



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

**Collaborative Dissonance:
Gender and Theology in Asian Pacific America**

Nami Kim
nkim@spelman.edu

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

Gender as an analytic category has added complexity to the discussions in theology in Asian Pacific America primarily through the efforts of feminist theologians of Asian descent. Gender has been deployed to look at the ways in which human beings' identities, experiences, and relationships are constructed as well as to examine theological notions, assumptions, and

agendas that have been considered “universal.” The pioneering work of feminist theologians of Asian descent has also strongly criticized patriarchal social and religious institutions, naming gender oppression as evil and denouncing it in conjunction with other intersecting forms of oppression.¹ In light of landmark feminist interventions in doing theology in Asian Pacific America, one may wonder if gender is still relevant to theology in Asian Pacific America. Is it passé to talk about gender in theology in the twenty-first century? Or, does gender still matter in theology in Asian Pacific America? If it still matters, to what extent and in what ways does it matter?

This article reasserts that gender does indeed still matter in theology in Asian Pacific America, for much work needs to be done to confront the interplay of everyday unequal gender dynamics experienced at home, at work, and in various religious institutions and structural issues such as sexism and (hetero)patriarchy that persist in Asian Pacific America. Gender still matters in doing theology in Asian Pacific America not only because it, as an analytic category, continues to reveal the gendered nature of the theological subject inscribed in patriarchal theological discourse in the guise of universality; but also because it helps us question the relationships of power by challenging what has been taken for granted as “natural” and/or “divinely sanctioned” systems. Taking gender into account in theology is not simply adding gender as *an* issue (read a women’s issue) in theological reflection, thereby concerning women only. It is, rather, broadening, expanding, and transforming the conceptual framework, scope, and agenda of

¹ See Nami Kim and W. Anne Joh, “Gender and Sexuality in Asian and Pacific American Religious/Theological Studies,” in *Asian & Oceanic American Religious Cultures Encyclopedia*, eds. Fumitaka Matsuoka and Jane Iwamura (ABC-CLIO, forthcoming).

theology as well as critically examining the unspoken theological assumptions, presuppositions, categories, and concepts. It also means an ongoing, unrelenting critique of gender oppression that is interlocked with other forms of oppression prevalent across Asian Pacific America, reminding us that a theological project can never be value-neutral. Deploying gender at the intersections with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (neo)coloniality, and ablebodiedness, among others, -- and noting its interactions -- is also important because gender can be and has been used to either essentialize one's theological and theoretical work, or to depoliticize it to denote the "scholarly seriousness" of one's work, by claiming that gender fits "within the scientific terminology of social science and thus dissociates itself from the (supposedly strident) politics of feminism."²

I begin with a discussion of the emergence of feminist theology in Asian Pacific America that has broken new ground by critically engaging gender as an analytic category and its attendant issues. Then I briefly explain why the term "theology in Asian Pacific America" is preferred to the usage of "Asian American theology," as it is not a self-evident description but a loaded phrase that requires unpacking. Finally, I identify four sites where "collaborative dissonance" may occur in doing theology in twenty-first-century Asian Pacific America, each of which affirms the ongoing necessity to engage gender in theological projects in Asian Pacific America.

² Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91/5 (Dec. 1986): 1056.

Feminist Theology in Asian Pacific America: Emergence and Continuance

What is called Asian American theology, a major theological articulation in Asian Pacific America, emerged during a time when various marginalized groups began to actively engage Christian theological discussions and movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since then, Asian American theology as a contextual theological discourse has grown into the present corpus of work by three generations of theologians, reflecting the plurality and heterogeneity of the experiences and realities of the people who constitute a group called Asian American. In *Introducing Asian American Theologies*, Jonathan Y. Tan discusses both the first and the second generations of Asian American theologians, and Andrew Sung Park identifies the two stages in Asian American theology in *Liberation Theologies in the United States*.³ Although an emerging third generation or third stage in Asian American theology is not included in their classification of Asian American theology, the two generations or two stages of work in Asian American theology attest that “a single, uniform, and normative Asian American theology is neither feasible nor desirable in the context of multiple heterogeneous, hybridized, and contested identities.”⁴

During its first stage, Asian American theology did not challenge its own gender insensitivity and patriarchal social and religious institutions that sanction gender hierarchy, whether in a leadership role in ministry or in theological/biblical teachings and interpretations.

³ Jonathan Y. Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008); Andrew Sung Park, “Asian American Theology,” in *Liberation Theologies in the United States: An Introduction*, eds. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

⁴ Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies*, 164.

Neither did it consider gender justice as an integral part of theological undertaking. Although Asian American theology was already a gendered discourse, with primarily Asian North American male voices and perspectives in the center of its theological inquiry, these first-stage theologians were often not cognizant of the ways in which gender dynamics work in theology. During this first stage, Asian American theology emphasized the experiences of Asian Americans (read Asian American men) by calling attention to their racial and cultural marginalization in the United States and by challenging the dominant Western theological enterprise. In other words, it was Asian American men's experiences and realities of racial discrimination, and social and political marginalization that became the main locus of theological discussion in the majority of earlier Asian American theological work. During the same time period, Asian liberation theology emerged in Asia, including Minjung and Dalit theology, and constructed a liberationist theological discourse in light of the experiences of struggling "Asians" (read Asian men) in postcolonial nation-states in Asia.

In the meantime, the analysis of women's experiences and women's search for liberation accelerated. Feminist scholars in religion, particularly feminist Christian theologians, the majority of whom were based in North America and Europe, began to produce a significant volume of work criticizing the generic human experience and the universalized notion of human, which, in fact, meant man/men (read propertied heterosexual white men). Feminist theologians from the margins, however, began to challenge mainstream feminism and feminist theology for their unproblematized use of the category of woman/women (read upper-middle-class white heterosexual women), women's experiences, and gender-only analysis that left out other

modalities of social relations and experiences. Included among these feminist theologians from the margins were feminist theologians of Asian descent, whose work can be classified under the second stage or second generation of Asian American theology. As Tan notes, one of the notable developments found among the second-generation of Asian American theologians is the “emergence of Asian American feminist theologians, who were absent among the ranks of the first-generation theologians.”⁵ In a similar vein, Park captures the characteristics of both stages:

Whereas the Asian American theologians of the first stage were critical of external social structures but paid little attention to the negative aspects of their own ethnic communities, the Asian American theologians of the second stage have reflected on intracommunal oppression and repression, including the issue of internal ethnocentrism, racism, and gender relations.⁶

The concern for gender has signaled new directions, approaches, and impacts in the field of theology in Asian Pacific America. Feminist theologians of Asian descent have paid close attention to the different historical and cultural contexts in which social categories, including gender, are produced, thereby criticizing the use of gender as an unchanging universal concept. Thus, feminist theologians of Asian descent have deployed gender contextually and at the intersections with other categories of analysis. While critically interrogating dominant androcentric Western theological discourse, feminist theologians of Asian descent have also leveled their criticism at sexism and patriarchy within Asian Pacific America, including religious institutions that maintain hierarchical gender relations and patriarchal power structures. The commitment of feminist theologians of Asian descent to bring sexual and gender justice to the faith communities and to the wider Asian Pacific America, as well as to the larger society, is

⁵ Ibid., 102.

⁶ Park, “Asian American Theology,” 116.

noteworthy. To put it differently, what has made their feminist theological work significant is not simply their use of gender as an analytic category; it is also their unwavering criticism and denouncement of various structures of oppression in relation to gender, such as patriarchy, sexism, colonialism, orientalism, neocolonialism, militarism, racism, androcentrism, homophobia, and gendered violence. One of the most recent works to capture this significance of feminist theology in Asian Pacific America is an anthology entitled *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology*. Published in 2007, it is a collection of interdisciplinary, multiethnic, antiracist, anticolonial, transnational, and multigenerational work by feminist scholars, teachers and activists of Asian descent in religious/theological studies, including the third generation of Asian American theologians.⁷

The goal of feminist theologians of Asian descent has been not the inclusion of their voices into the mainstream but the transformation of the theological enterprise itself by placing the experiences of women of Asian descent at the center of theological inquiry. This is not a simple task because their experiences are neither identical nor without complexity. Therefore, this task will require ongoing, vigorous work, especially when the struggles of women of Asian descent seem to intensify with the unceasing, if not worsening, social, political, economic, and religious struggles facing Asian Pacific America in the twenty-first century.

⁷ *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology*, eds. Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-lan, and Seung Ai Yang (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007). Also see Kim and Joh, "Gender and Sexuality in Asian and Pacific American Religious/Theological Studies."

Theology in Asian Pacific America

The interdisciplinary field of theology in Asian Pacific America is neither monolithic nor homogeneous, as it reflects the multiple and heterogeneous experiences of its constituents. Theology is contextual, and there is not an exception for the theological projects stemming from the context of Asian Pacific America, including feminist theology that is also wide ranging. The context for theology in Asian Pacific America includes the historical Asian (im)migrations to this country and the displacements of people from Asia and the ongoing U.S. neocolonialism and militarism that continue to affect the lives of people within and outside the borders of the United States. As Jodi Kim shows in her book *Ends of Empire*, the post-1965 immigration of Asians to the United States as well as the displacement experienced by Asians (for example, “refugee migrants” including “orphans”), have to do with various wars in which the United States engaged, such as the Korean War and the Vietnam War.⁸ Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho also pointedly state that “Asian and Pacific Islander displacements, dispossessions, and migrations to America have been punctuated by U.S. wars in Asia and the Pacific, and thus U.S. war waging has become an integral, if not naturalized, part of the grammar of these (im)migration narratives.”⁹ Shigematsu and Camacho convincingly argue that “to circumscribe our understanding of ‘America’ to the continental United States – as previous paradigms have tended to emphasize – is myopic in terms of the reach of American empire,” because the United

⁸ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

⁹ Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho, “Militarized Currents, Decolonizing Futures,” in *Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific*, eds. Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxvi.

States “defined its national interests not along the borders of the continental United States but in Asia and the Pacific.”¹⁰ Further, such circumscription “runs the risk of miscalculating the formative role that U.S. militarization plays in shaping the historical displacements and migrations of the populations we now refer to as Asian America and Pacific Islander.”¹¹ Scholars of Asian American politics have also argued that a “critical transnational perspective” needs to be adopted “to recalibrate the movement [of Asian peoples] away from [their] domestic roots – and toward the legacy of U.S. involvement in the Asian Pacific.”¹² Viewing the “American” only as one part of “place” for Asian American politics, Lisa Lowe writes, “‘Becoming a national citizen’ cannot be the exclusive narrative of emancipation for the Asian American subject. Rather, the current social formation entails a subject less narrated by the modern discourse of citizenship and more narrated by the histories of wars in Asia, immigration, and the dynamics of the current Global economy.”¹³

Based on this understanding of historical and current relationships between the United States and Asia and the Pacific, I use the term “theology in Asian Pacific America” rather than “Asian American theology.” Using the phrase “theology in Asian Pacific America” allows us to avoid reinscribing the unproblematized construction of theological discourse either based on the

¹⁰ Ibid., xxv.

¹¹ Ibid., xxv–xxvi.

¹² Christian Collet and Ikumi Koakutsu, “Does Transnational Living Preclude Pan-Ethnic Thinking? An Exploration of Asian American Identities,” in *The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans*, ed. Christian Collet and Pei-te Lien (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 169.

¹³ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), 33. Quoted in Christian Collet and Pei-te Lien, “The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans: Controversies, Questions, Convergence,” in *The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans*, 8.

reified notion of “Asianness” or on the uncritical claim of being “American.” Kwok Pui-lan echoes this reasoning in *Off the Menu* when she argues for the need to employ new conceptual frameworks to analyze the “Asia Pacific” in light of globalization and transnationalism. Kwok suggests that a transnational analysis will help us see that “Asian” and “America” should not be viewed as two discrete entities, but, rather, the two should be seen as “constantly influencing each other within the broader regional formation of the Asia Pacific.”¹⁴ Also, Kwok reminds that Asians and Asian North Americans are “strategically located in the interstices” of extensive transnational networks, “whether they work in the Silicon Valley or in the financial districts of Seoul, Hong Kong, or Tokyo.”¹⁵

Hence, the use of the phrase “theology in Asian Pacific America” is to foreground the context that requires a critical transnational framework in attending to theology in Asian Pacific America. Such use is not to suggest that the phrase encompasses *all* theological articulations arising from across Asia and North America. Nor does using a transnational framework in theology in Asian Pacific America presume an unrestricted, free movement of capital, technology, information, cultural resources, or human beings. Rather, doing so takes into account the unequal global power structures, because today’s global world, as Espiritu rightly puts it in her book *Home Bound*, is “not just some glorious hybrid, complex mixity” but is “systematically divided.”¹⁶ Such a transnational framework will also be helpful because it challenges

¹⁴ Kwok Pui-lan, “Fishing the Asia Pacific: Transnationalism and Feminist Theology,” in *Off The Menu*, 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁶ Yen Le Espiritu, *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 4.

“methodological nationalism.” As Nina Glick Schiller explains, methodological nationalism refers to a theoretical framework that equates society with the nation-state by adopting national borders as the “natural unit of study.”¹⁷ Preferring to use the phrase “theology in Asia Pacific America” is an effort to avoid “methodological nationalism” in doing theology, which will help us understand different gendered racial formations within the United States. For instance, Nadia Y. Kim, in her study of the transnational process about racialization, argues that the United States racializes many of its immigrants “both before and after arrival.”¹⁸ Identifying U.S. imperialism in Asia since World War II as one of the key sources of racialization of Asian ethnics, she contends that the United States “racially ‘Americanizes’ other countries by way of its ‘White-Black order.’”¹⁹ Understanding the role of U.S. imperialism in forming (im)migrants’ transnational understandings of race and their related identities helps us see gendered racial formations across Asian Pacific America.²⁰

Collaborative Dissonance

In what ways and to what extent does gender still matter in theology in Asian Pacific America? How could theology in Asian Pacific America further broaden its parameters to bring gender justice to Asian Pacific America? As a way to respond to these questions, I identify four

¹⁷ Nina Glick Schiller, “Transnational Social Fields and Imperialism: Bringing a Theory of Power to Transnational Studies,” *Anthropological Theory* 5/4 (2005): 440.

¹⁸ Nadia Y. Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008), 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-6.

²⁰ Kim also demonstrates how U.S. “imperialist racial formations” takes place in South Korea, while South Korea “exports” its nationalism to the Koreans in the United States.

sites where “collaborative dissonance” is called for concerning gender in theology in Asian Pacific America.

Roger Kamien explains in his book *Music: An Appreciation* that a dissonance in music refers to “an unstable tone combination . . . dissonant chords are ‘active’; traditionally they have been considered harsh and have expressed pain, grief, and conflict.”²¹ If “collaborative” implies the twofold meaning of “working together” and “working subversively against,”²² “dissonance” signifies “unstable” approaches to gender issues, within which reside both limitations and potentialities to bring changes to the existing paradigms. These approaches are considered unstable in the sense that they are changeable, on the edge, and even explosive due to constructive tensions emerging from within. Like dissonant chords, such approaches are also “active” in that the tensions within them are constantly present, testing their own limitations and calling new potentialities forward.

As Fumitaka Matsuoka observes, theology is “a thoroughly historical discipline that does its work in the midst of communities and their traditions. It is the discourse by which the arguments of diverse perspectives are voiced in community.”²³ Hence, calling for collaborative dissonance with regard to gender in theology in Asian Pacific America demonstrates the constructiveness of difference and the multiplicity in the (re)production of theological knowledge. To put it differently, calling for collaborative dissonance is neither to seek consensus

²¹ Roger Kamien, *Music: An Appreciation*, 4th brief ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), 43.

²² Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 28.

²³ Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995), 4.

nor to resolve conflicts in theological work for the sake of harmony, but, rather, it is to highlight the sites where different theological approaches and perspectives emerge, even at the cost of discomfort, conflict, pain, or resentment. In so doing, theology's gendered effects, which are multiple, including the destructive effects on the lives of heterosexual women and men and lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender persons in Asian Pacific America, can also be acknowledged, and thereby challenged. Collaborative dissonance taking place in various sites of contestation will eventually contribute to enriching the diverse communities across Asian Pacific America, without silencing different views and approaches. It will simultaneously subvert the dominant theological discourse that does not account for the plural and diverse experiences of people in these communities. Challenges and problems confronting twenty-first-century Asian Pacific America in relation to gender are both larger structural issues across Asian Pacific America and internal conflicts stemming from within, matters that require working together and at the same time working subversively against. Hence, the sites where collaborative dissonance occurs are contested sites of struggle and transformation, where different theological approaches and perspectives, like dissonant chords, may emerge, both expressing and generating tensions, discomfort, and pain. And it is the hopes for working together to end injustice or working subversively against injustice that affect communities in Asian Pacific America on multiple levels and to various degrees.

Site One: U.S. Imperialism, "Other" Religion(s), and Women

One aspect of the context within which theology in Asian Pacific America is being articulated is transnational, and its transnationality cannot be discussed without critically

examining the ongoing U.S. imperialist interventions in Asia and the Pacific. Current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are not exceptions but are part of a continuing U.S. imperialist project to build a series of “future super-colonies.”²⁴ The gloomy speculations over potentially imminent wars in regions like Iran and North Korea are not the news of bygone eras. The U.S. imperialist project has been and still is closely interrelated with its racist policy against people of color within the country’s own borders, and, as Jaideep Singh tells us, “religion” in North America has become a “particularly powerful method of classifying the ‘enemy’ or ‘other’ in national life in recent years, impacting primarily non-Christian people of color.”²⁵ Theology in Asian Pacific America, then, needs to respond to this context by examining the ways in which religion is invoked or utilized for imperialist political interests. All of this becomes more complicated when “other” religions are portrayed, not only by the mainstream media but also by some feminists, as inherently patriarchal, more oppressive, and less tolerant. For instance, along with the demonization of Islam, the narrative of Islamic states as the enemies of feminists and women was supported by many feminists.²⁶ Such framing of Islam through the (mis)appropriation of feminist rhetoric by the key players of the current U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq created the ground for launching America’s so-called War on Terror.²⁷ In this political climate, defining

²⁴ Carole Boyce Davies, “Con-di-fi-cation,” in *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women’s Studies*, eds. Stanlie M. James, Frances Smith Foster, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2010), 404.

²⁵ Jaideep Singh, “The Racialization of Minoritized Religious Identity: Constructing Sacred Sites at the Intersection of White and Christian Supremacy,” in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, eds. Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2003), 88.

²⁶ See Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).

²⁷ See Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Dangerous Brown Men: Exploiting Sex, Violence and Feminism in the War on Terror* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2008).

“Islamic countries” as a primary “mission field” and targeting Muslims in North America as objects of evangelization by some Christian churches and organizations across Asian Pacific America require a serious response from theologians in Asian Pacific America.²⁸

The site where U.S. imperialism, “other” religion(s), and women are intertwined becomes a contested location for theology in Asian Pacific America, as different theological perspectives may bring disparate arguments that are more likely to generate a cacophony than engender harmony. Developing a framework for a theological approach that resists attempts to become complicit with U.S. imperialist interests through the denouncement of colonialist and orientalist discourse of “saving other women” from their religion(s) constitutes one of the responses to this site. Such a framework critically interrogates Christian complicity in maintaining an imperialist agenda as well as the Christian dominance that is often overlooked in the larger U.S. social and political landscape. It is also a framework that critically examines how a discursive construction of religion, including that of “secular” feminists, as an ahistorical and/or essentialized entity, affects the ways in which women’s oppression is framed and discussed. It remains to be seen what other approaches will emerge in this contested site.

Site Two: Religious Diversity and Gender Oppression

The multiplicity and heterogeneity of religion/culture are other characteristics of the context for theology in Asian Pacific America, since Asian (im)migrants have brought with them

²⁸ For instance, in August, 2009, colorful flyers were handed out by a group of women and men of Asian descent in busy shopping mall complexes located in a metropolitan city in the U.S. South. The flyers showed a picture of a woman wearing a veil, along with the passage written in Korean, Chinese, and English that Christians should pray for their “unsaved” Muslim sisters and brothers during the month of Ramadan.

various religious traditions, including “Confucianized Christianity.”²⁹ However, there has been a lack of theological reflection on religious diversity and/or difference in spite of some Christian theological efforts to engage in conversations and dialogues with those whose faith can be categorized as part of “other” religions. Given the religious/cultural heterogeneity and multifaith traditions in Asian Pacific America, theologians of Asian descent would agree that theology in Asian Pacific America should take up the challenge of engaging different religious traditions, although the ways in which they engage may vary drastically. For instance, in an issue of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Kwok Pui-lan and Rachel Bundang discuss some of the areas in which women, through the grassroots movement and organization Pacific, Asian, North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM), should work in the near future, stating that “PANAAWTM theology will need to develop paradigms for theology and religious studies that affirm our multicultural and multireligious contexts.”³⁰

Critical engagements of diverse religious/cultural traditions in Asian Pacific America, however, have not been an easy task. As Kwok and Bundang explain, a failure to appreciate our religious and cultural resources due to the legacy of Western colonialism has rendered theologians of Asian descent unable to engage those resources in theology. Even when religious and cultural resources became available, they were part of a racist and/or orientalist approach or a “nativist approach that tends to create a homogeneous national culture, often based on the

²⁹ Nam-Soon Kang, “Confucian Familism and Its Social/Religious Embodiment in Christianity: Reconsidering the Family Discourse from a Feminist Perspective,” *Asian Journal of Theology* 18/1 (2004): 168-189.

³⁰ Kwok Pui-lan and Rachel A. R. Bundang, “PANAAWTM Lives!” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21/2 (2005): 153. See also “The Future of PANAAWTM Theology” at <http://www.panaawtm.org>; and *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*.

reification of one religious tradition, interpreted androcentrically.”³¹ Kwok and Bundang suggest that feminist theologians should interrogate “not only Western Christianity but also constructions of gender and power in Asian religions and in Asian North America.”³² Therefore, engaging diverse religious traditions in theology in Asian Pacific America will require the development of new frameworks that not only critically examine orientalist and colonialist constructions of “other” religions but that also unrelentingly interrogate the gender dynamics and androcentric teachings and interpretations found in those traditions. Such frameworks for engaging religious diversity should not overlook the unequal power dynamics between hegemonic Christianity and “other” religious traditions.

Specifically, new frameworks for interreligious engagements are greatly needed in addressing issues related to gender oppression, because gender oppression cuts across ethnoreligious communities in Asian Pacific America in multiple and multifaceted ways. For instance, the persistence of sexual and physical violence/abuse against women and girls, and the complicity of religion in ethnoreligious communities, leaves devastated many women and girls – those directly and indirectly affected by violence. This communal problem of violence and the lack of communal response to it, especially from religious institutions, require continuous, collective intervention and investment, because violence threatens the health and life of women and girls on a daily basis, putting at risk the stabilization of the community as a whole. Preventing violence is an important communal health issue, one that demands concerted efforts in the arenas of organized religion’s advocacy, research and teaching, and public policy. Fighting

³¹ Kwok and Bundang, “PANAAWTM Lives!” 153.

³² Ibid., 154.

to end violence against women and girls can be most effectively accomplished when all ethnoreligious communities are actively involved in the eradication of violence, because this issue cannot be solved in isolation. Hence, developing new frameworks for interreligious dialogues and practices in theology in Asian Pacific America is urgent. These new frameworks should enable critical examination of how victims are affected by the violence of patriarchal religious teachings, practices, and interpretations of the sacred texts that have been used to justify violence. The new frameworks are also expected to advocate for and promote interreligious and interfaith solidarity work related to ending violence against women and girls anywhere in the community, including at home, at work, and in religious institutions as well as other social and political institutions.

As many feminist theologians of Asian descent and other scholars of racial/ethnic minority have cautioned, however, efforts to deal with violence within ethnoreligious communities need to be done in a manner that does not “reinscribe and reproduce the racist and colonialist constructions of racial/ethnic minority groups and religious traditions other than Christianity as ‘inherently patriarchal,’ ‘more violent,’ ‘more homophobic,’ ...”³³ One of the ways that new frameworks for interreligious engagements can help dismantle such constructions of racial/ethnic minority groups, as well as those of religious traditions, is to provide “a more nuanced analysis of patriarchy not as a fixed hierarchical gender relation but as a set of negotiated social relations in which gender and class are inextricably implicated,”³⁴ as Sheba

³³ See Kim and Joh, “Gender and Sexuality in Asian and Pacific American Religious/Theological Studies.”

³⁴ Sheba Mariam George, *When Women Come First: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), quoted in Kim and Joh.

Mariam George notes. This kind of analysis will further demonstrate how patriarchal relations are “negotiated, mediated, contested, and/or reproduced” in different ethnoreligious communities, which will, in turn, help various communities in Asian Pacific America understand and teach alternative behavior for (im)migrant men of Asian descent who have wielded violence against the women and girls in their communities as a way of compensating for any status losses they experienced during the transnational (im)migration process.³⁵ Such efforts, to be sure, will not bear fruit without our challenging the prescribed gender roles and relations within our ethnoreligious communities. Therefore, alternatives for male perpetrators should be carefully considered and expressed so as to not make worse the effects of gender oppression in the lives of heterosexual women, children, and sexual minorities. Also, ongoing critical analyses and discussions are needed to challenge the shifting dynamics of patriarchy that skillfully adapt themselves to the existing social milieu, even when these dynamics include appropriating a feminist critique of traditional masculinity and femininity. This intersection of religious diversity and gender oppression is another contested site where dissonance is anticipated, yet there continues to be hope for working together to end sexual and gender oppression in the communities of Asian Pacific America.

Site Three: Family, the Binary Sex/Gender System, and Heterosexism

Feminist theologians have long argued that unequal gender relations have been preserved by theological justifications of the heterosexual family, where the man is the head of the house while the woman and children are subordinate to him. In spite of feminist theological efforts to

³⁵ Kim and Joh.

bring forth gender consciousness and gender justice, socially prescribed gender roles and identities and hierarchical gender relationships continue to be taught and practiced on a daily basis in Asian Pacific America. For instance, the rhetorical device of the “normal” family preserves socially accepted gender roles and relationships. This strategy works well in various communities across Asian Pacific America, given the strong emphasis on keeping the family intact in the face of increasing dissolution of the family unit due to “Western” individualism and “liberal” sexual mores, which are believed to be antithetical to the community-oriented “Asian” traditions and practices. Prevalent racial discrimination and prejudice in the larger society have also played a role in preserving the notion of the “normal” family in Asian Pacific America. Yet, heavy emphasis on the “normal” family has underscored the mainstream view of family, as it is maintained by the prescribed binary gender roles and gender functions reserved for men and women accordingly. The notion of the “normal” family further controls women’s sexuality and reproduction, often dividing women into opposing categories, such as virgin versus sexually loose, chaste versus unchaste, motherhood versus childlessness. Thus, women of Asian descent who do not fit into or who refuse to adhere to these categories are rendered outsiders who have been “co-opted” by a “promiscuous” Western culture. Included among them are lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, teenage mothers, and even feminists. The idea prevalent in various ethnoreligious communities that homosexuality is a “Western” byproduct supports this dichotomization of women. The family that is grounded in the binary sex/gender system and heteronormativity becomes a contested site in theology in Asian Pacific America. The family is a

major social institution, whose influence and effects cannot be underestimated in theology in Asian Pacific America.

Without a doubt, gender, as a conceptual framework that is based on the binary system of masculinity and femininity, has challenged and broadened theological endeavor in Asian Pacific America, when the work did not engage gender as a category of analysis. Although gender is understood as a socially constructed notion that is historically and culturally variable, it often refers to the binary system of masculinity and femininity based on biological “sex.” Theology has been critical of gender essentialism due to feminist intervention, but it still tends to accept the binary sex/gender system within which two fixed gender identities – man and woman – are taken for granted, which, in turn, normalizes the heterosexual experience and/or conceptual frameworks based on such experience.³⁶ Hence, gender as an accepted, rigid, two-sex/gender system needs to be further problematized. Moving beyond the binary sex/gender framework is crucial, and it requires reconsidering gender as multiple, since the critique of binary gender has often been a critique of superiority and inferiority inscribed into the two-gender system, but not the binary itself. The hierarchical gender system privileges masculinity as well as heterosexuality. And cultural devaluation of femininity and homosexuality solidifies the maintenance of the hierarchical gender system.³⁷ In other words, gender binary understood as gender inequality not only legitimizes gendered division of labor but also normalizes

³⁶ For the critique of heterosexual ideology, see Marcella Althaus-Reid, “From Liberation Theology to Indecent Theology” in *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next Generation*, ed. Ivan Petrella (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2005)

³⁷ See Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook, “Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: ‘Gender Normals,’ Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality,” *Gender & Society* 23/4 (August 2009): 440-64.

heterosexual desire.³⁸ Gender cannot be conflated with sexuality, yet it is important to understand gender and sexuality as mutually constitutive. It is, then, necessary to understand the relation between gender and heterosexuality in order to comprehend the persistence of gender inequality, for heterosexuality requires a binary sex system, according to which one's gender identity is supposed to follow.³⁹

Gender analysis in theology needs to further press our ethnoreligious communities to face the issue of human sexuality. Theology in Asian Pacific America has not fully examined how “normal” sexuality has been historically constructed. The ways in which heterosexuality is normatized in theological work need to be questioned and critically examined, especially how the family and various social units are conceptualized and organized. Hence, gender analysis requires theology in Asian Pacific America to be concerned not just with how dominant norms and practices of gender and sexuality function but also with how the prevailing narratives and forms of heteropatriarchal order can be deconstructed and demystified. Such analyses should accompany the critique of conservative patriarchal theology and religious institutions by examining how organizing concepts and underlying assumptions embedded in theological and biblical interpretations reinscribe heteronormativity. This work also requires theology to envision new practices, relations, structures, and narratives of social ordering that are not based on heteropatriarchal domination and subjugation. This entails redefining sexuality, including what Celine Parreny Shimizu calls “race positive sexuality” and “perverse sexuality” that have often

³⁸ Kim and Joh, “Gender and Sexuality in Asian and Pacific American Religious/Theological Studies.”

³⁹ Schilt and Westbrook, “Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity,” 443.

been classified as non-normative sexual identities/acts and practices that “do not demand morality, chastity, and modesty that discipline women.”⁴⁰ In this way, theology in Asian Pacific America can move beyond simply “accepting gay Christians in worship” or incorporating “non-heterosexual lives into heterosexual ideologies”⁴¹ or addressing homosexuality only in connection to HIV/AIDS crisis. In other words, what theology in Asian Pacific America hopes to witness in this contested site is not the inclusion of anyone in a “normative” system, but, rather, the transformation of the whole ideology and structure of the two-sex/gender system as well as heteronormativity. However, discord rather than accord is highly likely to occupy this site, at least, for a while.

Site Four: Minority Nationalism and Gendered/Sexual Regulation

Theology in Asian Pacific America works within a context that is fragmented by various boundaries, such as religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, ablebodiedness, language, and socioeconomic status. Though heterogeneous, this context is divided by hierarchical differences and stratifications. As Espiritu points out, recent immigration has “further diversified Asian Americans among cultural, generational, economic and political lines – all of which have compounded the difficulties of forging pan-Asian identities and institutions.”⁴² According to data released by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California in 2009, age,

⁴⁰ Celine Parreney Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 144-45, esp. 229; Kim and Joh, “Gender and Sexuality in Asian and Pacific American Religious/Theological Studies.”

⁴¹ Althaus-Reid, “From Liberation Theology to Indecent Theology,” 28.

⁴² Yen Le Espiritu, “Asian American Panethnicity: Challenges and Possibilities,” in *Trajectory of Civic and Political Engagement: A Public Policy Report*, ed. Paul M. Ong (Los Angeles: LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute, 2008), 120.

religiosity, and English proficiency are the three major determining factors in voting on Proposition 8 across Asian Pacific America.⁴³ Acknowledging the complexities as well as internal conflicts present across Asian Pacific America needs to be one of the ongoing tasks of theology in Asian Pacific America. For instance, the intersections of patriarchy, middle-class upward mobility, and heteronormativity cut across different ethnoreligious communities, such as Korean Buddhists, Chinese evangelical Christians, Indian Hindus, Vietnamese Buddhists, and Filipino Catholics, generating schisms and estrangements within the community. At the same time, contestations and resistance against the normatization of heteropatriarchy as the foundation of social relations have also emerged within the very same communities. Examples can be seen in the activism of LGBTQ communities and their allies in Asian Pacific America, actions which are often viewed by the status quo both within ethnoreligious communities and the larger society as being divisive in maintaining the harmony of the community.

One of the areas where struggles over ethnicity, gender relations, sexual regulation, and religious identity occur is a site that Gayatri Gopinath calls minority nationalism, where collaborative dissonance may take place in theology in Asian Pacific America. While a rich body of feminist literature, racial/ethnic studies, and postcolonial research has analyzed nationalism as a racialized, gendered, and sexualized social system, there has not been much attention paid to how minority nationalism within different ethnoreligious communities is at the intersections of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and religious identity.

⁴³ Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California, Press Release, January 22, 2009; Many Asian American Pacific Islander scholars and activists voice that passage of proposition 8 requires a more comprehensive analysis. See Kim and Joh, "Gender and Sexuality in Asian and Pacific American Religious/Theological Studies."

For example, discussing the ongoing confrontation between queer Indians and Indian Hindu nationalists in New York City, Gopinath shows how minority nationalism maintains gender and sexual normativity.⁴⁴ According to Gopinath, the Federation of Indian Associations (FIA), a group made up of Indian businessmen, denied both the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA) and the Sakhi for South Asian women (an anti-domestic violence women's group) the right to march in the India Day Parade that the FIA sponsored. The FIA claimed they denied participation on the grounds that the groups were "antinational," constructing "India" as "Hindu, patriarchal, middle-class, and free of homosexuals."⁴⁵ As Gopinath explains, the FIA's later inclusion of Sakhi but continuing denial of SALGA to march illustrates the ways in which the categories of woman and lesbian are constructed as mutually exclusive in hegemonic nationalist discourses as they are reproduced in diaspora.⁴⁶ As the context for theology in Asian Pacific America becomes more fragmented and diversified, it will continue to be necessary to take a close look at how ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, gender and sexual regulation, and religion intersect with minority nationalism to produce certain disciplinary regulations and practices within transnational ethnoreligious communities.

Conclusion

Dissonance can create anxiety, uncomfortable feelings, pain, and grief. Making gender matter in theology in Asian Pacific America can be disturbing, upsetting, annoying, and even

⁴⁴ Gayatri Gopinath, "Nostalgia, Desire, and Diaspora," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5/2 (Fall 1997): 467-489.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 471.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 471-72.

frightening, as it creates dissonance, rather than consonance. Collaborative dissonance, however, is necessary for theology in Asian Pacific America precisely because it disrupts seemingly stable, agreeable, and comfortable conditions of everyday life. To put it differently, collaborative dissonance is a constructive action to take where struggles, contestations, and resistance against domination and subjugation are occurring. Gender, as an analytic category, is an important note creating this collaborative dissonance, and as such it still matters in doing theology in Asian Pacific America in the twenty-first century.