



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

**Postcolonialism in Fugue:
Contrapuntality of Asian American Experience**

Wonhee Anne Joh
anne.joh@garrett.edu

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

*My memories of Korea
They seem so strange sometimes
Like they are about someone else's childhood
That I had stolen...
So I try to look for bridges,
To give meaning to my short existence in Korea
Before I became a hyphenated duality.
Someday I will go back to Korea
And look at my past in the face.*

*Try to reconcile my past and my present.
Figure out why my memories keep haunting me still and
Maybe mourn for the person
I could have been if I had never been planted
Somewhere else.*

Julie Kim, *Red and Yellow Dreams*

No matter how I tried, I could not remember the alphabet. I cried out of sheer frustration and feelings of stupidity. Not knowing English was making my life miserable. In the time it took for my family to travel across the Pacific Ocean to the United States, I lost my voice and even, according to kids at the new school, my intelligence. I wanted to learn English quickly. When I went to school, not only were children making fun of me for not knowing how to speak English, but even Korean children were malicious. This betrayal felt unexpectedly humiliating and confusing. Some of them even tricked me. One Korean boy gave me his nickels and took my dimes. He said the bigger nickel was valued more than the smaller dime. About a week after our arrival in this country, we did the mile run and that I could do. I couldn't speak English but I could run so I ran my heart out. Once I began feeling the wind in my hair I could not stop running. All my pent up emotions poured out in tears as I ran. I ran right off the track and ran all the way to my grandmother's home and told her I wanted to go back to Korea. That was back in 1976.

Feelings of Being “Out of Place”: Haunting and Contrapuntality of Asian American Experience

Memories of the past are always with us even as they are not static but always remembered differently; that difference appears in microscopic changes, say, in the smell associated with that memory. While some parts may be crystal clear and sharp, other parts remain unfocused and hazy, much like a dream as it fades with each waking moment. Eventually I did return to Korea for a visit but by then I knew that my identity was already changed by my life in the United States. I did not feel at home in Korea, but I still do not feel at home in the United States. Between this present moment and 1976 are reference points—multiple, complex

and dynamically moving—and they continue to influence the way I experience and know the spectrum of belonging and not belonging.

How do our still-present pasts continue to haunt us? How is it that the place one has left continues to haunt even as one tries with every effort to belong to a new place, despite its latent and sometimes overt hostility? History presents forms of powerful spectral reality and forms of spectral witnessing (for example feelings of being ‘out of place,’) that help us to recognize dormant ghosts of our past lives. No totalizing reach of dominant forces can ultimately and permanently repress or erase other truths and realities.¹ Haunting memories allow us to remember these always vibrating, simmering, and shadowed spectral presences. During my doctoral studies, I came across Edward Said’s memoir, *Out of Place*. Since my head was buried in reading postcolonial theory, it was a real joy and delight to find his memoir. Said’s memoir stirred memories that I had long forgotten or had buried as I trudged through my immigrant life. Though he wrote as a Palestinian exile his recollections found resonance in my life and experience as a Korean American immigrant. I, too, have often felt the desolate feeling of not belonging, of being here but not quite here, visible but not quite visible, accepted but not quite accepted, not quite white but not brown enough. Like Said, for whom the history of Palestine was and is fraught with a sense political ambush by dominant powers, I am also haunted by the colonial pasts of Korean history and Korea’s struggle with dominating powers. Though I have lived most of my life in the United States and did not directly experience Japanese colonization of Korea, the traumas of the Korean War, or the U.S. ongoing occupation of Korea, it is stunning

¹ William V. Spanos, *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008).

to recognize just how much these historical events continue not only to haunt people who directly experienced them but also to reproduce the traumatic affects of such historical legacies in ways often unbidden by latter generations. As Avery Gordon has noted, such a possibility of a collectively animated worldly memory is “articulated in extraordinary moments in which you—who never was there in that real place—can bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else...or something else in the world is remembering you.”² The question that I repeatedly find myself asking recently is *Why now?*

Similar to Said’s own experience, my intense feeling of being ‘out of place’ has not vanished but has dogged me persistently. However, though this feeling has persisted, it no longer has such stabbing and sharply painful, nagging discomfort that demands a resolution. Rather, my journey has led me to realize that the state of being ‘unhomed’ presents an epistemological gift. This epistemological ‘gift’ is an unexpected one—a conditionality that makes possible a radical openness to the unsettling ‘unhomedness’ of others.

The future of Asian American theology is located at the nexus in which theology envisions a future that negotiates diverse and multiple points of reference, dancing together contrapuntally. For some, the many and different notes within the ever expanding scope of Asian American theology may seem non-harmonious and counterproductive; but for many of us, it can only be, despite its many different and sometimes contradictory voices, polyvalent. In this way, Asian American theological thinking transforms non-coercively and generously with a utopian cast by recognizing the worldliness of all theological reflection.

² Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 166.

Deploying Said's notion of contrapuntal reading and the musical strategy of fugue in understanding the complexity of Asian American experience and subject formation, I suggest, is useful because it accentuates a non-totalizing ethico-political imaginative vision of the world. With this notion of the fugue in the background, this essay sets forth diverse reference points that postcolonial Asian American theologians might further examine.

By deploying a contrapuntal method, this essay might be seen as a fugue, requiring an assemblage of at times contrasting and contradictory moves. In particular, the essay brings into relation the following three complex contrapuntal moves: a) it moves from sites of Asian-America, to Asia, back to Asian America—specifically drawing from Korean American experience; b) it moves from Asian America to its neglected but potent implicature in African America, Latino/a America's colonial struggles; and c) it explores a variety of viewpoints accented by the interplay of dynamics of race, gender, sexuality and globalization. In so doing, I hope to display, insofar as one essay can do, the tapestry of thinking within which an Asian-American theology works.

Postcoloniality as a Form of Dissensual Practice: The Postcolonial and the Decolonial

...It is possible to define a certain dissensual practice of philosophy as an activity of de-classification that undermines all policing of domains and formulas. It does so not for the sole pleasure of deconstructing the master's discourse, but in order to think the lines according to which boundaries and passages are constructed, according to which they are conceivable and modifiable.... Engaging in critique of the instituted divisions, then, paves the way for renewing our interrogations into what we are able to think and to do.

Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*

Postcolonialism is a discourse that emerged after the period of colonization. However, this is not to say that the rise of nation-states ‘post’ declarations of independence from colonization has led to decolonization. Conceivably, formal colonization has ended in many places; but the conditions of coloniality, its range and scope, are operative ever more efficiently today. In fact, one can argue that conditions of coloniality have become sophisticated and intricately woven into the very desires of those who were once colonized. The work of decolonization can no longer be expected to happen in any clear and precise manner so that a clear and final meta-revolutionary blow might give birth to a new epoch. Rather, decolonization or ‘deimperialization’ can only take place in a dialectical movement in which intersecting movements to decolonize occur simultaneously in multiple sites.

The presence of the United States in most parts of Asia in recent history cannot be examined in its totality here, but suffice to say that the presence of the United States in Asia has been determinative in many ways. Some of the consequences of this presence continue to haunt not only those in Asia but also in the United States—and not only Asian Americans. Because of this interwoven history, postcolonial discourse can become a strategic reading of Asian American experience in the United States and thus suggest ways that identity formations emerge within a complex global nexus of relations of power. Specifically, this is to suggest that Asian American identities are not formed in isolation and within the boundaries of the U.S. nation-state, but rather are formed continuously within the relational flow and flux of global dynamics. This involves constructed domains and formulas that are both physical and epistemological. In this, too, there is recognition that given boundaries and borders are constructed as well as ‘naturalized’ in

colonial projects. I will be suggesting, too, that postcolonial critique, is, at its best, a form of what Rancière terms ‘dissensual practice’,³ wielded by those who continue to envision a decolonial world. I am reading the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’ as necessitating a critique—a dissensus—that envisions a *decolonial* world. As dissensual practice, postcolonial critique interrogates the limits and boundaries of not only what we believe to be ‘given’ but also what we are sanctioned to imagine. In other words, not only does postcolonial critique examine the effects and affects of coloniality in the history of various peoples, but it also interrogates the always-already-assumed ‘givenness’ and ‘rightness’ of notions such as the following: democracy, human rights, capitalism, communism, globalization, development, love, salvation, rights and wrongs, virtues, and vices. Postcolonial critique seeks to decolonize these often-assumed goods, not through some search for the native but by dismantling metanarratives of identitarianism and of the on-going imperial reach that pervades the innermost reaches of our very desires, nostalgia and hopes. This all means that its goal is not to ferret out and pinpoint the exact location of colonial damage. Rather, one of postcolonial critique’s ongoing interests is an examination of the intermingling effect and affect of past and present colonial practices by both the colonizers and the colonized. As this envisions decolonized worlds, it then also is as much about the future as it is about the past.

Asian American identities are thus not shaped solely by their relation to ‘America’ or by the singularity of ‘Asia’, but are constituted by what it means to be part of the imagined geopolitical dynamics of Asian and American, Asia and the United States. In this regard, Asian

³ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

American theological thinking must transgress the given boundaries and limits already erected by the past. Transgression means to cross over. It is a "...moving from one domain to another, the testing and challenging of limits, the mixing and intermingling of heterogeneities, cutting across expectations, providing unforeseen pleasures, discoveries, experience."⁴ For Asian American theological reflections, this assumes a radical critique of the imperial metaphysical logic of the West—both ontological and epistemological—that colonized most of our own structure of thinking and knowing. As philosopher William Spanos, a noted critic of Edward Said's work writes, "If there is any single motif that subsumes the last thirty years' various oppositional discourses, whether philosophical, cultural, or sociopolitical, it is the indefinite but very real notion of some other reality that, try as the custodians of the truth might to annul 'it', always returns to haunt this global truth."⁵ Dominant and dominating logics, which are imperialist, ontological and epistemological, cannot forever subdue the return of the repressed that gives shape to the world that is still to come.

To that end, Said's notions of fugue and contrapuntality are suggested as useful metaphors. 'Fugue' is a metaphor that helps us to understand not only the integrity of singularity but also that of plurality. In music, fugue/fuga is a polyphonic composition described as texture rather than form. It is a contrapuntal composition in which many voices enter then fade and re-enter and often overlap with one another. Contrapuntal productivity is an intellectual practice traversing interdependent linkages and histories, seeking a kind of ever shifting but still textured

⁴ Edward Said, *Musical Elaborations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁵ William V. Spanos, *The Legacy of Edward Said* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 225.

sociality. Fugue is a musical practice that can become a useful theological practice that suggests possibilities and conditions that might make singularity and plurality possible even as it recognizes interdependent histories that point toward textual sociality. Contrapuntality as reading against the grain blurs the line of center/periphery, East/West, and citizen/non-citizen by questioning assumed binaries so that one begins to recognize the depth of our ‘worldliness’—the inevitable fact of hybrid nature of all cultures and identities. Postcolonial contrapuntal reading of U.S. history, then, sheds light on how race, imperialism, colonization, gender, and sexuality all work to form the ideal ‘American’ that often did not and does not include Asian Americans in the dominant white imaginary. Ironically this simultaneous exclusion and inclusion gives birth to ever newly-regenerated notions of who that idealized ‘American’ is to be, which often continues not to be extended to Asian Americans, or for that matter to many who are not white. Providing whites with a ready alibi is of course the myth of the Model Minority (myths of inclusivity.) It also has a way of providing a false sense of honorary whiteness for some Asian Americans, a false sense of acceptance into whiteness. Simply put, as much as I would like to think that the Model Minority notion is just a myth that is resisted and actively disavowed and opposed by Asian Americans, I find that there are Asian Americans who accept and believe in their exceptionality—that as model minorities they are exceptional from among other minorities in this country and much closer to the American ideal than other minorities. As Vijay Prashad has noted, “The immigrant seeks a form of vertical assimilation, to climb from the lowest, darkest echelon on the stepladder of tyranny into the bright whiteness....Asians and Latinos have all

tried to barter their varied cultural worlds for the privileges of whiteness.”⁶ On the other hand, we cannot blithely ignore various extenuating and often complex ways in which multiple reference points are held and negotiated delicately and intentionally by Asian Americans in the formation of their very plural subjectivity. Rather than seek vertical integration, there are those who instead intentionally cultivate and nurture a horizontal assimilation.⁷ Cultivation of horizontal violence would involve a working across and with multiple sites of racial/ethnic communities and others who are continually marginalized to form collaborative alliances and mutual understanding. Because of the intense, so-called interventionist presence of the United States in much of Asia, Asian and American formations are in most cases co-constitutive of each other through shared multiple reference points, simultaneously bringing about the shattering force of the new with what seems like dissonance. In this regard, it is not only unjust but also dangerous to continue to view Asian American formation as separate from the intersecting histories of Asia and the histories of U.S. intervention and presence throughout Asia. Said’s notion of contrapuntality/fugue is a helpful methodological vision because it combines the complexity of an ever-shifting, differentiated singular/plural world on the one hand, with a pervasive sense of ‘over-againstness’, similar to Ranciere’s dissensus practice, on the other.

Dissensual practice is cognizant of Spivak’s ‘axiomatics of imperialism’ in which one’s complicity in the economic and social structures of so-called interventionist/imperialist presence should not be neglected. Contrapuntal reading as one form of dissensus practice, then, opens up

⁶ Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), x.

⁷ Ibid.

a space in which one's own epistemological foundations (often trained in assumptions of Western Enlightenment) can be transgressed. Postcolonial theory (and theology more specifically) must be attentive to the possibility and danger of becoming unmoored from the task of decolonization. Because the 'post' in the postcolonial often inadvertently connotes an 'aftermath' or an 'end' of a colonial era, it can result in misleading conclusions that the postcolonial era is free of any lingering colonial consequences. It is thus paramount for postcolonial critique to employ a 'decolonial' tactic (or to use Malini Johar Schueller's notion, to become a 'resistance postcolonialism') in which dissensual practice is a crucial part of the on-going analyses of what seems to be a continually-morphing of former colonial practices into ever new and shifting global theories and practices of globalization.

We can then respond to Kandice Chuh's question: "What is specifically useful about postcolonial and postcoloniality as critical terms of Asian Americanist analysis?"⁸ Modified with theology in mind, we might ask the question in this manner: What is useful about postcolonial and postcoloniality as critical terms for Asian American theological reflection? Any response to this latter question must address the fundamental form of dissensual practice that is at the heart of any postcolonial theological project—a project that is always already attuned to a contrapuntal reading of a textured world.

⁸ Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 117.

Postcoloniality Between Asia and Asian America

There must be a dialectical process in any deimperialization movement, then what conditions need to be created in the United States to bring about an effective movement there?

Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia As Method*

What are the conditions of possibility for Asians in America? Most Asian American studies have thus far tended to focus on the Asian in American. While the need for historical recollections of Asians and their roles in the United States is crucial to the kinds of tasks that Gary Okihiro writes about in the opening epigraph of this essay, such historical reconstructions have tended to focus solely on the domestic parameters of the U.S. nation-state. This is not enough. The complexity marking conditions of possibility for the diverse lives of Asians in the United States in the past, present and the future must be examined and reconstructed with closer scrutiny of what happened/s in the United States and, at the same time, with the United States' involvement elsewhere. For example, our recent domestic policy on immigration cannot be fully understood without understanding the historical underpinning of not only our domestic record of anti-immigration violence but also U.S. involvement in countries around the world. Postcolonial theorist, Gayatri C. Spivak writes that "war is an alibi every imperialism has given...and a civilizing mission carried to the extreme."⁹ U.S. involvement in Asia is numerous and devastating. Asian American experiences cannot be coherently or fully understood apart from the analysis of U.S. involvement in those countries. For example, Asian American scholar Jodi Kim notes how important it is to conceptualize Asian American critique and cultural politics in

⁹ Spivak, "Terror: A Speech After 9-11," *boundary 2* 31:2 (2004), 94.

ways that “mark the contradictions and ambivalent entanglements of American empire and gendered racial formations as the context out of which the post-World War II Asian American subject emerges and constitutes itself as such.”¹⁰ Thus, speaking and articulating meanings for Asian American subject formation cannot be done apart from the deeper examination of their connections to Asians’ experiences of U.S empire in Asia. Asian American experience therefore is directly linked to the ways that Asia has experienced the United States and vice versa. Whether it is in the Philippines, Korea, Japan or Vietnam, U.S involvement in those countries has left a mark on not just Asian and Asian American subjects but also on the dominant U.S. imaginary. This is not to say that Asia remains unchanged or innocent of imperial dynamics; analysis also implicates Asia with its own-to use Chen’s term-‘subimperial’ projects. For example, Korea’s own imperial desires are manifested in various parts of the globe where the economic power can be exploited by Korea itself. Globalized Korean transnational capitalist forces can be found at work exploiting both laborers and the natural resources of these places. Furthermore, as in the case of Korea, they are not only going ‘elsewhere’ (as is Mexico) to practice their subimperial desires. Reflecting U.S. imperial desires, Koreans are also now facing phenomenal growth in the numbers of non-Korean laborers working and living in Korea. Many were legally allowed to come into Korea to serve needs not being met by Koreans themselves. The cultural, political and social conditions [and suffering] with which these migrant workers and increasingly large populations of permanent Korean residents live are appalling to say the least. While economically exploited, these people face cultural political, social conditions of

¹⁰ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 7.

racism and xenophobia living among Koreans. Just as Asian American analysis of U.S. imperial designs is a complex endeavor, one that involves a simultaneous analysis of relations of power that spread around the world, any analysis of Asia must recognize that Asia, too, is a complex constellation of regional historical enmities and conflicts that must be addressed. Asia is not some 'pure' and 'innocent' bystander victimized by U.S. empire. While the victimization of Korea by the United States is a crucial dynamic, Asia also has been complicit with aiding and abetting U.S. imperial designs elsewhere. It is important to ask why this ongoing relationship between, say, Korea and the United States is an important site of analysis for examining influences that shape the conditions of possibility for Koreans in Korea as well as of Koreans in the United States. More nuance and deeper analysis needs to be offered to the response I share here briefly.

How the U.S. imaginary constructs its understanding of Korea and of Koreans in Korea has a direct impact on ways that Koreans in America are understood and treated. It is part of the racism borne by Koreans (and by other Asian Americans) that most U.S. citizens cannot differentiate between Korean Americans and Koreans. There have been more instances than I can recount here in which I am treated as if I am a foreigner and not an American citizen. Moreover, I am also viewed as a victimized foreigner who needs and continues to need U.S. benevolent rescue. This latter construct allows for a whole slew of racist stereotypes to continue to operate and recycle in the psyches of the dominant U.S. collective. To be sure, this ensures not only that the positionality of Koreans in Korea remains frozen in time and place, but it also requires constructs of Korean Americans in the dominant U.S. imaginary to remain stagnant. By

challenging this singularity and instead seeking multiple reference points, Asian American scholars transform the way we understand Asia, Asian America, and the United States always in the nexus of relations of power.

**Postcolonial Asian America: Its Relations to Afro-Asian
and Asian-Latino/a colonial struggles**

Polyculturalism is a ferocious engagement with the political world of culture, a painful embrace of the skin and all its contradictions.

Vijay Prashad, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*

A recent work on understanding of race by Korean Americans is the work of Nadia Y. Kim. Her work shifts studies of transnational understandings of race away from the more typical American-centered framework of U.S. immigrants.¹¹ By focusing instead on the context of U.S. imperialism and its global activities (specifically in Korea), she argues that Korean Americans' understanding of race precedes by a long time their immigration to the United States. Korean Americans' subject formation, she argues, began in Korea, especially during and in the aftermath of the Korean War. Korean immigrants' understanding of race, then, was not newly constructed after they set foot in the United States. Instead, Kim insists, both America's and Korea's racial formations were well underway even prior to immigration or the presence of Koreans in the United States. To be sure, the work of racial identity formation began not only for Koreans' understanding of themselves and of white Americans, but also for their perception of Latinos and

¹¹ Nadia Y. Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to L.A.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

African Americans even before Koreans set foot in the U.S. Before they entered the cultural landscape of U.S. discrimination against Latinos/as and against African Americans in the context of Jim Crow, they imbibed modes of this discrimination from the relations of the military service people in Korea. Analysis of the extent of racial formation and learning of racialized identities in Korea during this time exceed the scope of this essay, but suffice it to note that the lasting consequences of this complex racial formation, prior to immigration, have had major consequences in the immigrant communities in the United States. This orients Asian American thinkers, including theologians, to a much more complex task: reading events at multiple sites where a diverse Asia meets a diverse ‘America.’ In the remainder of this section I refer to two such sites: the Bandung conference in mid-20th century Indonesia and the still-debated case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in late 19th century United States. These cases and others can move us toward re-examining our learned reflexes when it comes to complicity in inter-racial, racialized identity formations.

Consider, first, the case of Bandung. In April 1954, the Indonesian Government proposed the convocation of an Asian-African conference. This Asian-African Conference, also known as the Bandung Conference, was held in Bandung, Indonesia, from April 18 through 24 in 1955. Twenty-nine Asian and African countries attended the conference. The spirit of unity of the Asian and African people as demonstrated at the conference—opposing imperialism and colonialism, the struggle for the defense of national independence and world peace, and the promotion of friendship among the peoples—is known as the ‘Bandung Spirit’. The conference enhanced the unity and cooperation among the Asian and African countries, inspired the people in the colonies

to struggle for national liberation, played a significant role in promoting the anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist struggle of the Asian and African people, and consolidated their unity. In his book, *The Color Curtain*, Richard Wright records his observations of the Bandung Conference. He notes that the document jointly written at the conference was the “last call of westernized Asians to the moral conscience of the west.”¹²

The Asian-African Conference was held at a time when post-war movement for national liberation in Asia, Africa and Latin America was vigorously surging forward, and the forces of imperialism and colonialism were met with heavy blows. It was the first international conference held by Asian and African countries themselves without the participation of any Western colonial power. The Bandung conference was an attempt to forge cross-racial political alliances, analyze the tensions that can make coalitions difficult, and trace the way those alliances are co-opted with monotonous regularity. Later, at the Havana Conference of 1966, the three continents of South America, Asia, and Africa came together in a broad alliance to form the Tricontinental—a movement of coalition building, collaboration and mutual recognition in working counter to the powers of injustice.¹³

The second case of complex racial calculus of Asians and ‘America’ returns us to the U.S. context. There is a long history of Afro Asian writing among U.S. figures, from W.E.B. Du Bois’ engagement with Asian politics to Paul Robeson’s internationalism, in which he attempt to forge cultural links between oppressed peoples across a variety of national, racial and political

¹² Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1956), 202.

¹³ Cf. Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

contexts. While efforts were made by Asians and Africans to forge alliances, it is also true that Asians and Africans were often pitted against each other in the racial framework of the United States. There are numerous cases in recent years that the media has pointed to as racial conflicts between African Americans and Asians, specifically between Korean- and African-Americans. Without going further into these events, I want to highlight an important event as an example of how frequently the white racial logic has made it difficult—if not impossible—for Asians and Africans to forge alliances.

The historical case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* is often recited as familiar history. In 1892, Homer Plessy purchased a first class train ticket in New Orleans. Plessy was “a citizen of the United States and a resident of the state of Louisiana, of mixed descent, in the proportion of seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African blood.”¹⁴ The reigning one-drop rule legally classified him as ‘black.’ However, according to certain accounts, a “mixture of colored blood was not discernable in him.” After buying his ticket, he sat in a vacant seat in the ‘whites only’ section and then was removed and jailed. In 1896 the Supreme Court ruled against Plessy by holding the constitutionality of the ‘equal but separate’ doctrine. The vote was seven to one. The single dissenting voice was that of Justice John Marshall Harlan. Marshall Harlan argued against the segregation noting, “There is no caste here. Our constitution is color blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law.”¹⁵ Interestingly there is a little known part of his opinion. He invokes a third racial

¹⁴ Sanda Mayzaw Lwin, “A Race So Different From Our Own”: Segregation, Exclusion, and the Myth of Mobility,” in *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History Politics* eds. Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19

category, one that speaks of neither black nor white. He observes that there exists a third group whose difference prohibited its members not only from becoming U.S. citizens but also from entering the very borders of the nation. He noted “there is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those persons belonging to it to become citizens of the United States. Persons belonging to it are with few exceptions, absolutely excluded from our country. I allude to the Chinese race.”¹⁶ Harlan invoked the Chinese race in his dissent to provide bodily proof that the Louisiana state is unjust to the ‘citizens of the black race.’ While his disagreement with the other seven who voted against Plessy is admirable, his logic was still within the white racist framework. By positioning one racial group over another, he manipulates the already-percolating racial divide by redrawing it as one between Asian and African American. The imagined body of the ‘Chinaman’ troubles the order of the color line in a way that is different from the way Plessy’s body does. Thus, the Asian body is deployed as a buffer between whites and blacks.¹⁷ In effect, Harlan was arguing *against* segregating Plessy by invoking the acceptability of segregating the Chinese. In crude form, Harlan was saying “*Look, Plessy isn’t Chinese, so he shouldn’t be subject to the logic of caste.*”

Given this kind of historical deployment of racial categories within the United States in addition to the decolonial movements of anti-colonial and anti-racist spirit of the Bandung gathering, how might Asians in America negotiate their own and others’ racial anxieties and also resist racialized bifurcations? How might Asians in America collaborate with other racialized

¹⁶ Ibid., 20

¹⁷ The Chinese Exclusion Acts 1882-1943 not only prohibited Chinese immigration but also denied naturalized citizenship to those already here.

communities toward decolonization? The accusation flung at many Koreans by other racialized groups is that Koreans are racists. As I have indicated, perhaps this has much to do with learned racism in the context of the U.S. imperial presence in Korea. Rather than ‘racists’, Nadia Kim describes Koreans as “racially prejudiced” in the same way she “would not describe Black Americans who reiterate anti-Korean or anti-Asian stereotypes to be racist but prejudiced.”¹⁸ Kim’s observation stems from her argument that globalization is not just the spread of military and capital but also a flow of images and ideas. One avenue of this is that the U.S. media saturation affects not only Koreans in Korea but also Koreans in America as well as other Americans. She goes on to argue that U.S. imperialism relies on “one group of color to help subordinate another group of color in a lesser country, thereby creating multiple and complex lines of inequality.”¹⁹ For those seeking to decolonize and resist racialized bifurcations, it is crucial that we engage in dissensual practices of resistant postcolonialism—one that springs from sites of quotidian practices of the political. It is thus necessary for postcolonial Asian American theology to examine the intricate ways in which we are all implicated in sustaining destructive racial ideologies in service to imperial desires.

¹⁸ Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to L.A.*, 9.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Postcoloniality as Interplay of Race, Gender, Sexuality and Globalization

It is often said that colonial imperialism is at an end in this world. We would better say that the end is in sight; or rather in the vision of certain men [sic]. It has not yet really ended.

W.E.B. Dubois, *Crossing the World Color Line*

It must be stressed, in this final major section that the multiplicity of moves in a contrapuntal method of Asian American theology must attend to the interplay not only between race and empire, or between race and coloniality, but *also* among these *and* gender, sexuality, and globalization. I have already suggested as much in the previous sections. It is necessary to comment on these with some greater specificity. Again, we find the interaction of a postcolonial complexity with dissensual practice. The contrapuntal fugue that is Asian American theology, then, reaches yet greater complexity and intensity. In this final section, I can only point out some of the dynamics of this interplay as illustrative.

Take first the issue of gendered experience. The construction of genders along a binary division must be criticized and problematized not only because of various ways in which this feeds into other social misogynistic impulses, but also because it is a bondage to the ways that men come to understand their identity. While in the past sexism was justified based on essentialist and biological notions of what constituted gender, feminist scholars today are arguing for anti-essentialist views and argue that one is not “born a female but becomes one.” I extend this argument further to say then that one is not “born a male but becomes one” and even further to say that one is not born as a “woman of color” but “becomes one.”²⁰ To be sure, rigid gender

²⁰ Cf. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

boundaries have always been transgressed and it is the task of feminist theologians to recover those transgressive occasions. I want to argue that a sustained and thorough investigation of how gender is also raced must continue to generate a wider conversation between scholars from all different racial/ethnic backgrounds. Gender is also simultaneously a practice of racing.²¹ Here, I want to say that different people experience their gendered bodies differently. For example heteronormativity is often extended to neither women nor men of color. Thus, racialized men of color are often de-masculinized or overtly feminized. A white women's experience of heteropatriarchy, for example, cannot be universalized but rather should be localized, just as one Asian American woman's gendered self is understood differently. Moreover, this is the same for the way that a white Euro-American male's understanding of 'masculinity' is quite different from an Asian male's experience. While biologists argue that there is no such thing as different 'races' within our human species, the experience of race is a concrete reality. Structural and systemic oppression based on notions of existing racial hierarchy and superiority is concretely present in our history and in our present reality. In the history of settler colonialism in the United States, white racism rooted in white supremacy gave birth to the colonization of this land and its peoples in addition to institutionalized slavery; this is attested to in the weight of our nation's history. In fact, white racism defined who *were* and who *were not* even considered to be *human*. White racism continued throughout U.S. history and even today is at the core of beliefs that build and re-build our national identity.²²

²¹ For an excellent critique of coloniality, race, gender and sexuality, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

²² Cf. Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

White racism and sexism worked simultaneously to marginalize particular peoples in routinized daily practices of humiliation and loss of dignity. Racism and sexism are intermingled and often work to sustain the dominant identity through its anchoring in certain essentialist metanarratives about its own identity in opposition to different identities.

While the black/white dyad in critical race theory is important and must be sustained, we also need to complexify such conversations even more by examining how white racism deploys race differently against different groups of people so that there is no uniform strategy against all racialized people. Instead, its insidious nature is precisely due to its diverse strategies of deploying racism against different peoples differently.²³ Ultimately, it is important to recognize that racism so saturates heteropatriarchy that even white women are not exempt from being racialized. If gender and race are problematic categories that need further and ongoing theorization and theologizing by feminists and womanists, there is also a vital need to re-examine how we construct and understand sexuality.

Gender/race dynamics are bound up with those of sexuality/race. If the ruses of gender and race as clear categories are deployed as scaffolding to shore up and hold together structures of domination, heteronormativity is yet another concept that links all these threads together. Sexuality defined as ‘straight’, or as the ‘norm’, works to sustain patriarchal power over women and other men who transgress rigid sexual demarcations. In a heteronormative dominative structure, those who are deemed as ‘other’ are often seen to be sexually transgressive, degenerative, deviant, and in need of discipline and regulation. Not only are other racialized and

²³ Cf. Gary Y. Okihiro, *Common Ground: Reimagining American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

gendered people then constructed as non-heterosexual, so also are those of other religions constructed by heteropatriarchal ideology as sexually deviant. We might ask if there are any differences between being a practicing white lesbian Christian and, say, a practicing lesbian Sikh?²⁴ How does race and gender get deployed here? According to the ‘straight’ epistemology, all those who are not heterosexual are deviant and queer. But there is also a lingering and persistent tendency even within queer communities to deploy race and gender against other queers of color which needs further unpacking. Moreover, we also need to ask the question of how and in what ways those who identify with LGBTIQ communities also sometimes fail to examine their complicity in the global capitalist project. Another complicating dimension is the ever expanding and deepening work of globalization as yet another way that coloniality has put on a new face.

The forces of globalization lead us to consider still further complexities without leaving the gender/race, and sexuality/race dynamics. In an age of rapid globalization, it is not surprising to say that feminist theology must also include finding ways to create just and sustainable existence. Colonization, imperialism and neoliberalism have left an indelible mark upon many lives and nations. Race, gender and sexuality have been used and deployed to mark the bodies that have been excluded and even abandoned. Nevertheless, there is an additional dynamic. In the age of globalization, which has and is shifting the way we define global power in our time,

²⁴ For an excellent discussion on white supremacy, heteronormativity, racialization of religion and sexuality, see Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: homonationalism in queer times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

we are learning to recognize the emergence of a kind of ‘financialization’²⁵ of the globe—one in which a division between the masses of the global poor far outnumber those few global elites whose access to wealth is far-reaching. As massive devastation is worked upon vulnerable people and the creation so that a privileged few accumulate wealth and resources beyond their need, we are faced with an unprecedented crisis of hunger, forced migration, disease, and death and—out of this mix—defiance and violence.

Amid the contrapuntal play of moves, we uncover questions that press toward dissensual practice to envision, again, a decolonized world. How might we theologize in ways that take life as sacred—all life? How do we theologize so that our world can continue and flourish? What deconstructive and reconstructive theological moves must be made so that we begin to reimagine the divine and this creation as sacred, as living in abundance rather than rooted in competition and scarcity? In the West, we have a saying that “might does not make right.” Yet, tragically, this is the base of our impulse for waging war on others. We steal other peoples’ resources, exploit their labor, colonize their lands and create vicious cycles through self-hatred and violence and through injection of drugs, junkified informational technology and selling knock-off weapons—all in the name of progress and democracy. The caveat here is not simply that the ‘West’ is fast becoming the only practitioner of such modes of being in the world, but also that other powerful global elites have joined this rank. Feminist theology cannot but give critical attention to the ways that the financialization of the globe is deepening the suffering of masses of

²⁵ Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward A History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

people worldwide. Globalization as a new form of neoliberal agenda is yet another re-created face of colonial legacy.

These are some of the queries of a postcolonial dissensual practice, and they set the agenda of an Asian-American theology that would address the interplay of race, gender, sexuality and globalization.

Coda

To be human is to be intended toward the other.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*

The new global person ... is one whose heart is as large as the world.... A heart as large as the world is a heart that sees the connections of our lives, wherever we are located on this planet Earth.... A heart large as the world is the heart that experiences the pain of the world, especially the pain of those who have suffered the most. It is a heart that embraces the pain of the other, even the forces that are antagonistic to one's interest, for it knows that the pain of the one is the pain of all.

Eleazar Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*

In arguing for a postcolonial deconstructive move, as I have throughout this essay, I want to insist that even when identity (whether gendered, raced, or sexualized, and whether performed in Asia or in the United States *or* in those complex places of intercontinental meeting) is provisional, one must engage in a persistent auto-critique in order to avoid over-determined authorization of identity and claims to authenticity. For example, the question of *who are the 'authentic inhabitants of margins'*? challenges 'womanist' or us to criticize ourselves persistently in order to avoid the ruse of monolithic, homogenous and totalizing notions of who or what we mean when we use the term 'Asian American' or 'feminist', queer. Instability of all rigid identitarianism must give way to identity as always positional and provisional in time and space.

How, then, do we give narration to our experience/s without reifying certain essentialist stereotypes, or without reifying a particular narrative as the metanarrative? How do we speak about all the plurality, ambiguity, multiplicity and provincial ways that identity is understood, without allowing one's particular speaking and theorizing to feed into a particular imaginary, be it a white imaginary, that of a particular feminist imaginary, or for that matter even an Asian American queer feminist imaginary? We must be mindful of just how interdependent our lives are even when we live in 'worlds' apart from one another. We cannot in all honesty speak of the 'West' or the 'East' precisely because geopolitical histories cannot be so easily sliced and diced. While unique and specific peoples and national formations exist, there are also historical parallels and global links between different formations due to the ways that those formations are gendered, raced, or colonized.

Postcolonial contrapuntal reading of U.S. history sheds light on how race, imperialism, colonization, gender, sexuality all work to form the ideal of the 'heteropatriarchal American' that does not include anyone who transgresses the given, clear boundaries in the dominant white imaginary. How do we begin to theologize the ways in which we must right all the wrongs? Perhaps we must heed the words of people such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (an atheist) when she notes that "one needs some sort of 'licensed lunacy' from some transcendental Other to develop the sort of ruthless commitment that can undermine the sense that one is better than those who are being helped..."²⁶ To avoid what Spivak decries as 'licensed lunacy', a continuous and sustained effort must be generated to move away from unilateral global feminist theologies

²⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Boston: Blackwell, 2008), 57.

and toward the building of coalitions and solidarities across differences—even those that seem insurmountable to some. By doing so, we will generate a worldview that embraces heterogeneity, multiplicity, and differences among and within ourselves and moves toward the recognition that all life is worthy of dignity and respect.²⁷ Indeed, we must train our imagination to dare to dream such fantastic possibilities as practices of postcolonial dissensual practice, always and already emphasizing the call for the decolonial in the postcolonial.

²⁷ For an excellent theological work that critiques the “logic of One” and offers a theology of multiplicity, see Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008).