A Journey of Struggle to Know and Represent the Self:
Asian American Women's Freedom/Protest Pedagogical Movements
Based on a Postcolonial Diasporic Feminist Imagination[1]

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Abstract

This paper critically reviews the binary Western colonial imagination and constructively describes a postcolonial diasporic feminist imagination that breaks the stranglehold of the pedagogy of colonial imagination over estranged, marginalized, and silenced Asian American women. It borrows from Kwok Pui-lan a metaphor of a journey of struggle to know and represent the self and, within the framework of this metaphor, analyzes three non-linear and interwoven aspects (postcolonial context, diasporic social location, and storied identities) of a postcolonial diasporic feminist imagination. It then probes three major pedagogical issues that concern Asian American women's freedom/protest movements: the decolonization of the colonial imagination, the culture-specificity of each perspective, and the intercultural encounter and dialogue among diverse perspectives. The contention of this paper is that a postcolonial diasporic feminist imagination helps Asian American women to form their storied identities by decolonizing, contextualizing, and making intercultural their postcolonial context and diasporic social location

Asian American women's freedom/protest movements belong to "Third World" theologies that "develop out of the *struggles* against social and political oppression, cultural alienation, and injustice as a result of sexism, racism, classism, colonialism, and other forms of [what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls *kyriarchy*]."[2] Kwok Pui-Lan writes about her

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1. This paper is an updated and abbreviated version of a chapter in my dissertation, "In Search of A Story-Weaving Curriculum Theory: Six Principles For A Narrative Curriculum Theory For Christian Education For Asian American Women, With Special Attention To Kwok Pui-Lan's Postcolonial Diasporic Feminist Theology" (Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond, VA, 2008).

2. Kwok Pui-Lan, ed., *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 2 (emphasis added). With regard to the neologism

own *pedagogical* struggle as an Asian American woman scholar against the prevalent colonial mindset of the academic *kyriarchy* as follows:

> I have been reflecting on my long intellectual journey to "struggle to know." Why is knowing a struggle? It is a struggle because you have to spend years learning what others told you is important to know, before you acquire the credentials and qualifications to say something about yourself. It is a struggle because you have to affirm first that you have something important to say and that your experience counts. . . .
> [Third World women's] articulation of their experience of colonization is so new; these women have been much represented, but until fairly recently have not been allowed the opportunities to represent themselves. Even if they have "spoken," their speech acts are expressed not only in words but also in forms (storytelling, songs, poems, dances, and quilting, etc.) that the academic and cultural establishments either could not understand or deemed insignificant. These knowledges have been ruled out as nondata: too fragmented, or insufficiently documented for serious inquiry. How do we come to know what we know? How do postcolonial intellectuals begin the process of decolonization of the mind and the soul? What are the steps we need to take and what kind of mind-set will steer us away from Eurocentrism, on the one hand, and a nostalgic romanticizing of one's heritage or tradition, on the other?[3]

Notably, these important questions are born out of Asian American women's *theological* struggle to know and represent themselves in the oppressive context of colonialism/imperialism. According to a theology of struggle, struggle in a marginalized situation is the best theological act one can do, for struggle itself is a liberating experience.[4] "Ultimately, a truly liberating theology calls into being, what does not exist so that it may be."[5] What has been called into being by Asian American women's liberative theological struggle against the pedagogy of colonial imagination, as I see it, is a postcolonial diasporic feminist imagination.

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kyriarchy, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 211.

3. Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 29-30.

4. Eleazar S. Fernandez, "On Unfinished Dreams, Defiant Hopes, and Historical Projects," in *A Dream Unfinished: Theological Reflections on America from the Margins*, ed. Eleazar S. Fernandez and Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 276.

4. Gemma Tulud Cruz, *An Intercultural Theology of Migration: Pilgrims in the Wilderness* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), 330.

A Postcolonial Journey of Struggle to Know and Represent the Self: Beyond the Binary Colonial Imagination

Fundamentally, the colonial way of imagining the world is to *position* the self and the other in oppositional power relations. The imagined world, accordingly, is a divided world: "us versus them." The "we" are the superior subject and the "they" are the inferior object; "their" world should be subordinate to "our" world.[6] And this binary colonial imagining has an educational implication: "we" should teach "them." Its presumptuous rationale is that "we" know "them" better than they know themselves. And, even if they know themselves, Karl Marx once said, "they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."[7] The binary colonial politics of identity ("we") and difference ("them") does not allow the colonized to identify themselves as historical subjects to know and represent themselves.

John Willinsky sharply criticizes this self-centered colonial "will to know" that has wielded the power to *name* (the "scientific mission") and the power to *teach* (the "educational mission") over the colonized.[8] There is no need in this colonial imagination for learning about the world from those who are named and positioned by the Western imagination. Rather there is only the West's will to educate: to refashion the world in its own image "without diminishing the lines of racial difference."[9] No doubt, imperialism's educational task was (and still is) to deal with and *domesticate* difference. Edward W. Said calls this identity-difference dynamic of the Western colonial mind "Orientalism." His objection to "Orientalism" is that this system of thought employs uncritically an essentialist,

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6. Edward W. Said puts it to the point: "'they' [are] not like 'us,' and for that reason deserved to be ruled." Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), xi.

7. This remark comes from Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, quoted by Edward W. Said in the epigraph of his book *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 2003, originally published in 1978).

8. John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

9. Ibid., 98.

homogenizing approach to a complex, dynamic, and heterogeneous human reality to the effect that both the Orient and the Occident are immune to interaction and change, keeping distance from one another.[10] Orientalism is all about distancing the West from the rest of the world or, to put it in the words of Willinsky, "always about a relative positioning of the West by a set of coordinates defined by race, culture, and nation."[11]

A postcolonial imagination is not so much about supplementing the colonial imagination as about unknowing the colonial knowledge and re-naming or re-positioning the colonized in the world. Both general education and theological education, in this regard, need to advance *a politics of struggle for a place in the world* and the place here searched for should be culture-specific and intercultural. This is what is called "a politics of location" that enables us "to name our location, to politicize our space and to question where our particular experiences and practice fit within the articulations and representations that surround us."[12] A postcolonial discourse based on this politics of location, according to Henry A. Giroux, deconstructs the Western colonial mindset and its logic and re-constructs the relationship between the margin and the center, "rendering visible how Western knowledge is encased in historical and institutional structures that both privilege and exclude particular readings, voices, aesthetics, authority, representations, and forms of sociality."[13] Kwok Pui-Lan advises that a postcolonial reading should deny the binary perspective that separates the margin from the center, for both the center and the margin are "mutually inscribed in the colonial process."[14] This both/and-ness of a postcolonial imagination comes from a deeper understanding of the location or locality of culture, both national and personal.

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10. Said, *Orientalism*, 333.

11. Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World*, 253.

12. Joan Borsa, "Toward a Politics of Location: Rethinking Marginality," *Canadian Women's Studies* 11, no. 1 (1990): 36. Quoted in Henry A. Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 18.

13. Giroux, *Border Crossings*, 19.

14. Kwok Pui-Lan, "Theology and Social Theory," in *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*, ed. Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 21-22.

A Diasporic Journey of Struggle to Know and Represent the Self: Between Worlds and in Languages

Like a postcolonial imagination, a diasporic imagination as its subset also addresses a politics of location as it deals with the "loss of home and language in the new setting"[15] and the resultant life of being "out of place."[16] Crossing borders, diasporic persons encounter "an intense problematization of identity," that is, a realization that their once solid identity becomes "fluid, unstable, constructed, constantly shifting, and multiple."[17] Unlike the colonizers, they have no power to essentialize their identity in opposition to the other. They are inclined to accept Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity as "a *positioning*" in order to refute the colonial understanding of cultural identity as "a fixed essence."[18]

The postcolonial literature and diasporic studies clearly show that their context and social location lead them to *a colonial process of being forcefully estranged and marginalized*, for they are forced to live "through migration and exile as a minority subject within an alien and alienating culture."[19] Being diasporic, in this regard, is *becoming the other to self and to the world* against one's own will. This becoming the other is an imposed identity and being diasporic involves falling victim to the colonial mechanism of

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15. Edward W. Said, "Between Worlds," in *London Review of Books* (May 7, 1998), 2.

16. Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

17. Eleazar S. Fernandez, "America from the Hearts of a Diasporized People: A Diasporized Heart," in *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans*, ed. Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 261.

18. Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan, "My Journey into Diasporic Hermeneutics," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 56, nos. 1-2 (2002): 51. See Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. P. Williams and L. Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 395.

19. Fernando F. Segovia, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement," in *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*. Vol. 1 of *Reading from This Place*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 60-61n6.

stereotyping that is used to "distort" and "dominate" the colonized.[20] Due to its psychological and sociological challenges and traumas, being diasporic is diagnosed as "a theological experience" that leads most of diasporas to "hold tight to what they already have—reaffirming traditional beliefs and rituals as a source of comfort and protection."[21] And yet this kind of religious or cultural fundamentalism does not belong to what Fernando F. Segovia calls "a theology of the diaspora" that is in the making in between—"in exile, in displacement and relocation."[22]

Considering the estrangement and marginalization of diasporic persons, how do we respond to Kwok Pui-Lan's question regarding the third way that goes beyond the either-or choice of Eurocentrism, on the one hand, and cultural fundamentalism, on the other? The answer lies in the very disaporic location in which Asian American women are positioned. Being diasporic is not only the source of their alienation but also the origin of their diasporic identity—the identity of *otherness*. To make his point, Segovia differentiates the "other" with quotation marks from the other without quotation marks. In his usage, the "other" (with quotation marks) refers to the negative side of being diasporic, "a situation of overwhelming and overriding imposition," and the other (without quotation marks) indicates "a situation of respect and engagement."[23] While the former use of the word "other" refers to the colonial politics of identity-in-opposition, the latter form relates to the postcolonial politics of identity-in-relation. With this ingenious differentiation, Segovia proposes that to engage in the diasporic journey of struggle to know and to represent the self is to accept the postcolonial other's self-definition that rectifies the stereotypes of the colonial "other."

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20. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 104.

21. Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 325-26.

22. Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margin* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 122.

23. Segovia, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora," 52n2.

Segovia's diasporic reading strategy echoes that of R. S. Sugirtharajah, who navigates between Orientalism and Ethnonationalism (academic jargon for Kwok's "pitfalls") in the direction of a third alternative: "to position ourselves between and betwixt cultures and countries and engage in a processual hermeneutic."[24] Sugirtharajah borrows the concept of "processual" from Processual Archeology—a study of process that investigates the way human do things and the way things decay. So the term "processual" refers to cultural, historical, and ecological aspects of the study. Sugirtharajah sees the diasporic interpreter as engaged in the *process* of searching for an interpretative home, "equally committed to and disturbed by both cultures—the one we left behind and the one we enter and try to understand."[25] In this interpretative process lies an ongoing cultural negotiation by which the diasporic interpreter seriously considers what Willinsky calls "culture's hybrid, hyphenated and diasporic relation to identity."[26] Sugirtharajah invites the diasporic interpreter to enter into what he calls "the uncolonialized space" where various cultural interpretations are freely consulted, mixed, and, if possible, harmonized without "locking oneself into one position [and thereby] denying oneself available options."[27] This processual hermeneutic stands in line with Giroux's "border pedagogy" that gives full attention to "the process of crossing over into cultural borders" so that narratives, languages, and experiences of the other can become a resource for the rethinking and remaking of the identity politics.[28] In this regard, the diasporic journey of struggle to know and to represent the self involves creating *borderlands* where the silenced other is invited to engage in complicated conversations about the politics of identity and difference, telling their stories.

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24. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*, 109.

25. Ibid., 137.

26. Willinsky, "Curriculum, After Culture, Race, Nation," *Discourse* 20, no. 1 (1999): 89.

27. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*, 109.

28. Giroux, *Border Crossings*, 150.

A Feminist Journey of Struggle to Know and Represent the Self: Speech, Silence, and Hybrid Interstices

Reflecting on her border-crossing experiences in the United States, Nina Asher concludes that she has arrived at new homes in hybrid social locations "through the self-reflexive praxis of being and becoming in the world."[29] The postcolonial and diasporic journey, as she sees it, necessarily involves an "ongoing, self-reflexive border work," for the deconstruction of the external colonial structures does not automatically vouch for the disintegration of the internalized colonization within the colonized mind.[30] She maintains that being self-reflexive or having an image or reflection of one's self as a perennial border crosser is the main task of a postcolonial imagination for the journey in hybrid interstices. The problem for border crossers like Asher, however, is that colonial imagination *silences* their voices and stories not so much by silencing as by speaking: *speaking for* them or *writing for* them.

The colonizers spoke for the colonized within the framework of essentialist colonial thinking. And white feminists do the same thing when they speak for non-white women. This practice of speaking for or writing for the other is quite prevalent even when Western intellectuals want to hear an "authentic native voice" from a diasporic person like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who argues that "the First World woman must learn to stop feeling privileged *as a woman*."[31] In her article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak vigorously points out that not only First World intellectuals but also diasporic postcolonial academics like her cannot speak for the subaltern, because, according to her strenuous definition of the term, to be stigmatized as subaltern in any discursive context means to be unable to represent

29. Nina Asher, "At the Interstices: Engaging Postcolonial and Feminist Perspectives for a Multicultural Education Pedagogy in the South," *Teachers College Record* 107, no. 5 (2005): 1081, 1085-86.

30. Ibid., 1083-87.

31. Quoted in Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 110.

himself or herself. As she sees it, the subaltern as a woman *cannot* speak because colonialism and patriarchy silence her by speaking for her.[32]

It should be also noted that silencing and *choosing not to speak* are not the same thing, even though they are related in a manner of action-reaction. Patti Duncan argues that silence, in the sense of choosing not to speak, is "a specifically feminist method" that Asian American women writers have used in their writings "as means of unsaying."[33] This argument is made particularly against the negative (racialized and gendered) stereotypes associated with Asian American women: "silence, passivity, deceptiveness, and inscrutability."[34] What is most problematic, as Duncan sees it, is that "certain Eurocentric premises regarding social norms about speech and silence prevail" as we note in such phrases as "break silence," "speaking out," and "finding a voice."[35] She introduces a different understanding about speech and silence as she regards silence, like speech, as a form of discourse, "always socially and culturally constructed."[36] When Asian American women are silent, it does not necessarily mean that they give up their right to be the subject of speech. It rather could be an act of their "resistance to the process of mainstream acculturation and Americanization"[37] or, to put it with reference to Spivak's theory of writing "under erasure," "a refusal to participate in their own erasure" in this process.[38] So the meaning of silence depends on the position of a person who chooses to speak or not speak in a particular context and social location.

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32. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313. According to Spivak, the notion subaltern implies "something of a not-speakingness" (290).

33. Patti Duncan, *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 220, 217.

34. Ibid., 2.

35. Ibid., 7-8.

36. Ibid., 216.

37. Ibid., 23.

38. Ibid., 144, 225.

What Asian American women need, in fact, is not so much speech as what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space." In this interstice of discourses, neither enforced silence nor coerced speech prevails and a special kind of speech (speaking *to* or, better, speaking *with*) and a special kind of silence (*choosing not to speak*) are invited to engage in conversation by way of negotiating cultural differences. According to Bhabha, it is here that the colonial mode of representation of "otherness" is questioned and the asymmetry of power between the colonizer and the colonized and between the dominant and the marginalized is challenged. What is involved in this negotiation is, to put it in Bhabha's own words, "the anxiety of the irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity that articulates its problems of identification and its diasporic aesthetic in an uncanny, disjunctive temporality that is, at once, the *time* of cultural displacement, and the *space* of the 'untranslatable.'"[39]

Notably, what this interstitial negotiation brings forth is a politics of hybrid identity that a postcolonial diasporic imagination finds both liberative and transformative. It is not the concept of difference (or even diversity) but the concept of hybridity that helps a postcolonial diasporic feminist imagination to move beyond colonialism's binary understanding of speech and silence. The homogenizing power of the colonial imagination gets lost and the hybridizing power of a postcolonial diasporic feminist imagination is found in the narrative borderlands where storied identities are woven by way of negotiating cultural differences.

Three Pedagogical Issues for a Postcolonial Diasporic Feminist Imagination

To conclude: what Asian American women's freedom/protest movements have imagined is a decolonizing, contextualizing, and intercultural pedagogy that encounters, embraces, and engages "multiple interstices—in-between, hybrid spaces, emerging at the intersections of different cultures, histories, and locations."[40] And this pedagogy hinges on

39. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 25.

40. Asher, "At the Interstices," 1081.

what William F. Pinar calls "authentic conversation [that] requires 'going beyond' the surface to take into account 'unspoken' and 'taken-for-granted' assumptions."[41]

There are three pedagogical issues we have to keep in mind:

The first issue is to *decolonize* the colonial imagination. The colonial mind has an inclination toward universalizing and overlooking differences and speaking for and silencing different voices. For an "authentic conversation" to happen, we should disavow and disclaim the colonial power to name, position, and teach different people and their cultures, histories, and locations. We must help the colonized un-learn their colonial education based on the binary ("us versus them") imagination.

The second issue is to ascertain the *culture-specificity* of any knowledge and representation. The colonized mind has a tendency to internalize the colonial "othering" process and become "the other" to the self and the world. For an "authentic conversation" to evolve, we should recognize and respect the difference or otherness of others and their self-defining, self-locating, and self-representing stories. We must not only de-center the colonial imagination but also re-center a postcolonial imagination that is multi-centered and polyphonic in the postcolonial context and diasporic social location.

The third issue is to develop an *intercultural* pedagogy that overcomes the superficiality of a decolonizing and contextualizing pedagogy that encounters the other without embracing and engaging the other. For an "authentic conversation" to grow, we should move from a politics of inequalities to a politics of transformation,[42] from the adjective ("hybrid" or "multicultural") mode of thinking to the verbal ("hybridize" or "mix") mode of thinking, and from a multicultural mode to an intercultural mode. We must cross the borders of difference and create borderlands where stories of the estranged, marginalized, and silenced Asian American women can be shared and interwoven with other stories.

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41. William F. Pinar, *What Is Curriculum Theory?* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 159.

41. María Pilar Aquino, "Feminist Intercultural Theology: Toward a Shared Future of Justice," in *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World,* ed. María Pilar Aquino and Maria José Rosado-Nunes (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 18-19.

While the colonial politics of positioning has left Asian American women estranged, marginalized, and silenced between worlds and in languages, the postcolonial politics of re-positioning enables them to take a passage from the double alienation of being in-between to the double belonging of being in-both. Therefore we aim at overcoming the monocultural discourse of the colonial metanarrative by going beneath its surface to debunk hidden and undisputed assumptions and acknowledging and celebrating our differences by telling stories of the heart in our struggle *together*, for "we understand that identity is always constructed in relation to others."[43]

43. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*, 60.