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**Orchestrating New Theological Overtures:
Heterogeneity, Dissonance, and Fluidity
vis-à-vis Imperial Monophony**

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**Introduction to
New Overtures: Asian North American Theology in the 21st Century
(Essays in Honor of Fumitaka Matsuoka),
edited by Eleazar S. Fernandez**

It was January 2008, Berkeley, California, when Fumitaka and I had a conversation about his plan to retire from Pacific School of Religion. We had a great conversation about retirement, but it was hard for me to imagine he would be retiring soon. If my memory serves me well, I even said, “As a retired person you can take *more risks!*” He laughed as we continued walking to

a nearby restaurant. I surely miss, as many do, his presence at some of the academic and church events, but I am glad he now has the freedom to pursue some of his other interests. He has more time for his family and playtime with his grandchildren. However, with his love for the church, theological education, Asian North American communities, and transformative community involvement, I cannot imagine Fumitaka hiding in retirement isolation. I am not surprised when from time to time I hear news about his new adventures and theological overtures.

In gratitude for Fumitaka Matsuoka's significant contribution to theological education, the church, religious studies, Asian and Asian American studies, and interdisciplinary studies, Asian North American scholars and friends have undertaken a book project. Honoring Matsuoka's visionary projects and courageous initiatives, this book project is also visionary in its direction and audacious in its moves. It aims not only to take account of the accomplishments and continuing struggles of Asian North Americans but also articulates strategic and creative responses to new challenges. Because the sociopolitical-religious space that Asian North Americans navigate is wide, involving multiple forms of negotiation and subject-agents and demanding interfaith and interdisciplinary approaches, this book addresses a wide range of topics: contextualization, empire and geopolitics, diaspora and racial minority formation, sexuality, class, gender, Asian North American theologies, postcolonialism, biblical studies, mission and ministry, pedagogy, interfaith relations, transnationalism, and more. In the spirit of companionship and dialogue, this book also has a section devoted to African American, Latino/a, and Native American voices.

On Music Metaphor: New Overtures

Music is something that is already in the air waiting for creative spirits to catch its tune and rhythms and its various expressions. Such is the case with the title of this book: *New Overtures*. The title came as if waiting for receptive and reflective individuals to welcome it into the world of words and prose. It emerged out of my conversation with Kwok Pui-lan and Tat-siong Benny Liew. Contributors to the volume have used various musical metaphors— notes, melody, syncopation, counterpoint, fugue, *sinfonia*, composition, improvisation, bluegrass, pedal point, remix, elegy, requiem, *bembe*, etc.—to articulate their views. With the skillful transposition of the authors, these musical metaphors have explanatory and revelatory powers: to disclose the intricate web of social relations and articulate new possibilities of dwelling and acting.

Music is an apt metaphor for use in this project. It conveys many of the key ideas presented by various authors regarding social harmony, dissonance, contrapuntality, change, fusion, creativity, adaptation, cooperation, construction, fluidity, hybridity, lament, tradition, option for the least, etc. The complicated and complex nature of harmony, polyphony, and counterpoint makes musical metaphor particularly fitting. Creative and delightful compositions often include pleasing harmonies as well as discordant notes and dissonance. The Chinese composer Tan Dun, notes Kwok, uses counterpoint to bring ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, sound and silence together to create imaginative musical works that resist easy classification. Fugue offers an example of counterpoint or contrapuntal expression. A composition of counterpoint in which many voices enter, fade, overlap, and reenter, fugue is an

appropriate metaphor for postcolonial contrapuntal reading strategy—a reading strategy that has been an effective ally of subaltern communities.

Writers in this volume convey deep respect for tradition, for classical music of various times and climes. Patrick Cheng, for example, employs *sinfonia*, a term originating in the late Renaissance to introduce various kinds of pieces, usually vocal. By the 1700s, it was sometimes used to designate the three-movement Italian overture, which Cheng adopts for his articulation of the trinity. Nonetheless, even as contributors to the volume show deep respect for tradition, they approach tradition as a living heritage that needs constant engagement and re-interpretation in relation to new challenges. Jonathan Tan speaks of moving beyond tradition maintenance to traditioning-remix as a much-needed posture in order to take account of historical movement as well as of fluidity and multiplicity. Similarly, Boyung Lee employs the bluegrass form which showcases each musician one-by-one; instruments and singers take turns playing or singing the melody and improvising. As part of a whole, each one plays an active role and does not simply conform to established harmony, authority, or tradition.

Context: Asia, Transnationalism, and Asian America as Geopolitical Place and Space

The greater freedom claimed by later generations of Asian North American theologians to use pieces from various places and cultural traditions to compose new overtures, reflects not only a greater embrace of the dynamic, shifting, and fluid character of realities but also a new understanding of our global context—particularly our global connectivity. To be sure, each musician has a geographic provenance, birthed and shaped by specific localities. Johann

Sebastian Bach is a child of Germany (West) as Tan Dun, widely known for his scores for the movies *Crouching Tiger* and *Hidden Dragon*, is of China (East). Similarly, we can say that an Aristotelian classic is a child of the West as a Confucian classic is of the East. But what is Germany or China, Europe or Asia? There was not even a nation-state called Germany when Bach was born! Where is the demarcation line that separates the East from the West? Who draws the line and for what purpose? Boundaries are constructs that people determine and, in many instances, change. Bach belongs to the West as Tan to the East (where is the reference point?) as they both belong to the earth and to humanity. Tan did not learn music solely from his village in Hunan, China, but also in New York as a graduate student at Columbia University studying composition with Chou Wen-Chung, a Chinese American composer, who in turn worked with composer Edgard Varèse, an immigrant from France. Tan encountered the works of composers such as Philip Glass (trained in harmony and counterpoint), John Cage, and Steve Reich, to name a few.

In a spirit like Tan Dun's, Asian American theologians have exercised growing freedom in fusing horizons to compose new theological overtures. This is not simply because no one can own a single horizon, but because the well-being of one locality or group is connected to another. With a fluid and unstable construal of borders and an expansive sense of belonging, the new generation of Asian North American theologians has become more daring in transgressing constructed boundaries of various sorts, whether geographic, racial/ethnic, nation-state or fields of discipline. They fuse horizons for the sake of that which promotes life. Appropriating Michel de Certeau's poacher who trespasses on the private properties of others, Liew speaks of drawing

“resources available from various sites and transits liberally and flexibly, without pledging to any cultural, racial, or national canons or canonical standards, *for the sake of justice making.*”¹

Essentialist, territorial-based thinking served an important purpose in the era of the formation of nation-states and their struggles for national independence. While geographical territory is a given reality, it is not simply geography that defines the life of nation-states. Much of what defines the quality of life and people’s interaction within a nation-state is a construct, a geopolitical construct. There is a geographical place called Asia to be sure—discourse exists in relation to geographic place; nothing exists in thin air—but the term “Asia” and how Asians experience life in relation to the rest of the world is a geopolitical construct. There is Asia because Asia or Asia Pacific has been constructed: it is a construct in relation to Europe, the United States of America, and in relation to what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call “Empire,” a network of power relations that transcends nation-states even if it is enforced and propagated by more powerful nation-states, especially the United States.²

Asia as a context is a construct of the Euro-American sociopolitical imaginary. Japan tried to claim it but was not successful when its interest collided with the interest of the West, particularly of the United States. Edward Said calls this Western sociopolitical imaginary of Asia Orientalism. Asia is a creation of a Western Orientalizing gaze; it is a mirror of Western fantasy, fears, and desires. For the West, Asia is the wild, the barbaric, the exotic, and the alien that must be subjugated, tamed, rejected, and/or appropriated. From a geopolitical point of view, Asia

¹ Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Introduction: Intervening on the Postcolonial,” in *Postcolonial Intervention: Essays in Honor of R. S. Sugirtharajah*, ed. Tat-siong Benny Liew (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 15. Emphasis mine.

² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

serves the political and economic interests of the United States. In cultural and religious matters, it is considered a resource for bottled spirituality to rejuvenate spiritually-sapped Westerners. Asia in the Western imaginary offers what it desires, provided the objects of its desire are first tamed and domesticated.

As a geopolitical construct—non-bounded space—much of what is Asia lies beyond its geographic confines. Much of what is Asia is transnational and relational. As a constructed relational concept much of what Asia experiences—poverty, economic prosperity, conflict, etc.—is a product of this transnational relationship. Global relationship as it is seen through geopolitics is constitutive of what is Asia and Asian reality. There is no such thing as Asia apart from this geopolitically framed relationship, and this geopolitically framed relationship shapes the interaction of nation-states within the Asian region and its interaction without, with such entities as Europe and the United States. The exchange of communications, financial transactions, goods, services, and ideas make up Asia and the context of Asia. When Asia is viewed as a construct, a fluid, shifting, porous, and expansive reality, it is no longer tenable to speak of Asia in essentialist-purist terms. Asia is a hybridized reality. The “Asian critical principle” that Asian theologians speak about is “critical” only when it is critical of its closely-bounded geographic framework and of its essentialist, purist, and nativistic premises.

Seeing Asia as a constructed geopolitical discourse (not a unified and bounded unit) liberates us from territorial/sociocultural essentialism, and it helps us understand the relationship between Asian and Asian American. If Asia as a construct is a reality beyond the geographic confines of the Asian region, we can say that being Asian is not completely identical with

remaining physically in the land called Asia and embodying traditional/essential markers of “Asianness,” whatever they may be. This runs counter to the insistence of some Asian scholars that those who are physically at home in Asia are true (or more) Asian than those in the diaspora.³ I contend that in the era of massive global diaspora, Asia is where its people are: the majority of its inhabitants have stayed at home but many are scattered around the globe and are finding spaces, creating or constructing the Asian. The Asian is mobile, not simply bounded by national soil. The Asian, even if not in the Asian territory, is connected to Asia and affected by what happens to Asia. This is clearly the case in the relationship between the United States and Asia. Whatever relationship the United States has with Asia at a particular moment in history has a corresponding effect on how the U.S. society is in relationship with Asian Americans. Asia as a constructed context is not a stable reality, but subject to the vicissitudes of global politics. In this regard, when Asians and Asian North American theologians articulate what the Asian context and, by extension, being Asian is, they must move beyond geography to the realm of geopolitics and social imaginary.

Multiple Subjectivities and Belongings: Multiple Expressions of Struggle

If we speak of Asia as a complex, broad, transnational, porous, hybrid, fluid, unstable, and contested geopolitical space, we must do the same when we speak of Asian identity and subjectivity. Musical metaphors that express freedom, movement, fluidity, and multiplicity are

³ Cf. Gerald O. West, “What Difference Does Postcolonial Biblical Criticism Make? Reflections from a (South) African Perspective,” in Liew, *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honor of R. S. Sugirtharajah*, 256-273.

reflective of the prevailing understanding among Asian North American scholars and theologians that Asian American identity is socially constructed, fluid, shifting, complex, and multiple. The homogenous Asian does not exist except in the Orientalist imaginary. Asians and Asian North Americans are humans assuming multiple identities, subjectivities, and belongings. This multiplicity is true not only *between* nation-states in Asia, but even *within* nation-states. Moreover, there are multiple subjectivities at the individual level. An individual may be Chinese by ethnicity, born in Malaysia, adopted by white Canadians, and an immigrant to the United States. We may add other categories: gender, sexuality, class, and religious affiliation. If this person is gay or lesbian, she or he may seek affinity with white gays and lesbians, but may also encounter racism within that group. On the other hand, while she or he may feel at home ethnically with Asian North Americans, she or he may experience marginalization in the Asian North American communities because of her or his sexual identity.

With heightened transnational connection brought about by the compression of time and space and extension of reach, we must articulate an anthropology that takes serious account of translocal identity. There is a need to speak of identity not only in terms of multiplicity but also in terms of translocality. The translocal is not simply an adjective we attach to a person: it is constitutive of a person's identity, an evolving form of identity. It is a particular way of being and a particular way of dwelling. The translocal is a self that is porous to the interweaving of the many localities in the self. This person is locally rooted and globally winged. A translocal is one who experiences the interweaving, the tension, and the possibilities of one world of many worlds.

Complexifying the multiplicity, fluidity, and unstableness of identity is what Matsuoka calls “amphibolous” life. He speaks of himself as one living with an amphibolous faith, not completely at home in one religion such as Christianity. A person or community with an amphibolous faith embodies more than one epistemological and cosmological orientation. Most often the Eurocentric-Christian worldview expects or forces the individual to make an either-or decision, but diverse orientations do not submit to easy compromise. Thus the diverse person or community experiences tensions with the wider society as well as tension within. There have been tensions within white churches that see Hmong members, for example, embodying their indigenous and Buddhist religious practices as baptized Christians. Tension results from the expectation that Hmong members must stick to a single Christian, if not Eurocentric, worldview.

Given the constructed, multiple, and constantly shifting character of identity and subjectivity, Asian North American theologians have realized that they cannot continue in silence for the sake of harmony within Asian North American communities. Harmony cannot be maintained at the expense of muted identities and subjectivities of other members within Asian American communities, especially if these identities and subjectivities have become occasions of oppression. Asian North American theologians of later generations are increasingly cognizant of this reality; hence, they have become more open and daring in speaking about dissonance within the Asian North American communities. One’s experience of pain cannot be muted for the sake of harmony. As there are multiple identities and various experiences of marginalization, so must the expressions of struggle be multiple.

"We must work with many fronts at once," says Charlotte Bunch, because people are oppressed by multi-dimensions of issues in different degrees. She continues, "While we may say at any given moment that one issue is particularly crucial, it is important that work be done on other aspects of the changes we need at the same time."⁴ Aida Hortado states a similar point: "All forms of oppression afflicting . . . groups have to be taken into account simultaneously."⁵ Subaltern women, in response to white feminists' homogenizing discourse which assumes generic women's experience, point to the necessity of dealing with forms of oppression that are particular to specific groups. Instead of conceptualizing gender subordination from the sole point of women's experience, which homogenizes and imperializes, Hortado, along with Patricia Zavella and other feminists of color, proposes that "social structure should be the analytical focus, which allows for profound differences among women."⁶ This insight is useful not only in women's discourse but also in negotiating, articulating, and advancing coalitional politics for global democracy.

Even as dissonance and differentiated response is affirmed, Asian North Americans know that collaboration is critically important. Collaboration and dissonance are not antithetical. Collaboration has integrity when dissonance has its place. This includes dissonance within Asian communities and dissonance in relation to the wider society. Artful collaboration, like bluegrass or jazz, allows each participant to take a turn in playing the melody and, at other moments in the

⁴ Charlotte Bunch, "Going Public with Our Vision," in *Experiencing Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, ed. Virginia Cyrus (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1993), 389.

⁵ Aida Hortado, *The Color of Privilege: Three Blasphemies on Race and Feminism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 42.

⁶ Ibid.; Patricia Zavella, "The Problematic Relationship of Feminism and Chicana Studies," *Women's Studies* 17:123-134.

performance, the accompaniment. Each contributes to the performance, taking leadership and fading away in turn, to produce a marvelous performance in spite of or because of their distinctness, because they share something in common: the performance of beautiful music. Naming the “common” is critical for collaboration or coalition building. The crucial question becomes: What is the “common”?

Naming and Producing the “Common”: Collaboration/Coalition

The common is often understood in generic, general, and essentialist terms. It is frequently associated with the traditional notion of community or public. In legal terms the “common” is public domain that is owned and managed by the state. This is not what “common” means here. The “common,” as Hardt and Negri contend, is not an entity controlled by the state but something that is named and produced through the communication and collaboration of the singularities.⁷ The common is an expression of an “ethical notion of performativity”: it is the performance of the singularities in their acts of naming the common that they share (they live on the same earth, struggle under capitalist regimes of production and exploitation, and share hopes for a better life) and, through the process of communication, also produce the common. The common they produce is, in turn, also productive: the common produces the common. This dual understanding of the common—that which is *produced* as well as that which *produces*—is a critical key to understanding economic and social activity.⁸

⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 206.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

What is the common that already exists and which Asians and Asian American theologians must produce? Where must we focus our gaze to start building the common? Where do differences intersect, and how shall we discern the common in the intersection?

Aside from the general notion of the common that Asians and Asian North Americans share with each other and with the rest of humanity—such as the shared earth and globally shared vulnerabilities and hopes—Asians have come to share (or have been forced to share) something in common by virtue of geopolitical destiny in relation to the interest of the West or the global North. Asian Americans share a common plight as racialized/minoritized groups within the white dominant society. To be sure the common they share is fluid, volatile, and shifting, but what they share in common provides a strategic, tactical point for collaboration or coalition. Multiple identities and belonging complicate the shape of the common: there are differences that cannot be muted. How shall we take the differences, particularly those that are locations of pain?

One way to interpret the intersection of differences is to recognize the various forms of oppression as inseparable even as they are distinct. This is what I have argued elsewhere as the interlocking structure of systemic evils.⁹ It means that the configuration of one's experience of a specific form of oppression and exploitation is influenced by the extent to which one is affected by other forms of oppression, a reminder that while differences exist, interconnections also exist. Lines of differences are present (e.g., class lines, racial lines, and gender lines), and it is “between”

⁹ Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).

such lines, says Cherríe Moraga, that “the truth of our connection lies.”¹⁰ When lines of differences connect, attract, and relate, the common is being produced, and coalitional praxis is being born.

The lines of differences and oppression intersect and interlock and the multiple forms of marginalization must be addressed singly and integrally. But what is needed is more than the coming together of different interests interconnected by pain. There is a broader reality and frame that people with distinctive pains share; this is the imperial condition. We need to see the distinctive pains and struggles through this larger frame: global democracy in the face of imperial hegemony. Identity politics in Asian America needs to be seen in relation to empire, which, as I noted earlier, is a network of power relations at a global level. Without this larger perspective ethnic groups can easily be subverted and pitted against each other, as was the case between African Americans and Asian North Americans in South Central Los Angeles.

Transgressing Boundaries, Bridging Various Disciplines and Publics

If geographic regional formations are constructs, so are various academic disciplines. If Asia is a construct based on geopolitical interest, so are Asian studies and Asian American studies. Geopolitical interest has shaped their academic formation. This is the case, Kwok argues, with area or regional studies which traditionally divided Asia into regions: East Asia, Southern Asia, and South Asia. Each area studies developed “experts” (including “native informants”) who gathered and accumulated a body of knowledge for the consumption of the global North.

¹⁰ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 59.

Area studies served the function of providing information on enemy nation-states and strategic regions. The influence of geopolitics in the formation of academic fields reminds us of Michel Foucault's discourse on power-knowledge.¹¹ In the case of Asia regional studies, the hegemonic power of the global North assumed the form of knowledge; it possessed an aura of academic neutrality and legitimacy.

The emergence and status of Asian American studies, as Matsuoka's essay reminds us, is also reflective of the larger politics; it mirrors the plight of Asian American communities. Like other fields of study, its institutionalization as an academic discipline intertwined with the politics of higher education, the politics of the wider society, and the question of its contribution to the cultural capital. Asian American studies emerged out of the clamor from the community for a relevant academic program and with a strong participation from members of the community. Pressures from the university to conform to academic autonomy, which is considered essential for research, led to its distancing from the community at large. Asian American studies gained academic legitimacy, but it resulted in separation—being split off—from the interest of the wider community, particularly Asian North American communities.

Asian American studies, including theological studies, contends Matsuoka, need to constantly question the relationship between academic legitimacy and accountability to our communities, particularly to the challenges Asian North Americans face. Theological education must do the same. The academic integrity of Asian American studies or theological studies needs to be maintained, but academic fields do not exist for themselves alone. We need to know how

¹¹ Michel Foucault in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

they are contributing to the cultural capital of the wider society in general and to Asian and Asian North American communities in particular. We need to find out how Asian North American theological discourse is informing our faith communities. Is it a postcolonial theology without a church? Asian American studies and Asian North American theologies must not only maintain their legitimacy in the academic world, they must also exercise critical presence in academic settings—questioning content, method, pedagogy, policies, and institutional structures that promote marginalization—and they must articulate transformative practices.

Global complexity, geographic/geopolitical deterritorialization and re-territorialization, border crossings, threshold dwelling, transnationality, fluidity, and hybridity must bear on how we construct fields of disciplines. The academic community has abundant institutional forms of insistent individualism (such as disciplinary fields) that have become specialty silos. These specialty fields, says John Cobb Jr., “constitute self-contained communities of research whose selection of topics is little affected by any needs but their own.”¹² The “hands-off” agreement among specialty fields breeds a kind of indifference to common concerns that everyone must address.¹³ Writers in this volume have recognized the need for interdisciplinary work which, in the prevalence of sacralized disciplinary silos, requires the unholy act of transgression. This volume embodies theologies that transgress disciplinary boundaries: boundaries that make academic disciplines captive to hegemonic interests; boundaries that are of little use in the life

¹² John Cobb Jr., cited in John B. Bennett, *Academic Life: Hospitality, Ethics, and Spirituality* (Boston: Anker Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 15.

¹³ Joseph Bessler, “Seminaries as Endangered Habitats in a Fragile Ecosystem: A New Ecology Model,” in *Revitalizing Practice: Collaborative Models for Theological Faculties* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 9.

and practice of communities; boundaries or disciplinary silos that make scholars prisoners of their academic disciplines. Matsuoka is a model of bridging the various publics—civil society, academy, and the church—of Asian American studies and Asian North American theological discourse, as well as of various fields of discipline. He is a public intellectual, a church leader, an academic administrator, a scholar, and a teacher.

Engaging the Public and Creating Counterpublics

The dreams and voices of Asian Americans need to find a place in the wider public square if they are to contribute to the shaping of our public life. The dominant public sphere is, however, elitist and exclusionary: it favors the wealthy and denies participation to a significant number of groups such as the poor majority, common laborers, women and children, and migrants or non-citizens, to name but a few. The notion of public discourse based on the force of better argument only serves to hide the advantage of those who have educational credentials and economic and political means. It is naïve to start a dialogue or conversation as if sociopolitical inequalities do not exist. The official, dominant global public as we know it is controlled by powerful economic and political interests.

The official public sphere not only excludes subaltern voices, in many ways it is also inhospitable to religious voices, including the theological production of the subaltern. Although there is growing recognition of the positive role that religion plays in society, many subaltern progressive movements do not readily welcome the contributions of religious communities except for tactical purposes, “renting a clerical collar” or clothing mobilization work with “moral

garments” in order to provide a “passport of morality.”¹⁴ This should not, however, be a reason to give up working with progressive movements or give up participation in the wider public sphere. Asian American theologians perform an important role in articulating political or public theologies that address our common life.

Given multiple exclusions and inequalities, it is imperative that the official public be challenged. Even more, Asian North American theological communities must create counterpublics. The struggle is not simply for inclusion into the single official public, as if it were good in itself, but because multiple publics are necessary for participatory democracy.¹⁵ Any adequate theory of the public must allow for the multiplicity of publics, especially publics that have been sidelined and silenced by the larger public. These alternative publics are not meant to be “separatist, except periodically, for health,” says Alice Walker.¹⁶ Counterpublics provide a space for the subaltern multitude to regroup, re-imagine, re-energize and re-strategize so as to engage and subvert the larger exclusionary public, as well as to construct a new and better tomorrow. The vision of a new world—a world symbolized by the Pentecost, or a world in which there is room for many worlds (*un mundo donde quepan muchos mundo*), or following

¹⁴ Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*, First Edition (New York: Random House, 1971), 36, 44.

¹⁵ Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Poststructuralist” Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 69-98.

¹⁶ Cited in Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 41.

U.S. feminists of color, of *Otro Mundo Zurdo* (the left-handed world)—needs a counterpublic to dream, subvert the status-quo and launch differential-oppositional-coalitional praxis.¹⁷

Organization of the Book

In addition to the Introduction and the Postlude this book has four parts: Reading the Past and Setting the Notes for the New Theological Overtures (Part 1); Sight (Site) Reading: Voicing our Songs of Laments, Struggles, and Hopes (Part 2); Our Repertoire: Perspectives from Various Disciplines (Part 3); and Orchestrating and Conspiring with Others: Conversations with Companions on the Journey (Part 4). Let me spell out the basic direction of each Part and then proceed to take a brief rendering of the distinctive notes of each essay composition.

Part 1, Reading the Past and Setting the Notes for the New Theological Overtures, attempts to take account of the history of Asian American experience: the struggles and hopes of previous generations, the shifting contours of Asian American studies in response to shifting political dynamics in the wider U.S. context, and the evolving faith praxis of the people, particularly those who have given shape to the theological discourse of the time. Based on critical retrieval and re-reading of historical developments, the essays in Part 1 attempt to articulate the basic shape and direction that Asian and Asian North American theological reflection must take in the twenty first century. The two essays in Part 1 are from Matsuoka, “Asian North American Theology in the 21st Century: A Personal Reflection,” and Jonathan Tan,

¹⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, “La Prieta,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981), 208-209. Also see Analouise Keating, “Forging El Mundo Zurdo: Changing Ourselves, Changing the World,” in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, eds. Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 519-530.

“From Classical Tradition Maintenance to Remix *Traditioning*: Revisioning Asian American Theologies for the 21st Century.”

Asian North Americans cannot move forward without learning where they have been and without embracing the pains, struggles, and hopes of the previous generations. Their ability to name and give voice to the history of their people is possible only if they have learned to care and have cared enough to learn and listen. Second generation theologians know that their current position in the world of theological discourse owes much to the labors of an earlier generation. It is with profound gratitude that they exercise a critical assessment of the past as they seek to move forward.

Matsuoka, a pioneer among second generation Asian North American theologians and the honoree of this anthology, highlights both this gratitude and critical assessment of the past even as he seeks to articulate what he believes should be the new direction for Asian and Asian North American theology. Matsuoka’s posture in relation to the past and the present coheres with the way he sees his life’s journey, a journey made up of self-conscious decisions within the larger framework of a historical context he did not choose. Perhaps this is what we call destiny, as Matsuoka does. He sees destiny not as the iron jacket of history that stifles agency, but rather the setting of his experience of life “on the boundary;” it is “grace entangled.” From this personal starting point Matsuoka takes a cursory account of the development of Asian American studies and, more explicitly, of theological studies. He then proceeds to name the themes of Asian North American theologies and articulates the scaffolding of Asian North American theologies for the twenty first century.

Providing a hinge connecting Matsuoka and the rest of the essays is Tan's work. Tan does a brief historical critique of the works of first generation theologians, highlighting the significance of their struggles against racism and various forms of discrimination as well as their claim for a place in church and society, while pointing out the limitations of their theoretical frameworks, particularly their essentialist thinking and assimilationist stances. He then articulates the theological project of the next generation, which takes account of the multivalent and complex intertwining of sociopolitical, economic, cultural, religious, ecological, and sexual identities. Tan adopts the lens of traditioning-remix vis-à-vis tradition maintenance, an approach he believes is best suited to dealing with multiple subjectivities and concerns in an increasingly globalized world.

Part 2, Sight (Site) Reading: Voicing our Songs of Laments, Struggles, and Hopes, critiques the context of the Asian North American experience, one which is multidimensional and simultaneously local and global, as well as transnational. Attentiveness to the local is possible only by being attentive to the global, which is not simply the world out there but a reality constituted by the interweaving of various localities. With this wider frame setting the context, essays in Part 2 name the multidimensional aspects of Asian North American identity and experience and bring to the forefront matters that call for serious engagement not only within Asian North American communities but also in the wider public, such as gender, sexuality, diaspora, racial inequality, and the persistence of hegemonic-colonializing practices. Opening Part 2 is the essay of Lester Edwin Ruiz, followed by essays of Kwok Pui-lan, Wonhee Anne Joh, James Kyung-Jin Lee, Nami Kim, and Patrick S. Cheng.

Ruiz's essay, "Revisiting the Question Concerning (Theological) Contextualization," provides an appropriate opening for Part 2. His account of contextualization sets the stage or framework for taking account of the context of Asian North American theological discourse. No doubt contextualization calls us to take context seriously, but what does taking it seriously mean? Before this question can be adequately addressed, a more fundamental question needs to be asked: What do we mean by contextualization? In an attempt to answer this question Ruiz calls us to revisit the question concerning contextualization. Situating the context of contextualization in the world of empire, diaspora, and multiple ways of dwelling, Ruiz brings up the significant multiple nuances of contextualization, exploring its depth and width. Subverting essentialist premises, he speaks of contextualization as an act or practice of re/producing insurrectionary knowledge, liberating ways of being, empowering politics, world-forming practices, etc.

Kwok's "Theological Counterpoints: Transnationalism and Political Theology in the Asia Pacific" demonstrates that relevant political theology must account for shifts in the conceptualization of the in-between space and in the relationship between Asia and America. She calls for a serious examination of the older Western imaginaries of Asia, which often fail to consider the changing geopolitical dynamics, particularly the rise of China and India as global economic powers. We cannot continue to ignore this new reality if political theology must speak prophetically to the challenges of our increasingly globalized and transnationalized context. In addition to taking Asian geopolitics as context seriously, Kwok argues that categories such as empire, nation, citizenship, and transnationalism must be integral to theological discourse, along with race, class, gender, sexuality, and other forms of identity. Kwok calls for an approach to

theologizing that accentuates counterpoint as a way of experimenting with what she names new theological aesthetics.

Interweaving and complementing Kwok's theological counterpoint is Joh's "Postcolonial in Fugue: Contrapuntality of Asian American Experience." Joh deploys fugue as a musical metaphor to speak, following Edward Said, of contrapuntality in postcolonial discourse. The characteristics of fugue—a polyphonic composition in which many distinct voices enter, fade, re-enter, overlap, interweave, and assume a certain texture—is akin to a postcolonial contrapuntal composition. As a postcolonial metaphor, fugue, argues Joh, points to a way of reading that blurs or transgresses the traditional binary line of center/periphery, East/West, citizen/non-citizen, etc. With postcolonial fugue, Joh points to a way of doing theology that opens the possibility of singularity and plurality coming together to form a promising social textuality.

After Kwok and Joh have introduced us to the larger context of geopolitics and postcolonial ways of reading such as counterpoint/contrapuntality, Lee presents in his "Elegies of Social Life: The Wounded Asian American," a reading of the pain of Asian North Americans through the hermeneutic lens of "woundedness." What if, Lee asks, instead of theorizing damage as injury inflicted upon otherwise healthy Asian North Americans by the dominant white society, we see Asian North American experience as fundamentally that of woundedness, one that is intrinsic to its social body history? Perhaps, Lee ventures, in such a reframing we might be able to reimagine justice not as an elusive revolutionary fantasy but as a life practice in which we become more attentive to the limits and capacities of social institutions and the contingencies of wounded bodies that inhabit our sociopolitical habitat. It may be, contends Lee, that the

dominant narrative or the fundamental starting point of health is a problem in itself, and that we need to subvert the hegemony of the normal so as to liberate ourselves from its grip.

Building on the works of Asian North American scholars, Kim's essay, "Collaborative Dissonance: Gender and Theology in Asian Pacific America," pursues and articulates the crucial importance of gender in doing theology in the Asian Pacific American context. Without a doubt, putting gender at the front and center of theology creates tensions and conflicts within Asian North American communities, but this matter cannot be skirted to preserve superficial unity. Recognizing the need for collaboration even in the midst of conflict, Kim proposes "collaborative dissonance" as a posture for theologizing in the Asian North American context. Collaborative dissonance does not seek to resolve differences, but sees the constructiveness of difference and multiplicity in the re/production of theological knowledge.

Cheng's essay, "A Three-Part Sinfonia: Queer Asian Reflections on Trinity," pursues further the intersectionality of various forms of oppression and exploitation, particularly as it relates to the experience of queer Asian North Americans. Queer Asian North Americans are caught in the dehumanizing middle: the heterosexism of Asian North American communities and the racism of white lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities. Wrestling with this context, Cheng correlates the queer Asian North Americans' three-fold experience of sexuality, race, and spirituality with the perichoretic interaction within the trinitarian God-head. If the three-fold experience of sexuality, race, and spirituality mirrors the interaction in the Divine life itself, then, Cheng argues, queer Asian North Americans are made in the image and likeness of God, although in a distinctive melodic key. This trinitarian rendering of queer Asian North

American experience is Cheng's attempt to bring wholeness not only to queer Asian North American communities but also to the wider world in need of transformation.

Part 3, *Our Repertoire: Perspectives from Various Disciplines*, articulates and presents the various repertoires that Asian North American scholars have developed and advanced in response to the challenges they face. Part 3 includes essays from the fields or disciplines of ethics, education and pedagogy, biblical studies, theology (particularly mission), ministry, and interfaith relations.

The first essay under Part 3 is Sharon Tan's "Composing Integrity: A Method for Moral Agency for Asian North Americans." "Simple integrity," which Tan describes as a past-oriented, dogmatic consistency of belief, voice, and action, is not adequate to the complex identity experience of Asian North Americans that intertwines racism and partial privilege. Instead of simple integrity Tan composes and proposes what she calls "complex integrity." This notion of complex integrity, Tan contends, acknowledges multiple sources of moral knowledge and responsibilities, and it composes integrity by weaving multiple sources and narratives into a desired moral future seeking to respond to the challenges of the present. For those who are both victims of marginalization and recipients of partial privilege, Tan envisions the direction of complex integrity to be that of reconciliation and justice: right relation and the flourishing of all, particularly in U.S. society.

Following Tan is Boyung Lee's "Singing Bluegrass in a Mother Tongue: An Asian North American Pedagogy." Lee appropriates bluegrass, though not native to Asia, as an apt metaphor for articulating the distinctive features of Asian North American religious education. In contrast

to a kind of music in which all instruments play the melody together or one instrument consistently leads while others follow, bluegrass allows each musician to take turns in leading, playing the melody and improvising on it. Transposing the old-music and the blue-grass metaphors to Asian North American communities, Lee points out the old-music emphasis in Asian North American communities in which community members are expected to sing the community's tune, often at the expense of their own. The emphasis on communal harmony in many instances silences dissonance. Lee is not debunking the old-music, but is seeking balance: motherland's strong communal music balanced by encouraging each member to take a turn playing the melody and, sometimes, to improvise. Lee proposes this balance for Asian North American religious education.

The theme of the next essay, "Informality, Illegality, and Improvisation: Theological Reflections on Money, Migration, and Ministry in Chinatown, NYC, and Beyond," is ecclesiology in relation to economy, migration, and religion. Amos Yong calls our attention to the socioeconomic plight of Asian Americans—particularly to the lives of many undocumented Fuzhounese in New York City who are struggling to survive under Chinatown's informal economy—as an entry point to thinking about the church. With insights from ethnographic research that highlight the interweaving of globalization, migration, and religion, Yong explores their impact on how we may re-imagine church and ministry. Deploying the lens of informal economy, he re-reads the socioeconomic experience of the early apostolic church to articulate a model of mission and ministry, one that is particularly responsive to the plight of diasporized and marginalized people. Without a doubt, what he calls a migration model presents challenges, but it

also offers immense possibilities for the church's wider engagement with economic globalization.

Following an ecclesiological focus and a theologizing that does not run away from dissonance, J. Jayakiran Sebastian's essay, "Should the Pedal Point always Bring Dissonance Back into Harmony? Interrogating *missio Dei* from an Asian American Perspective," examines the dominance of *missio Dei*, the direction of the pedal point in the understanding and practice of mission in the past few decades. In introducing the possibility of dissonance to the established harmony, Sebastian moves in the spirit of critical scholarship that is fully cognizant of the constant temptation to create regimes of truth. He is not discounting the significance of *missio Dei*, but wants us to see how the concept has played out in empirical terms. With probing questions, Sebastian asks: Without completely denying its Divine inspiration, by granting it Divine origin are we not covering up the harsh realities that have been done in the name of mission? Are we downplaying human responsibility in mission?

Sebastian's essay offers a great segue to J. Paul Rajashekar's "Discordant Notes: Proselytism in an Age of Pluralism." The reality of religious pluralism that has been part of Asian reality is now increasingly a global reality. The migration of people has changed the religious demographics of various places, including countries of the global North. Given our increasingly plural religious context, Rajashekar explores some issues related to proselytism. When religion is understood as integral to the life of the whole society, proselytism may be seen as an assault to identity and rights, and can therefore, contends Rajashekar, be socially disruptive. He is not suggesting that Christian churches abandon evangelism or the possibility of

conversion, but puts evangelism in tension with the challenges of pluralism. Rajashekar's highly nuanced essay does not offer closure to the conversation, but leaves us with discordant notes.

Asian Americans need to articulate their distinctive narratives, their struggles, hopes, and dreams of a new and better tomorrow, but they know that they have companions and they need companions. They share many challenges with other marginalized voices, such as African American, Latino American, and Native American. Part 4, *Orchestrating and Conspiring with Others: Conversations with Companions in the Journey*, provides a space for companions to share their thoughts as Asian North American theologians articulate new theological overtures.

James Treat's essay, "Requiem Mass: The Bitter Medicine of Religious Change," presents a Native American voice and perspective. Treat forewarns his readers that, much as he finds affinity with the plight of Asian Americans, Native Americans are not Asia's second sons sent packing across the Bering land bridge, and they are not another American minority group. There is no easy or simple solidarity between indigenous people and diasporized communities. With this warning, Treat recounts through the story of Christian boarding schools how Christian mission has given bitter medicine to Native Americans. In the wake of the considerable misery Native Americans have experienced from Christian mission, what redeeming grace does Christianity have to offer? Perhaps, contends Treat, this is the aspect most troublesome with Christian faith: its "concern for culpability before the practice of charity." Is pitifully begging forgiveness the best act Western Christians can offer in relation to Native Americans?

The next essay is Miguel de la Torre's "A *Bembe* for Chino Cubanos." *Bembes*, says de la Torre, are Afro-Cuban dance rituals in which humans become one with gods and attain wisdom.

He adopts the *bembe* metaphor to speak of the dance that must be performed to gain an understanding of the Asian (Chino) roots in Cuba and the intersection of Asian Cuban identity with race, ethnicity, and nationhood. In an account that is itself reflective of the wisdom derived from dancing with the gods, de la Torre takes his readers to the intricate web of intra-Hispanic (Cuban) oppressive structures, especially as they shed light on the plight of Chino Cubanos. His account has the power of revelation: it discloses insights that have not been given much attention before, and it explores the complex and fluid discourse of identity and marginalization.

The last essay of Part 4 is Anthony Pinn's, "Suffering We Know: The Hermeneutic of Han and the Dilemma of African American (Religious) Experience." Pinn uses Nella Larsen's novel (*Quicksand*) and her portrayal of the fictional character, Helga Crane, as an entry point in dealing with the complex, multidimensional, highly nuanced, and paradoxical experience of the suffering of African Americans, which does not easily fit the common grand design of black and womanist theological discourses. Instead of a clear trajectory from oppression to resistance and the teleology of liberation, Helga's suffering and struggle reflect a deep sense of woundedness. It is in this regard that Pinn sees the Asian concept *han* as a helpful category in taking account of the suffering that African Americans have experienced.

The closing essay by David Kyuman Kim, "Worlds Made a Part: An Essay in Honor of Fumitaka Matsuoka," provides an excellent ending, a postlude if you will, to this anthology project. Kim's account of critical nostalgia and the point he makes about exercising freedom or agency while recognizing that we are products of history resonates with Matsuoka's account of his own journey and his sense of vocation. Matsuoka speaks of the actions he made in freedom

while recognizing that “we exercise our freedom in the midst of values and powers we have not chosen but by which we are bound.” Beyond recognizing that agency is exercised between freedom and destiny, Kim speaks of critical nostalgia that Matsuoka embodies, as the unstoppable search for humanizing possibilities. Kim’s excellent tribute to Matsuoka is a fitting postlude.