian Pacific North American religious/theological studies, in particular? To put it differently, what can religious/theological studies from an Asian Pacific North American feminist perspective² learn from Afro/black-Orientalism or AfroAsian encounters as it continues to struggle with issues about Americanness, citizenship, democracy, imperialism, moral agency, and the intersectionality of religion, race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality? In his introduction to *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, Gayraud Wilmore suggests that questions, such as how does African American religious studies relate to “Black Studies, African Studies, and to the research on Hispanic, Asian, native American, and other Third World religions,” should be addressed in a future book.³ Engaging Afro/black-Orientalism can be an attempt to respond to his call for a future task that is not only interdisciplinary but also cross-racial, cross-ethnicity, interreligious, and trans-Pacific. From another angle, engaging Afro/black-Orientalism can open a way to encourage and advance the dialogue and interactions between African American and Asian/Asian Pacific North American religious/theological studies.

In this essay, I will first discuss some of the traces of Afro/black-Orientalism that illustrate its heterogeneity in order to look at why it is significant to engage Afro/black-

² For the issues related to Asian and Asian Pacific North American identity formations, see *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women in Theology and Religion*, ed. Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-lan, and Seung Ai Yang (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

³ Gayraud Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), xiii.

Orientalism. Each section is a brief examination, and is open for further explorations. Second, I aim to articulate the significance and implications of engaging Afro/black-Orientalism for doing interdisciplinary religious/theological studies from an Asian Pacific North American feminist perspective. I take this essay as an opportunity to think about ways of entering religious and theological discussions on issues such as white supremacy, postcolonialism, imperialism, and American nationalism and national identity and to stimulate further work on these subject matters. Discussing “AfroAsian encounters” should encourage explorations of Asian-Latino/a, Asian-Native, Afro-Asian-Latino/a, and Afro-Asian-Native connections, which may bear historically similar critiques of racism, imperialism, and American nationalism.⁴

Afro/black-Orientalism and Its Traces

Afro/black-Orientalism is a heterogeneous discourse in its form, meaning, manifestation, and political as well as discursive effect. Traces of Afro/black-Orientalism include, but are not limited to, 1) nineteenth-century abolitionist Frederick Douglass’s efforts to connect the predicament of African American workers to that of Asian laborers critiquing race-based exclusion in U.S. immigration policy; 2) Zora Neale Hurston’s fierce critique of U. S. President Harry S. Truman calling him the “Butcher of Asia” for supporting U.S. imperialist expansion in

⁴ In his response to my paper presentation on Afro/black-Orientalism, Rudy Busto suggested for a further examination of the historical connections between different racial groups that yield similar critiques of Afro/black-Orientalism. Panel on “Negotiating Postcolonialism/Postcoloniality,” Asian North American Religion, Culture, and Society Group, American Academy of Religion National Meeting, San Diego, CA (Nov 2007). Also see George Lipsitz, “‘Frantic to Join . . . the Japanese Army’: Black Soldiers and Civilians Confront the Asian Pacific War,” in *Perilous Memories*, ed. T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White, and Lisa Yoneyama (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

Asia, by linking it to the lynching of blacks in the United States;⁵ 3) Richard Wright's *The Color Curtain*, which launched the tradition of AfroAsian studies;⁶ and 4) the National Association for Advancement of Colored People's response to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.⁷

Bill V. Mullen defines Afro-Orientalism as a counterdiscourse that “at times shares with its dominant namesake certain features but primarily constitutes an independent critical trajectory of thought on the practice and ideological weight of Orientalism in the Western world.”⁸ Asian American studies scholar Helen H. Jun notes that although black Orientalism has no singular meaning or manifestation, it encompasses “an entire range of black imaginings of Asia that are in fact negotiations with the limits and disappointments of black citizenship.”⁹

Whether it is limited to the discourse of black citizenship in relation to U.S. policy on Asian immigrants, or to the discourses of antiracism and anti-imperialism, Afro/black-Orientalism, as Mullen puts it, is a “signifying discourse on race, nation, and global politics constituting a subtradition in indigenous U.S. writing on imperialism, colonialism, and the making of capitalist empire.”¹⁰ As such, Afro/black-Orientalism acknowledges not only the

⁵ Bill V. Mullen, “Persisting Solidarities: Tracing the AfroAsian Thread in U.S. Literature and Culture,” in Raphael-Hernandez and Steen, *AfroAsian Encounters*, 245.

⁶ Vijay Prashad, “Bandung Is Done: Passages in AfroAsian Epistemology,” in Raphael-Hernandez and Steen, *AfroAsian Encounters*, xi.

⁷ See Lipsitz, “‘Frantic to Join . . . the Japanese Army’.”

⁸ Mullen, *Afro Orientalism*, xv.

⁹ Helen H. Jun, “Black Orientalism: Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Race and U.S. Citizenship,” *American Quarterly* 58/4 (2006): 1047-66, quotation on 1050.

¹⁰ Mullen, *Afro Orientalism*, xv.

problems of Orientalism, Western imperialism, and capitalism but also the extent to which such problems have affected African Americans, Asian Americans, Africans, and Asians, sometimes in paralleled ways and sometimes through different trajectories. Hence, Afro/black-Orientalism, as Jun puts it, is “*not* employed as an accusatory and reductive condemnation that functions to chastise black individuals or institutions for being imperialist, racist, or Orientalist.”¹¹ Rather, Afro/black-Orientalism is employed as an important site where a crude opposition between blacks and Asians can be contested, where the parallel courses of Western imperialism through Asia and Africa can be explored, where the experiences of African Americans and Asian Americans as slaves and indentured servants in the Americas, respectively, can be compared, and where cross-racial, cross-ethnic, and trans-Pacific political solidarity that is not based on racial identification can be sought out. Exploring instances of Afro/black-Orientalism in various historical contexts illuminates not only the importance of race but also how crucial it is to explore how gender, sexuality, and religion intersect with race and class in the face of ongoing racism, sexism, heterosexism, militarism, and class exploitation.

W. E. B. Du Bois’ Denunciation of White Supremacy and Imperialism

Many (mostly male) African American political activists and intellectuals in the United States in the early twentieth century hailed Japan as a role model that challenged white supremacy, rejoicing in the news that Japan had defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War. W. E. B. Du Bois, known as the American founder of Pan-Africanism, was among many African

¹¹ Jun, “Black Orientalism,” 1050.

Americans who saw the beginning of the end for white supremacy in Japan's defeat of Russia in 1905.¹² Ironically, however, Du Bois's pro-Japanese stance resonated with Japan's colonial rhetoric of "saving Asia from the Western imperialism." For instance, he stated, "The idea of Japan was to invoke war and force--to drive Europe out of Asia and substitute the domination of a weak Asia by a strong Japan."¹³ Although some African American political activists considered Japan's "victory" in Asia as a positive sign that white supremacy could be overcome, Japan's imperialism reinscribed another form of racial hierarchy in the Asian Pacific region.

Even when Japan invaded Manchuria, instead of criticizing Japan, many African Americans criticized the denunciation of the Japanese invasion in China in the mainstream U.S. press, which they considered as hypocritical in light of the fact that the mainstream U.S. press did not condemn the white supremacy that Europe and the United States had imposed on Shanghai.¹⁴ Hence, Japan's invasion of Nanjing—the Nanjing massacre in particular—did not minimize African American intellectuals' pro-Japanese stance. According to David Levering Lewis, Du Bois said in reference to the Nanjing massacre that the Japanese neither invented nor perfected "killing the unarmed and innocent in order to reach the guilty," by pointing out terrible

¹² Gerald Horne, "Tokyo Bound: African Americans and Japan Confront White Supremacy," *Souls: a critical journal of black politics, culture, and society* 2/2 (Summer 2001): 17–29, quotation on 20.

¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, "World without Race Conflict," *American Journal of Sociology* 49, no. 5 (May 1944): 450–56, quotation on 451. Unlike Du Bois, Langston Hughes rejected Japan's Pan-Asianism. See Yukiko Koshiro, "Beyond an Alliance of Color: The African American Impact on Modern Japan," *Positions: East Asia Culture Critiques* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 183–215.

¹⁴ Horne, "Tokyo Bound," 21.

instances of European conduct drawn from South Africa, the Punjab, and Guernica.¹⁵ Du Bois summed up the thoughts of many African Americans when he posed this question upon arriving in China in the 1930s: “Why is it that you [the Chinese] hate Japan more than Europe when you have suffered more from England, France, and Germany, than from Japan.”¹⁶

At the same time, despite his support of Japanese imperialism (while criticizing European imperialism), his romanticization of “Asia,” and his idealization of China under communism, Du Bois was one of the most vigorous critiques of the “Yellow Peril” in racial theories and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. He was also a leading proponent of anti-colonialism in Africa and Asia, and an untiring critic of U.S. white supremacist nationalism and capitalism. For him, full emancipation meant freeing “the majority of workers who are yellow, brown, and black.”¹⁷ After realizing the cruelty and aggression that Japanese imperialism had wrought in Asia, Du Bois asserted that imperialism by any race was unconscionable. For him and many other African American intellectuals and activists, anti-colonialist struggle meant not only vigorous opposition and critique of white supremacy but also denouncement of imperialism and racial hierarchy in any form.

¹⁵ David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: A John Macrae Book, 2000), 419.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1998), 16.

Black Support of Chinese Immigration and the Struggle over Citizenship

In her study of black attitudes toward the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 through analysis of black newspapers in the nineteenth century, Helen H. Jun shows how Orientalist discourses of Chinese cultural difference facilitated the “assimilation of black Americans to ideologies of political modernity and consolidated black identification as U.S. national subject” while reifying the Orientalist logic of the anti-Chinese movement.¹⁸ For instance, she quotes historian Arnold Shankman who observed that, “from 1880-1935 almost every time the Chinese were mentioned in the black press, it was in connection with intrigue, prostitution, murder, the sale of opium or children for money . . . superstitious practices, shootings or tong wars.”¹⁹ As Jun argues, it was crucial for black Americans to emphasize the “Christian formation of the black national subject in explicating black qualification for citizenship, which, consequently, Orientalizes, or discursively disciplines the Chinese and Indian as inadequate to political modernity.”²⁰

Although black Orientalist discourse on Chinese difference was employed to articulate the “Americanness” of black people in opposition to “Asians,” whose religious and cultural differences rendered them unfit to be considered “Americans,” black Americans realized that when federal legislation excludes one group of people based on race it could do the same to

¹⁸ Jun, “Black Orientalism,” 1048.

¹⁹ Arnold Shankman, “Black on Yellow: Afro-Americans View Chinese-Americans, 1850–1935,” *Phylon* 39/1 (Spring 1978): 1-17, quotation on 10, quoted in Jun, “Black Orientalism,” 1052.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1057.

them, thus negatively affecting their own collective endeavor to claim the full rights of U.S. citizenship.²¹ Many black Americans protested the Chinese Exclusion Act as a result.²²

This legacy of Afro/black-Orientalism illustrates the following points. First, uncritical adherence to “Americanness” would not help racial/ethnic minority groups in their claiming of full U.S. citizenship. Second, Christianity became a double-edged sword—one that challenged white supremacy and another that reinscribed American Orientalism. Last, black political support of Chinese immigration was not based on racial identification with the Chinese, whose gendered racial and immigrant formations were different from those of African Americans, but based on a common political struggle against white supremacist nationalism that had excluded racial/ethnic minority groups from claiming the full rights of citizenship in the United States.

The Bandung Conference’s Legacy of Anti-Colonialism and Afro-Asian Solidarity²³

The Bandung Conference, often referred to as the Asian-African Conference, was held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, with the leaders of twenty-nine independent Asian and African nations participating.²⁴ The strategy of Asian and African nations in the conference was to

²¹ Ibid., 1060.

²² Black attitudes toward the 1913 and 1920 California Alien Land Acts and the 1924 John Immigration Act reflect similar dynamics as they critiqued the anti-Japanese legislation because it was racial discrimination.

²³ Part of this section appeared in Nami Kim, “The ‘Indigestible’ Asian: The Unifying Term ‘Asian’ in Theological Discourse,” in Brock, Kim, Pui-lan, and Yang, *Off the Menu*.

²⁴ Originally, thirty countries, which constituted one-half of the independent countries throughout the world at that time, were invited, but the Central African Federation decided not to attend. Taiwan and South and North Korea were not invited to attend the conference. See Roeslan Abdulgani, *The Bandung Connection: The Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung in 1955* (Singapore: Gunung Agung, 1981).

“strengthen their independence from Western imperialism while keeping the Soviet bloc at a comfortable distance.”²⁵ The creation of this strategic bloc, comprised of significant portions of the so-called third world, was the beginning of what came to be known as the “nonaligned” movement. According to Richard Wright, one of two African Americans who observed the conference from the beginning, Bandung was an indictment of Western racialism, which had been the cornerstone of Western justification for colonial exploitation and promotion of the idea of white Western racial superiority.²⁶ Wright also wrote that the Bandung Conference stressed economic cooperation among the Asian and African powers. Along with the desire for economic cooperation among the participating countries, the Bandung Conference represented postcolonial nationalists’ call for the renewal of the ancient Asian and African cultures and religions that had been interrupted during the past centuries.²⁷ In other words, Bandung characterized postcolonial nationalists’ emphasis on reviving traditional cultures and religions. Although many attempts to restore often-nostalgic notions of tradition and culture were problematic as carried out in postcolonial societies during their nation-building processes, examining them helps us understand the ongoing role of “religion” in colonial, anti-colonial, and postcolonial power struggles.²⁸

²⁵ See Matthew Quest’s book review of Richard Wright’s *The Color Curtain* (1994), originally published in 1956 by the University Press of Mississippi, <http://www.spunk.org/library/pubs/lr/sp001716/bandung.html>.

²⁶ Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain; A Report on the Bandung Conference* (Cleveland: World, 1956), 151-53.

²⁷ Ibid., 204.

²⁸ For the Bandung Conference’s influence on Christian theological development in Asia, see Kim, “The ‘Indigestible’ Asian.”

Is It Necessary to Engage Afro/black-Orientalism?

In November 2006, more than thirty African leaders and Chinese gathered at the first Sino-African summit (Forum on China-Africa Co-operation), which was held in Beijing to enhance economic and technical cooperation between China and African nations. Chinese private and state companies have been building roads, dams, hospitals, and running factories and telecommunications systems across the African continent. As a return on its investment, China has demanded African resources like oil, mineral, timber, cotton, and so on.²⁹ While increasing cooperation between China and African nations has increased economic opportunities for African nations, it has also brought unforeseen tensions, for example, between local people and “imported” Chinese and other laborers from Asia who work in Chinese-owned and -run companies in Africa. Competition over cheap labor has led to what is called “the new face of the global race to the bottom.”³⁰ When newly independent Asian and African nations met for the first time in Bandung in 1955 they could not have predicted whether the outcome of their newfound collaboration would be positive or negative. Nor could W. E. B. Du Bois have foreseen the possible tensions that might arise when he wrote “China and Africa” and “I Sing to China” during his visit to China at the age of 91 in 1959.

²⁹ See Rob Crilly, “Chinese Seek Resources, Profits in Africa,” *USAToday*, June 21, 2005, http://www.usatoday.com/money/world/2005-06-21-africa-china-usat_x.htm; and “Never Too Late to Scramble; China in Africa,” *The Economist*, October 26, 2006, <http://economist.com/world/africa> (accessed March 10, 2007).

³⁰ “Chinese Migrant Workers in Africa,” *Global Labor Strategies*, March 6, 2007. http://laborstrategies.blogs.com/global_labor_strategies/2007/03/free_trade_and_html (accessed March 10, 2007).

To many, the Bandung era of Afro-Asian solidarity represented a high point of the anti-imperialist and antiracist struggles of people of Asian and African descent. Fifty years later, however, the spirit and political significance of the Bandung era seems to have faded. Vijay Prashad also notes that although “AfroAsian solidarity” emerged in the Bandung era as a political stand against colonialism, the foundation for that solidarity is “now largely eroded, with Africa and Asia interested in each other’s resources and capital, where the bold pronouncements for a radical reconfiguration of the international political economy has vanished.”³¹ The task of engaging Afro/black-Orientalism may seem challenging today because the context in which we raise concerns and questions is different from that of the early to mid-twentieth century during which African American activists and intellectuals had formed political solidarity. Also, people are no longer primarily concerned with the third-world anti-colonial struggle for nation-state sovereignty and the color line of Jim Crow racial segregation in the United States where African American activists and intellectuals began their search for global solidarity among people of color.

Yet, as black feminist Patricia Hill Collins stresses, the racial hierarchies Du Bois observed a century ago continue to exist not only on a local level but also on a global scale.³² We now face what Hill Collins calls “new racism,” which is “transnational” due to the global market economy and global mass media.³³ Racialized and gendered globalization continues to produce

³¹ Prashad, “Bandung Is Done,” xiv.

³² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 33.

³³ Ibid., 54.

color lines in the twenty-first century. Also, while admitting that the “excavations of AfroAsian solidarity might be nostalgic and anachronistic,”³⁴ Prashad nonetheless maintains that the “epistemological and historical archive of solidarity” and “memory of the interactions” must be brought to light.³⁵ In a similar vein, Mullen states, “AfroAsian solidarity needs a constant reorientation to itself. The constant threat of historical erasure of the coalition building of ethnic communities necessitates an urgent, disciplined commitment to a ‘useable’ AfroAsian past.”³⁶

By challenging white supremacy, which has persistently pit one racial/ethnic minority group against another, Afro/black-Orientalism may shed new light on the forgotten history of interactions and coalitions among African, African Americans, and Asians and Asian North Americans in their concerted efforts to resist racism, colonialism, and U.S. imperialism.³⁷ Engaging Afro/black-Orientalism is not a naïve attempt to romanticize the relationship between people of African descent and Asian descent when the relationship between these groups has been strenuous if not totally hostile as shown in incidents such as the Los Angeles Riot of 1992 and the ongoing plight of biracial children between African American fathers and “Asian” mothers on U.S. military bases in Asia. Rather, engaging Afro/black-Orientalism needs to be understood as an effort to underscore the “political solidarity” that has characterized various forms of Afro-Asian connections and coalition, including black American protests against the Chinese Exclusion Act and other discriminatory U.S. immigration policies. In turn, this helps

³⁴ Prashad, “Bandung Is Done,” xiv.

³⁵ Ibid., xxi.

³⁶ Mullen, “Persisting Solidarities,” 257.

³⁷ See *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans*, ed. Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

disrupt the black and white racial binary that has characterized racism and racial formations in mainstream U.S. culture. In what follows, I will briefly discuss some of the implications of engaging Afro/black-Orientalism for doing interdisciplinary religious/theological studies from an Asian Pacific North American feminist perspective by highlighting shared interests between the two.

First, by looking at how African American intellectuals and political activists employed an Afro/black-Orientalist “critique” to engage American nationalism and national identity, religious/theological studies from an Asian Pacific North American feminist perspective can find ways in which it can critically engage American nationalism and American identity in the context of U.S. empire building. Observing the recent fervor of American nationalism--in other words, “excessive or fanatical devotion to a nation and its interest, often associated with a belief that one country is superior to all others”³⁸--in the midst of ongoing U.S. war against Iraq, feminist scholar in religion Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls for a critical analysis of American capitalist nationalism as a structure of domination.³⁹ The end goal of such analysis, however, is not just to critique and analyze American nationalism and national identity. Rather, as Sharon D. Welch has rightly put it, what is equally needed is to articulate “alternative forms of national identity and global order and responsibility.”⁴⁰ In her response to Schüssler Fiorenza’s urgent call to engage a

³⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza uses the third definition of nationalism offered by *Encarta Dictionary*, since the United States “prides itself in being the world’s number one superpower,” in “Feminist Studies in Religion and the The*logy In-Between Nationalism and Globalization,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21/1 (Spring 2005): 111-19, quotation on 112.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

critical analysis of American nationalism as a structure of domination, Welch defines “critique” as a form of “patriotism and an affirmation of a complex identity as national and global citizens.”⁴¹ Such critique is found in the works of Du Bois and other African American intellectuals, who understood their fate under U.S. racist domestic policy in relation to others who suffer under Western imperial exploitation.

For instance, when Du Bois talked about “the world problem of the color line” in 1914, he was linking the fate of African Americans to the race problem in the world. Likewise, African American anti-colonial activists of the 1940s strongly argued that their struggles against Jim Crow were inseparably bound to the struggles of African and Asian peoples for independence from colonialism.⁴² As Penny M. Von Eschen puts it, African Americans’ critique of American empire was closely related to their critique of colonialism elsewhere, and offering a critique of American empire did not preclude them from being in solidarity with other colonized people.⁴³ Even when African Americans began embracing American foreign policy by emphasizing their American citizenship and cutting off international links of common struggle in the hope of fostering domestic civil rights toward the end of 1950s, Du Bois remarked that black Americans were “becoming Americans. But then what Americans to become?”⁴⁴ Such deployment of

⁴¹ Ibid., 129.

⁴² Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 2.

⁴³ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁴ Harold Isaacs, *The New World of Negro Americans: The Impact of World Affairs on the Race Problem in the United States and Particularly on the Negro, His View of Himself, His Country, and of Africa* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963), 228, quoted in *ibid.*, 187.

“critique” by African American intellectuals and political activists suggests a further use of critique as a way to engage American nationalism and American identity in the twenty-first century, for such critique of Americanness was an indictment of the abstract notion of human being in Western intellectual and political discourses, which in fact meant white, Western, Christian, propertied men. While Afro/black-Orientalism contributed to debunking such notions of what it meant to be “human,” its critique of American nationalism and national identity did not scrutinize this predominantly male perspective. In engaging with Afro/black-Orientalism, religious/theological studies from an Asian Pacific North American feminist perspective can further deconstruct such a concept of human subjectivity that is heteronormative and masculine, which will, in turn, help contest other abstract notions, such as freedom, liberty, justice, and equality, in Western intellectual and political traditions.

Second, engaging Afro-Orientalism also pushes theologians and religious scholars to think about the role of Christianity and “other” religions in forming American identity, since what it means to be an American has been of theological/religious interest and concern. For instance, Gayraud S. Wilmore said, “Blackness and whiteness are so deeply rooted in what it means to be an American that they have become in the United States, consciously and unconsciously, sources and norms for thinking theologically and ordering the life and work of the Christian churches.”⁴⁵ While I agree with Wilmore about the significance of color symbolism operating in the U.S. context, I suggest that we expand his argument by pointing out different gendered racial formations that have taken place in this society, including gendered racial

⁴⁵ Gayraud S. Wilmore, “Black Consciousness: Stumbling Block or Battering Ram?” in *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 86.

formations of Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States. The articulation of Americanness or American identity has been in relation not only to “race” but also to religion, for religion and race/ethnicity are closely intertwined.⁴⁶ Asians in the United States, whether they were born here or immigrated, have been viewed as “perpetual foreigners” who cannot be part of white Christian America. This further raises a question about how and to what extent Christianity can take part in the work of justice given the complex ways in which African Americans have employed Christianity to fight racism, on the one hand, and to differentiate themselves from Asian immigrants while articulating their American identity in relation to Christianity, on the other hand. Without acknowledging the complex gendered racial formations of Asian Pacific North Americans, Native Americans, African Americans, Latino/a Americans, and Euro-Americans along the axes of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, understanding what it means to be “American” will not be complete, but always reinforce the binary of black and white, and of Christianity and “other” religions in the United States.

Finally, engaging Afro/black-Orientalism can help us explore the ways in which the parameters of struggle are defined in religious/theological studies, whether the struggle is against racism, sexism, heterosexism, or imperialism. In other words, engaging Afro/black-Orientalism can assure that oppression needs to be conceptualized in ways that one form of oppression is not prioritized over another based on identity politics, or that racial/ethnic conflict among minority groups is not looked at simply as a matter between the two without dealing with white

⁴⁶ See *Revealing the Sacred in Asian & Pacific America*, ed. Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2003). Also see Khyati Joshi, *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

supremacy. This way of conceptualizing oppression and forming strategic coalitions based on such conceptualization becomes especially significant given the recent development of transnational alliances of Christian Right with antifeminist perspectives and practices that cut across national borders, extensively affecting and altering people's lives.

For instance, at the recent conference held in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, leaders of the Anglican Communion gave its national churches in the United States and Canada eight months to cease blessing same-sex unions and to ban the ordination of sexually active gay bishops.⁴⁷ Many bishops from countries in the global South have been in the forefront of this opposition to the same-sex union. They have also been opposed to the ordination of women. Moreover, Uganda bans same-sex marriages and Zanzibar criminalizes "lesbianism" and same-sex marriages, marking "the continent as a place of legally-mandated homophobic intolerance."⁴⁸ According to Jessica Horn, Nigerian federal government's plan to introduce the bill that proposes to criminalize same-sex marriages and to make activism for gay rights a criminal offense is based on President Olusegun Obasanjo's premise that such unions are "un-Biblical, unnatural and definitely un-African."⁴⁹ Horn argues that a common motif in the homophobic rhetoric of African leaders is "resisting moral corruption from the West," and the moral condemnation and persecution of non-heteronormative behavior is supported by reference to two texts that were

⁴⁷ Anthony Glassman, "Anglicans Give U.S. Church Eight Months to Stop Gay Unions," *News from the Gay People's Chronicle*, February 23, 2007, <http://www.gaypeopleschronicle.com/stories07/february/0223074.htm>.

⁴⁸ Jessica Horn, "Re-righting the Sexual Body," *Feminist Africa: Subaltern Sexualities* 6 (2006): 7-19, quotation on 7.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

introduced by the European colonization of Africa: “laws criminalizing ‘unnatural sex’ and the Bible.”⁵⁰ But the Bible, Horn maintains, was “carried again by a new wave of US-driven Pentecostal evangelism.”⁵¹ This form of Pentecostalism has been quickly immersed into communities that face the crisis of HIV/AIDS, poverty, armed conflict, by providing “space for communal catharsis while re-entering conservative Christian mores.”⁵²

In the face of these challenges, what is urgently needed are transnational alliances of anti-heterosexist and anti-heteropatriarchal oppositions, which widen the parameters of struggle to the extent that such challenges are not simply the “problems” of those who are directly affected by them but rather the issues that should concern everyone who believe in a world that does not discriminate or dehumanize persons based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion, ablebodiedness, and so on. What we can inherit from Afro-Asian connections, especially from the Bandung Conference, is that the core struggles that have rendered “third world” as oppositional consciousness. Although the spirit of the Bandung has vanished, rearticulated notion of third-world oppositional consciousness that is not based on geography nor based solely on shared experiences of oppression can be useful. As Chandra Mohanty has rightly put it, third-world oppositional consciousness and struggle is defined as “the way we think about race, class, and gender--the political links we choose to make among and between struggles.”⁵³ Such

⁵⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 4.

understanding of oppositional consciousness and struggle can help provide a platform where new ways of understanding oppression can be articulated, and where anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-heterosexist, and anti-imperialist transnational feminist alliances can be articulated and formed.

A Thought at Intermission

In his opera *Warrior Sisters: The New Adventures of African and Asian Womyn Warriors*, Fred Ho, a contemporary composer, baritone saxophone player, and political activist against racism and sexism, narrates transhistorical, transnational, and cross-racial journey of four revolutionary women. They are Fa Mu Lan, a cross-dressing female warrior during the Boxer Rebellion in China; Ashante warrior queen Nana Yaa Asantewa; Sieh King King, a community organizer who entered the U.S. “illegally” when U.S. immigration law prohibited Chinese women from entering the country; and Black Panther leader Assata Shakur. In this opera, these four women from different historical times and different geopolitical contexts journey together toward a new territory where patriarchal conceptions of color, power, sexuality, and empire are no longer present.⁵⁴

This imaginative retelling of four women’s journey in the genre of opera is a creative attempt to continue the legacy of Afro-Asian connections that have been antiracist, anti-colonialist, and anti-imperialist by incorporating anti-patriarchal struggle. I hope that engaging Afro/black-Orientalism can not only provide insights, ideas, and strategies to combat global color lines, but also open the floor for the further discussions on the issues that people continue

⁵⁴ Mullen, *Afro Orientalism*, 196.

to struggle with, such as sexism, heterosexism, neo-colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and “Christian privilege,” by taking into account gender, sexuality, and religion as constitutive of one another in forming not only one’s identity but also strategies for coalitions. For this task, “excavating” useable Afro-Asian connections must continue.