Worlds Made a Part

David Kyuman Kim
david.kim@conncoll.edu

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A Matter of Memory

Let us be honest about our myths. There is an animating Orientalist myth in American racial discourse that maintains that Asian Americans have a preoccupation with "Asia," and, more specifically, with their so-called nations of origin—Korea, China, the Philippines, India,

Japan, and so on. Surely, the folklore in question is in part self-perpetuated by Asian Americans. Nevertheless, it also reflects the lingering demands of assimilation in the white supremacist racial and ethnic hierarchy of America, even as the material and lived effects of globalization have become "normal." In light of these prevailing conditions, I want to consider how the dynamics of Asian American racialization torques under paradoxical forces. On the one hand, Asian American racialization responds to the demand to assimilate to cosmopolitan ideals of cultural pluralism; on the other hand, there is a countervailing pull for Asian Americans to dissimulate their desires for "Asia."

In order to understand the lived effects of these competing forces on Asian Americans, let us turn to the crucial work of memory, religion, and race. How might we think through the complex relationship amongst these three ways of being human in the world? Religion and race constitute memory in terrifically complicated ways. We know that race is not simply a structural affair. In everyday life, race is also a deeply embedding concern of the spirit. Taking the psychic and spiritual life of race and memory into consideration raises challenging questions: How do we develop an account of the interplay between the challenge of memory and the Asian American religious imagination? Furthermore, what roles do cultural and religious memory play in Asian American social and cultural criticism and subjectivity? With these questions in mind, I want to underscore the constructive uses of memory—specifically, forms of memory that speak to the folklore about Asian Americans I mentioned at the beginning, known more generally as nostalgia. How might cultural critics invert and repurpose the work of memory in light of the Orientalist logic that presumes an ineluctable Asian American nostalgia *for* "Asia"? What

critiques are available that can identify the constructive uses of nostalgia and memory, such as anti-imperialist analyses that problematize cosmopolitan notions such as cultural pluralism as an unalloyed good? And how might these modes of cultural criticism begin to highlight some of the existential challenges of living through the tumult of constituting new racial discourses? Luckily we have a grand example of this sort of complex and highly sophisticated cultural criticism in the work of Fumitaka Matsuoka, the visionary theologian of the Asian American diaspora.

It is fair to ask: why turn to "nostalgia?" After all, aren't there other terrains of memory-work that leave Asian Americans less prone to the follies of sentimentalist Orientalism? Consider the etymology. "Nostalgia" comes from the Greek *nostos* ("home") and *algia* ("longing"). Nostalgia is at once a by-product of large-scale global forces, such as capitalism, the so-called "world religions," and political ideologies like democracy. Conversely, nostalgia is also a means and a mechanism of articulating intimate matters of the psychic life, most especially personal memory. Nostalgia provides a way of finding connections between these two spheres of human experience, which is to say, between the material, structural (i.e., the political and social), and cultural conditions of the world, on the one hand, and the interior life of the individual psyche, on the other. As critical theorists such as Adorno, Lukács, Foucault, and Butler have taught us, there is a tyranny to the circulation and constitution of memory. The realization of "authentic memory"—a rather capacious category that includes everything from authorized national histories to theological doctrines and ideological mandates—is an aspiration. Memory can be a hothouse for the growth and enforcement of cultures of significance and meaning. Intensifying the stakes, my core claim here is that a memory of integrity can serve as an achievement.

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In thinking through the constructive uses of nostalgia, let me begin with a distinction laid out by Svetlana Boym in her incisive book *The Future of Nostalgia*—an analytic distinction between two types of nostalgia, namely, restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia.[1] Boym's typology of nostalgia helps to uncover the vicissitudes of the career of memory in modernity, in particular the constitution of history with regard to national and cultural identity. Note that this relationship often comes into sharper and unexpected focus, somewhat paradoxically, when nostalgia crops up as a resource for withstanding presiding forces of modernity and modernization such as market- and capital-driven globalization, otherwise known as neoliberalism. Let's unpack this complex circuit of experience by circling back to Boym's typology of nostalgia. "Restorative nostalgia" reflects the kind of sentimentalism, dogmatism, and absolutism often associated with nationalism and ethnocentrism. The longing and memory of this kind of nostalgia is "restorative" in so far as a focus on a fixed object is at play, such as "The Old South," "the homeland," or the idea of "America" as a cultural and political icon. As the stuff of cultural, social, *and* psychic identity, restorative nostalgia holds out a *telos* of a "transhistorical reconstruction of a lost home."[2] This is the stuff of national myths and narratives, "official" histories, and the allergic reaction to self-criticism that is, if not unique to, at least symptomatic of ideology. "Reflective nostalgia," on the other hand, concerns a much less fixed constellation of ideas. If restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct and restore "nostos/home" itself, then reflective nostalgia fixes on "algia," which is to say it finds its expression and meaning in longing, yearning, and desire—a longing, argues Boym, that "delays the

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[1] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

[2] Ibid, xviii.

homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately." Whereas restorative nostalgia is tied to "clear," material, cultural, and political aims that are construed as "truth and tradition" (home or homeland as nation-state, for example), reflective nostalgia, Boym contends, "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging. Reflective nostalgia does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity." [3] Surely among the most vexing of these contradictions of modernity is the simultaneous increase in human freedom *and* oppression.[4]

Restorative nostalgia depicts and deploys the memory of "home cultures" as qualitatively better than one's present social location and historical conditions. The ethic *and* ethos of restorative nostalgia is conservative by definition and design, developed with a lexicon of returns: restore, preserve, resurrect, and reconstruct *the* nation, *the* culture, *the* religion, *the* way of life.[5] This is not to say that these nations, cultures, religions, and ways of life have actually ever existed in time and space. It is important to note the ways in which migration, mobility, alienation, and the like shape conservative and conserving frames of reference for "home." The metaphorical figures of restorative nostalgia are the archivist, the apparatchik, and the nationalist.

It is clear from Boym's critique and analysis that we will find constructive uses not in nostalgia's restorative form but rather in reflective nostalgia or what I will also call "critical nostalgia." Bearing this in mind, the metaphorical figure I want to focus on as representative of

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[3] Ibid.

[4] I discuss this paradox of modernity in David Kyuman Kim, *Melancholic Freedom: Agency and the Spirit of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 86-88.

[5] David Chidester, "Transatlantic Religion" in *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 150-171.

reflective or critical nostalgia is *the exilic writer*, especially in the mode of cultural critic and theologian of diaspora—both of whom, I maintain, seek out constructive ways to tap into cultural and social memory—itself an often ambivalently delineated though effectively influential means of establishing social existence.

Nostalgia, so Boym argues, is a "historical emotion," more specifically, an emotion—or really a set of emotions that speak to a condition not only of loss and detachment (from culture, history, tradition, and the like) but also of mourning. In this sense, nostalgia is expressive of another psychic state, namely, melancholy or, as Freud called it, "melancholia."[6] In referring to loss, detachment, and mourning, I am situating and identifying nostalgia (and melancholy) with the memory conditions of modernity, especially the conditions that shape our sense of history and our relationship to space, time, and values. If the ethos of modernity and modernism incants progress and universalism, the critical ethos of nostalgia runs cross-grain with modernity and modernism, and is, I would argue, in conflict with one of the reigning inheritors of globalizing modernity, namely, cosmopolitanism. Why? Because uncritical nostalgia maintains a lingering preoccupation with that which modernity and modernism want to supersede and leave behind: the local, the particular, and specific and affective attachments.[7] Cosmopolitanism insists on a banal pluralism (this is a condition Kant lays out in his account of the conditions for the

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[6] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated and edited by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 14:243-60.

[7] I take up this version of the secularization thesis in the chapter 1 of *Melancholic Freedom*. Kim, *Melancholic Freedom*, 3-22.

possibility for cosmopolitanism as a means of achieving "perpetual peace").[8] To this point, Boym writes:

> Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history. The nostalgic is looking for a spiritual addressee. Encountering silence, he [sic] looks for memorable signs, desperately misreading them.[9]

On this score, those engaged in restorative nostalgia are seeking to establish material conditions to resolve their mourning, such as a regressive lament over the absence of a sovereign nation-state. In contrast, the critical nostalgic is more apt (if not more happy) to dwell and exist *in* the ambiguity and ambivalence of living without a persistent and compulsive need to reconstruct a mythic home.[10]

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[8] Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace" in *Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1970]), 93-130. See also in the same volume, Kant's essay "Idea with a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," 41-53. For an advocatory account of modern cosmopolitanism, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

[9] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 8.

[10] This was certainly true in the Zionist debates around the turn of the 20th century. Consider the tact taken by Ahad Ha'am, one of the most powerful critics of the Zionist project that sought the establishment of "the nation of Palestine," what we now know as Israel. Ha'am argued that the creation of a political state—organized around an actual, physical/geographical space—would ultimately subvert and corrupt the spiritual bond among Jews around the world and across history. In other words, Ha'am maintained the conviction that the quality and character that constitute what it means to be "a Jew" and to be a diasporic people would become too world-bound, too prone to the corruption that comes with political institutions and practices. Surely, Ha'am's project relied on a utopian allure that most materialists would and did find wanting and politically naive. Nonetheless, his critique raises an interesting set of challenges to the *typos* of "nation" or even the notion of "a people" that follows from a Herderian nationalism grounded in practices such as a notion of a common language ("*Volkspracht*") as the foundation for national identity. Ahad Ha'am, *Selected Essays of Ahad Ha'am*, trans. Leon Simon (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1936); see especially "Imitation and Assimilation," "Priest and Prophet," Flesh and Spirit." and "The Spiritual Revival." For a sympathetic reading of Herder, see Charles Taylor, "Language and human nature" in his *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 215-247.

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Critical nostalgia is by its nature shaded by *ambivalence*. It is an ambivalence that goes to the central role of longing and desire in nostalgia and is framed by questions such as: "If I get my object of desire ('home'), will it remain something I long for? If not, then do I really want it? Do I want to make it 'real'? Would 'getting it'—would getting *there* (again 'home')—take away the allure, the enchantment of the very idea of home?"

Indeed, as I write these words, the exhilarating revolutions unfolding in Tunisia, Yemen, Jordan, and Egypt have heightened a renewed sense of what is at stake in aspirations for reclaiming home and homeland.[11] After decades of living under repressive regimes, everyday people across north Africa and the Middle East are insisting, largely through peaceful means, on their humanity and integrity—which is to say, making public their claims and insistence of themselves as "a people." Among the array of needs and forms of suffering that have inspired the aspiration for democracy in Egypt and other nations throughout the region is the desire to re-claim nation, heritage, and self-determination—all fortified and stoked by memories hard won.

Nostalgia is useful as a descriptive/analytic category as well as a normative one. As a descriptive/analytic concept, nostalgia can reflect the confusions produced in the wake of empire. Think here of the post-colonial mind. Or consider another example: the pervasive (mis)characterization of religion as imperial. How have the so-called "world religions" functioned as circuits of memory that shape racial identities in accordance with cosmopolitan idea(l)s. On the one hand, each of the "world religions" (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism,

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[11] Pundits and social scientists alike seem to have settled on calling what is still unfolding in north Africa as "the Arab spring." The romance of this turn of phrase has its appeals, but it also seems to detract from the huge political, cultural, and social shifts rendered by the revolutions enacted and those still taking place.

and so on) achieved their global statuses by instilling in their respective proponents ambitions of expansion, growth, and, frankly, some form of ideological domination. This is as true of Constantine as it was of George W. Bush. The effectiveness of these crusades of spiritual global expansion relied, and continue to rely, not only on institutional and governmental agendas but also on campaigns to shape the heart and mind, which is to say, to establish, with varying degrees of success, ideological uniformity and conformity among their adherents.[12]

On the other hand, there have been religious figures and movements—for example, pacifist Hindus (Gandhi) or Christians (King), or anti-imperial Tibetan Buddhists (the Dalai Lama)—who have been committed to fighting domination through prophetic calls to political action and mobilization. Consider, as well, the political theologian Johann Baptist Metz's notion of "dangerous memory" (the passion of Christ is a dangerous memory to the forces of domination and oppression) or Gershom Scholem's deployment of the idea of the Jewish covenant with God as a promise of emancipation, freedom and justice.[13] Both are examples of nostalgia, of dangerous memory as a source of hope that fuels resistance. Abraham Joshua Heschel comes readily to mind as exemplary of this practice of prophetic witness. In a different

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[12] While I am wary of an approach that would equate "religion" with "ideology," it remains that there are ideological features to the institutionalization of religions that seek measures of uniformity — in practice and intent — among its adherents and practitioners. While it may be the case that conformity is a particularly effective mechanism for social and psychological control, it does not follow that all religions or all religious believers and practitioners are uncritical participants in their respective traditions.

[13] Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 111; Gershom Scholem, "On Jonah and the Concept of Justice," *Critical Inquiry* (25:2): 353-361; Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

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vein, Fumitaka Matsuoka has consistently registered and given voice to the dangerous memory of the racialized diasporas of Asian America.[14]

Critical Nostalgia and the Spiritual Exile

In a normative mode, nostalgia finds expression in both Jewish and Christian theology, in particular in the form of messianic and/or eschatological expectations. This is what animates the remembrance of divine acts, such as examples and expectations of compassion—remembrances that vivify a vision of a coming or a return ("the messiah") that will bring justice to an unjust world. The analogy I am drawing here is with the discourse about racialization and ethnic identity found in analyses of Asian American life that romanticizes—and I mean this in the gooiest terms possible—aspirations of returning "home," where the home in question is one of the genealogical nation-states of Asia. Nonetheless, I am suggesting there are constructive uses to thinking about nostalgia; namely, it allows critical reflection about the confusion, ambivalence, and ambiguity rendered by empire. Indeed, I would argue that the memoryscape of critical nostalgia offers a constructive alternative to the somewhat tired discourses of "two worlds" and the increasingly generic notion of "hybridity."

To my mind, of considerably greater interest than the dialectical end-points of "home" and "abroad" or "empire and colony" are the in-between states that emerge through attempts to articulate and consider the power of memory and forgetting. In other words, from a phenomenological standpoint, the value of analyzing nostalgia is that it allows deliberate

[14] In addition to the deeply illuminating *Out of Silence*, see also Fumitaka Matsuoka, *The Color of Faith: Building Community in a Multiracial Society* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998).

consideration of the experience of memory itself in everyday life. Nostalgia is a concept that peers into the time and space of life itself in ways that doesn't leave life standing "as is" but unsettles and destabilizes through claims about and for "the ordinary."[15] Nostalgia is not, I am contending, simply another way of speaking of the doubleness or duality of the self or of a people or of home or life itself. Instead, nostalgia reflects the ambiguity of the everyday—not the split between worlds but rather the fragmented, fragmentary nature of ordinary life. The critical and constructive work of nostalgia can help to render lost worlds a part of a whole not yet realized, a part of a history yet to come.

Fanon teaches us that modernity makes and reproduces itself through myriad disciplinary techniques that shape, delimit, and define the parameters of "the everyday."[16] In calling nostalgia a form of critical memory, I am arguing that the constitution and construction of nostalgia-work can be a form of critical reflection on the meaning of the past and the present, as well as a means of enabling visions of possible futures. Stated otherwise, one reason to take the phenomenon of nostalgia seriously is that it offers a glimpse into the operation of memory in modernity, and in so doing provides a picture of what makes up the everyday, the ordinary. I agree with Stanley Cavell's characterization of the relationship between memory, identity, and the ordinary/everyday: critical reflection on the everyday (or what Cavell calls, in his enticingly expansive

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[15] To my mind, one of the most fruitful and productive inquiries into the critical work of discerning "the ordinary" is found in the corpus of Stanley Cavell and his project of Emersonian perfectionism. See, e.g., Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[16] Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

manner, "philosophy" and "the ordinary") tends to generate a disappointment with the world as lived, by which he means the social world where we live and interact with others.[17]

The archetype that perhaps best exemplifies the problems and virtues of nostalgia is "the exile," the figure who experiences estrangement and longing in arguably the most exquisitely fraught mode. Boym identifies exilic figures like Nabakov and Brodsky as exemplars of the parlance of nostalgia; and I would include many if not all post-colonial writers, essayists, and artists, such as Edwidge Danticat, V. S. Naipul, André Aciman, Carlos Bulosan, Frantz Fanon, Theresa Cha, and Edward Said. In honoring the legacy of Fumitaka Matsuoka, it is appropriate to refine the archetype in question and focus on a figure of cultural criticism and critical race theology that has been so crucial for Asian American religious life, namely, *the spiritual exile*. Indeed, figures in exile are often the ones who "benefit" most from, or rather *with* nostalgia. After all, the exilic has a special place in most discourses about the pressing significance of place, space, and memory, especially in consideration of the physical, psychic, and emotional displacement that results from diaspora and other consequences of geo-politics. Among the most striking features of Matsuoka's work has been his role as a persistent prophetic witness to the spiritual exile of Asian American religious communities for whom he has been an indefatigable source of insight *and* foresight for over three decades.

No doubt, Matsuoka is a theologian of prodigious talents. But what are the qualities that make him such an engaging and important theological presence—one who was indispensable in giving shape and voice to the development of Asian American religious studies and theology at

[17] Ibid., 3-26.

the end of the twentieth and through the turn of the twenty-first century? Evident at all levels are the synthetic power of his writing and his talents for building institutions. We know the books that have given voice to communities of faith and color. Think also of Matsuoka's leadership as dean of the Pacific School of Religion. Let us make note of his vision in creating the PANA Institute for Leadership Development and the Study of Pacific and Asian North American Religion. Behold his crucial support of the Asian Pacific Religions Research Initiative for over a decade. These achievements notwithstanding, I write in homage to my friend Fumitaka Matsuoka in gratitude for his prodigious work as a prophetic witness to the Asian American diaspora. In his deeply enacted care and compassion for the life and fate of Asian Americans of faith, Matsuoka has been a marvelous exemplar of the spiritual exile as cultural critic. Despite his humility in regard to these remarkable achievements, I am honor bound to acknowledge his role as one of the grand theologians of the Asian American religious diaspora. With this in mind, I want to consider the following questions: What does it mean to claim that you are a child of a diaspora who is also a spiritual exile? What responsibilities do we have as children of diasporas?

Narratives and stories of nostalgia—in both restorative and reflective forms—are expressions of myth. Nationalists who are dead-set at establishing material, political, and social re-instantiations of collective identity—for example, the ideological formations of "Israel" or a united "Korea"—operate, in my view, with an unhealthy dose of mythic utopianism. They have an ideal state in mind—where the multiple meanings of "ideal state" as political, psychological, and physical conditions are operational.[18] Paradoxically, the establishment of a political state, for

[18] For a provocative examination of myth and the political, see Roland Boer, *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

example, cannot fully satisfy the restorative longing for home. After all, the ideal is what animates this form of nostalgia, and political institutions and the like are inherently non-ideal entities.

Reflective or critical nostalgia keeps the experience and expectations of home, loss, and detachment in mind, but not with the idea of realizing or instantiating home. The difference in horizons of expectations between restorative and reflective nostalgics is evident in the grammar of eschatology or end-time. The restorative nostalgic thinks the kingdom of God can be and will be rendered in the terms and conditions of ordinary time and space.[19] The reflective nostalgic accepts that the kingdom is always before us but not within reach. The grammar of memory, of critical nostalgia as it were, finds its expression not necessarily in the future tense ("The kingdom will come") but rather in the future perfect ("The kingdom will have come when…").

By "spiritual exile" I am referring to a figure whose psychic state of mind and mode of being in the world critically engages held-beliefs of a given people on history, immanence, transcendence, the divine, and the sacred. The spiritual exile embodies the struggle within a state of nostalgia and melancholy, acutely experienced as a form of cultural and spiritual nihilism.[20] It is this melancholy and nostalgia that is at once the end product of nihilism and also the expression of agency that defines the psychic condition of the spiritual exile. The spiritual exile inhabits an existential despair that can broadly confront crises of nihilism and can engage survival strategies that, at once, inflect a melancholy that mourns the loss of the past, as well as a

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[19] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 9.

[20] For a nuanced consideration of coping with cultural nihilism, see Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

nostalgia that aspires to keep hold of and preserve history while resisting submission to the regnant knowledge regimes of the present. Fredric Jameson calls such regimes "organizational fictions"—which is to say that they are utopic narratives that structure and "make sense of" the text as well as experience.[21] To this end, I am suggesting that the critical nostalgia found in Matsuoka's work speaks to the strenuous efforts that are retrieving yet holding onto the worlds that have been lost and may or may not be recoverable through the fragments of memories, stories told, and geo-political legacies that often obscure more than they reveal.[22]

In a sense, what I am suggesting is that nostalgia is the "upbeat" voice of hope that accompanies the "black sun" (to invoke Julia Kristeva's dark metaphor) of melancholia. Whereas the melancholic, as a theorist like Kristeva describes her/him, lives "an abyssal suffering that does not succeed in signifying itself and, having lost meaning, loses life," the critical nostalgic, by contrast, is constantly seeking out glimpses of possibility.[23] Neither the nostalgic nor the melancholic functions with a subjectivity of wholeness; again, the psyche is distilled through fragments of memory and glimpses of possible futures. For all the loss that the melancholic endures, the critical nostalgic seeks out comparable forms of counter-memory to light up that black sun.

Kristeva is helpful here insofar as she identifies a link between melancholy and experiences of "symbolic breakdown," that is, when language loses its capacity to express

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[21] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

[22] Cf. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 153-180.

[23] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 189.

linguistic, existential, and psychic meaning for the self. Language becomes empty and yet there remains the primary resource to articulate and express one's psyche. Take note of Kristeva's account of this breakdown:

> The spectacular collapse of meaning with depressive persons—and, at the limit, the meaning of life—allows us to assume that they experience difficulty integrating the universal signifying sequence that is language. In the best cases, speaking beings and their language are like one: is not speech our "second nature?" In contrast, the speech of the depressed is to them like an alien skin; melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue. They have lost the meaning—the value—of their mother tongue for want of losing the mother. The dead language they speak, which foreshadows their suicide, conceals a Thing buried alive.[24]

It is crucial to note that the critical nostalgia that Matsuoka has written about does not reflect an incapacitating despair. In this regard, the distinction from melancholy is clear. Instead, Matsuoka has written with care about the losses that Asian American communities of faith—in particular, Japanese Americans—have endured, not in terms of a nihilistic end-state but rather as a condition that indicates new possibilities of being in the world. *This* capacity for prophetic witness that does not capitulate to despair is what suggests Matsuoka as a poet of spiritual exile and of critical nostalgia. Matsuoka's poetic sensibility readily names "the pain and promise of pluralism," in which "the matter of Asian American self-identify is more accurately understood through our ability to cope with an often inhospitable society and to locate our own sense of dignity and worth within it. Such strife inevitably leads us toward a quest for a fair and just order in society."[25] Matsuoka's critical race theology of communities of color refuses to take on the

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[24] Ibid, 53.

[25] Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1995), 56-58.

organizational fictions of white Christian supremacy; which is to say that he resists a unifying coherence to the disparate elements of memory that simultaneously engender a critical nostalgia and constitute the possibility of agency. His theological work represents an instance of finding possibility from impossibility and foreclosure, as well as discerning a mode of agency that emerges from remembrance.[26]

As I indicated earlier, Matsuoka does not deploy utopian fictions, such as one finds in appeals to neo-Platonic returns to "the One" or other edenic visions that would explain away loss, exile, estrangement, and melancholy. To do as much would be to assume that wholeness, reconciliation, and truth are inherently desirable and emancipatory. If there is anything that postcolonial writers have taught us, it is that these visions of emancipation from imperial regimes are pipe dreams, flights of fancy from the deeply sedimented and embedded effects of the imperium. Expunging myths of unity and plenitude means resisting the temptations of disabling utopian notions of life without empire, without the history of colonialism. In concert with this effort, critical nostalgia seeks out new forms of agency. A spiritual exile like Matsuoka reveals agency in the nostalgic remembrance and embrace of things past, and in the subsequent contemplation of their persistence in the present, and in the foreshadowing of an enabling future. These difficult lessons are evident in what Matsuoka finds to be "the price Japanese Americans have paid for the preservation of their dignity. . .[that has proven to be] both painful and immeasurable, passed on to succeeding generations."[27] The theological excellence of Matsuoka's

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[26] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 132-150.

[27] Matsuoka, *Out of Silence*, 25.

spiritual exile speaks to the work of the artist and the poet.[28] The critical distance he has to the "lost worlds" of "Japan" and even "the U.S." allows him an ironic space to reflect on the past, present and future. It is a stance through which he simultaneously engages and disengages with his material contexts of new languages and worlds.

Worlds Made a Part

As I suggested earlier, there are modes and forms of expression that are endemic to the experience of nostalgia. While not writing poetry as such, from his earliest essays up to his most recent work, I would argue that Matsuoka has written with a distinct poetic sensibility. When effective, the poetic is a deeply illuminating index of the ordinary. It can offer insight into the everyday by offering highly distilled accounts of human experience. By way of conclusion, let me highlight Matsuoka's poetic sensibility and his role as bearing prophetic witness for spiritual exiles by drawing on a central strand of Angus Fletcher's recent poetic theory, specifically, his notion of "the middle voice." Fletcher argues that in contrast to languages such as ancient Greek and modern French, English language and grammar lack what he calls "the middle voice": a form of grammar that indicates a "back and forth between an inner self and the world out there." The middle voice refers to modes of perception that involve an exchange (the dialectic of gift-giving is an apt metaphor), as in the back and forth between persons. Fletcher writes, "Such mental activity is both inside and outside at the same moment, while we perceivers stand

[28] Cavell identifies a similar path of disappointment, collapse of meaning, and self-transformation and transfiguration in Emerson and other perfectionist thinkers and artists. See, e.g., Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2005), 7-27, 83-132.

between."[29] The middle voice expresses perceptions that are neither active nor passive. It finds its expression in verbs such as "ponder," "sense," "move," "dwell," "loose and lose," "hold" and "attach and detach."[30] We can hear this middle voice of motion and emotion in the poetry of critical nostalgia, such as found in the work of the great Iranian poet Forough Farrokhazad. Consider Farrokhazad's poem "The Gift":

> I speak from the deep end of night
> Of end of darkness I speak.
> I speak of deep night ending.
>
> O kind friend, if you visit my house,
> bring me a lamp, cut me a window,
> so I can gaze at the swarming alley of the fortunate.[31]

Or hear Matsuoka's deeply compassionate account of the "promise in pain" prominent among Asian American Christians:

> [T]he fluid and complex nature of Asian American Christians' search for an identity [is] often fraught with unresolved pain. What this indicates is the fundamentally ambiguous and yet dynamic ordering of life….The order of life in this fashion, moreover, is likely to be expressed in terms of a shift in value orientation. Hospitality for the stranger, empathy for the disenfranchised, and courage to face the future, even amidst an overwhelmingly adverse condition, are far more significant than correct doctrine and consistency in logic. It is, in fact, the experience and acceptance of an ambiguous and dynamic state of life that allows a person the transformation of values and worldviews.[32]

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[29] Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory of Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 105.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Forough Farrokhzad, *Sin: Selected Poems of Forough Farrokhzad*. Translated by Sholeh Wolpé (Little Rock, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 2007), 57.

[32] Matsuoka, *Out of Silence*, 77.

To my mind, the grammar of the middle voice—which is to say, the grammar of being neither fully agent nor object but somewhere in-between, immersed and enmeshed between the two—is found in the expressive practice of nostalgia and memory. Nostalgia is the middle voice between history and the aesthetic—a memorial terrain between two different modes of narrative, if you will. In effect, all three (the historical, the aesthetic/poetic, and the nostalgic) aspire to a measure of fidelity to lived experience. It sounds banal to characterize this as a mode of "description," but if what is at stake is a struggle to understand the ordinary and the everyday effects of living under an imperial regime or the struggles of withstanding the penetrating effects of race and religion, then the challenge lies in figuring out how to depict and understand, and to give an account of lives lived.

Let me be clear: my argument is not a paean to the empirical by any stretch. Remember: these are claims about memory, about nostalgia—the artifacts of experience. Therefore, substantial consideration must be given to the supraempirical, that is, dispatches of the *interior* life—specifically, the expressions of the interior life that relate to but are distinct from the manifold of the social.[33] Furthermore, I want to avoid any slip into sentimentalism or misty-eyed wistfulness. In the critical form I am putting forward, nostalgia can reflect a discipline and a rigor. One might call it a discipline of remembrance.

Matsuoka has consistently asked Foucauldian questions of the spiritual exile about the relationship between subjectivity and the ethical—hence, the questions I posed earlier about the

[33] Ricoeur's attempt to move from the "what" of memory (i.e., memory as an object of cognition and/or perception) to the "who" of memory (i.e., the self who remembers) requires understanding the "how" of memory (i.e., the means and ways memory works for the self). Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3-4.

responsibilities each of us has as children of one diaspora or another. Consider Foucault's questions about subjectivity and knowledge: "How have certain kinds of interdictions become the price required for attaining certain kinds of knowledge [*savoir*] about oneself? What must one know [*connaître*] about oneself in order to be willing to accept such renunciation?"[34] Along these lines, Matsuoka has queried into his own identification with a broader Japanese history, family legacies, and his self-understanding as a Japanese-American Christian born of this heritage. What official histories has he been subjected to? How can one distinguish between these ideological narratives and the hidden histories of the oppressed, of one's ancestors? In his inflection of the middle voice, Matsuoka has tried to determine how to understand history and his own role as a spiritual exile apart from the authorial interdictions of the history told by the victors: Japan, the U.S., the Church, specifically in darkness of the internment of Japanese Americans. "What I have witnessed in Japanese Americans," writes Matsuoka, "and particularly their Christian churches is that the motivation for recovery of 'sacred conventions' is rooted deeply and foundationally in their experiences of the historical injuries caused by the incarceration into concentration camps during World War II. The motivation for Japanese Americans…derives mainly from painful experiences that remind them what it means to have an alternative vision of society, an alternative value, a 'second language.'"[35] This is reminiscent of

[34] Michel Foucault, "Introduction" in *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Free Press, 1997), xxiv.

[35] Fumitaka Matsuoka, "Creating Community Amidst the Memories of Historic Injuries," in *Realizing the America of our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans*, Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez, eds. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 29-40.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's classic *Dictée*, when she reflects in her own poetic terms on the Japanese colonial rule over Korea:

> Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion.[36]

A confession: I must say that I do not think that untold histories—the "minor" discourses in history—are unambiguously good things to know. It is a postmodern conceit that learning about and uncovering untold pasts are inherently or necessarily redemptive or even emancipatory. This can be true and may in fact be the appropriate incentive to engage in uncovering what Edward Said calls "oppositional knowledge." Nonetheless, I am foregrounding nostalgia here as an acknowledgment of how genuinely difficult it is to come to terms with the unsettling past, a forgotten and suppressed history. Matsuoka's theology is hardly salutary in this regard. As Matsuoka powerfully argues, "past oppression and injustice inflicted by the nation are also remembered mythically and in narrative form….The memories persist with such power because it is a sign of allegiance to share these painful memories among [Japanese Americans]."[37] Matsuoka has vigilantly reminded us that once recovered there is no guarantee that redemption will come with the release of what Walter Benjamin calls the "oppressed past."[38] Uncovering the truth, saving history from oblivion, may not be enough to stave off melancholy

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[36] Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1995), 33.

[37] Matsuoka, "Creating Community Amidst the Memories of Historic Injuries," 37.

[38] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

nor to right past wrongs. This is a torturous lesson taught by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Cha confronts us by asking whether wholeness is truly redemptive. This is to ask if relenting to what Cioran calls the "temptation to exist" amounts to assenting to a totalizing historical memory that one knows occludes oppressions, violence, and suffering.[39]

And yet the hope is that a different future might be rendered through the articulation of a lost past. This is the opening that critical nostalgia seeks. Indeed, this is what suggests critical nostalgia as engendering, at minimum, episodic qualities of agency. Certainly, melancholy persists precisely because one cannot be assured that this will be the case. For the melancholic, the past cannot be mourned for fear that it will be lost. To mourn is to let go of an object of love, as Freud wrote of mourning and melancholia.[40] For the nostalgic, a future deeply saturated by the past is what renders hope.[41]

As a theologian of critical nostalgia, as a spiritual exile who is at the same time a cultural critic, Matsuoka has always sought to interrogate a condition in which the self can mediate between the causes of melancholy and the catharsis of reflective nostalgia and aesthetic production. As he argues in his classic *Our of Silence*

> The capacity to live the life of ambiguity, or the "courage to be," is not merely the capacity to endure the status quo, however. It is, instead, the freedom to live in a world of pain without being complacent about and acquiescing to its own ordering power. It is the freedom to shatter the complacency of the existing order without even a blueprint for what the world beyond it looks like. Such a freedom, by nature, transcends the existing situation or conceptual ideal. It breaks into the

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[39] E. M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*. Translated by Richard Howard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[40] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia."

[41] Arjun Appadurai, "Hope and Democracy," *Public Culture* 2007 (19:1): 29-34.

> world from beyond. It exists in the realm of faith. And it takes a certain social, cultural, ethnic, or class location in which one exists, a place of the "holy insecurity," a fringe, to become receptive to such a freedom, a promise given in the good news.[42]

Matsuoka's virtuous insistence here indicates that to translate the experience of loss—to render into words the experiences of loss and remembrance—is a survival imperative for the spiritual exile. This sentiment is akin to Kristeva's argument that "[t]he artist consumed by melancholia is...the most relentless in his[/her] struggle against the symbolic abdication that blankets him[/her]."[43] The nostalgic agency Matsuoka has enacted over the last three decades is an agonistic struggle with what Wole Soyinka calls the "burden of memory and the muse of forgiveness."[44] The suffering of memory is painful and yet defines who one is. The past as memory, and forgetting as history—minor or suppressed—is constitutive even in our lack of awareness.

What refuge is there for the critical nostalgia that Matsuoka has so fruitfully engaged? As Ricoeur argues, texts can be forms of meaningful action insofar as they serve as expressions of the psychic life.[45] Matsuoka makes the case this way:

> The experience of "rage, resentment, and fear" is an opportunity that could lead to a new cognition, new epistemologies, and new ways of knowing and naming reality. The movement from pain and suffering caused by racism to a new vision of humanity requires painful lessons in memory and accountability. It requires a yearning, a passion, and a determination to know what has occurred, and at the

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[42] Matsuoka, *Out of Silence*, 79.

[43] Kristeva, *Black Sun,* 9.

[44] Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[45] Paul Ricouer, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 144.

> same time, a will to move beyond bondage to past experience into a vision of a new and alternate ordering of human relationships.

Through his writing and the communities that he has helped to build and sustain, Matsuoka has been able to convey the *agon* of psychic, cultural, and spiritual exile while also demonstrating how the production of texts and the collaborative work of sustaining communities are achievements and acts of defiance against despair.

As with the case of the nihilism that Kristeva finds in the work of Dostoevsky, I have come to conclude that the solemnity of forgiveness transfigures melancholy.[46] Matsuoka finds an expansive compassion in the darkness of the Japanese American internment. He writes, "If the experiences of historical injuries suffered by Japanese Americans point to their willingness to go beyond their inclination to dwell in the pain of the past and to reach out for strengthening a web of all people in the U.S. society, this society has not been able to value their generosity. This is the challenge that awaits America in truly becoming the America of all our hearts."[47] Similarly, Kristeva argues, the connection between such forgiveness and the meaning of critical nostalgia is "between suffering and acting out….[A]esthetic activity constitutes forgiveness."[48] Matsuoka's theological engagements represent the expressive compassion of the poet, the musician, the spiritual exile. To wit, the critical knowledge rendered through the middle voice *can* (though not necessarily does) come from nostalgia; critical nostalgia mediates and bridges the internal life, the psychic life, on the one hand, and the social world, on the other. The mediation of these two

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[46] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 173-218.

[47] Matsuoka, "Creating Community Amidst the Memories of Historic Injuries" in *Realizing the America in Our Hearts,* 39.

[48] Kristeva, *Black Sun,* 190.

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poles (What do we call them? “History and subjectivity”? “Experience and the psyche”?) constitutes a demanding challenge for many of our greatest cultural critics. Certainly, this is what Said labored to convey throughout his career. He wrote from an inheritance of the humanist tradition that begins with Vico’s insight and provocation that history is the creation of the human mind and spirit. The main challenge to the critic, according to Said, is to work out of the bind that poststructuralists like Foucault established so convincingly—call it the free will problem of history: How do we find freedom and agency under conditions in which we are, at once, products of history and also agents who have animating wills and lives?

Nostalgia helps to negotiate this conundrum. It keeps us speaking in the middle voice of memory—of displacement and dwelling, of dispossession and self-possession—as we come to grips with the flux of time and space, and of history and place. A critical grammar of nostalgia can help make determinations about how to best apply the cache of memories that have an engaging hold on the imagination—home, language, culture, “my people”. It evokes the question Said famously asked in his essay “Traveling Theory”: “What is critical consciousness at bottom if not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives?”[49] In the end, the resource and resourcefulness of a nostalgic mind—in the risks that it undertakes to retrieve and retell history, as well as to engage in rigorous, even strenuous self-criticism—enlivens the on-going search for democratic alternatives and the hope of humanizing possibilities. And so it is with these

[49] Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 247.

aspirations in mind that I find myself among the legion indebted to the inspired legacy of the great spiritual exile Fumitaka Matsuoka.[50]

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