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INTRODUCTION: LIBERATION THEOLOGY UNBOUND: FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

When he had thus spoken, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" The dead man came forth, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

—John 11:43–44

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.

—Karl Marx, "Introduction" to
A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right

The dreams of the colonial subject are muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, and climbing. I dream I burst out laughing, I am leaping across a river and chased by a pack of cars that never catches up with me.

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

What time is it on the clock of the world?

—Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution*

Here is a book that should have been written long ago. It should have been written by any of the theologians or activists or laypersons who articulated an “Amerasian” or “Asian American” theology of liberation in the early 1970s, whose writings have instead been relegated to archival documents in libraries and seminaries.¹ Methodist bishop Roy Isao Sano, director of what was then the Asian Center for Theology and Strategies (ACTS, and later PACTS) in Berkeley, California, compiled two readers on the nascent subject, with contributions from dozens of Japanese, Filipino, Chinese, and Korean American Christians reflecting on the growing consciousness around their personal identity and cultural heritage. They connected it with the new Black theology that was being developed alongside the Black Power movement and Third World Liberation Front, against the backdrop of White racist domination at home and military imperialism abroad.² Copies of the readers were distributed but never published, unlike *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (1971), the first publication of UCLA’s Asian American Studies Center Press. The press was created to address the “lack of appropriate materials in readily accessible form,”³ as the field of Asian American studies was newly established after the 1968 strikes for ethnic studies in San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) and UC Berkeley. In his introduction to *The Theologies of Asian Americans and Pacific Peoples: A Reader* (1976), Roy I. Sano expressed the hope that a third edition would be sufficiently inclusive of representative voices, so that a publisher would consider printing and distributing the volume to a wider audience. As history would have it, this was not to be.

One would be hard-pressed to learn about this brief history of Asian American theology of liberation. Only a few books surveying Asian American theology or liberation theology mention it, if at all, in a few short paragraphs or as a footnote. When I learned about this, I was fortunate enough to be visiting the University of British Columbia mathematics department, where the Vancouver School of Theology up the road held a copy of the 1976 reader. This was in

2019, in the middle of the Trump era and at the end of a turbulent decade of global unrest. I had been in the United States on and off for about a decade—what was the place of Asians or faith in the ongoing struggles? Even in 2015 I remember raging and grieving and searching inside as I sat listening to a dispassionate sermon the Sunday after a White supremacist murdered nine people at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. Why did I have to dig so deep to find any trace of liberation theology from an Asian American point of view? How much more now, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic?

To my knowledge, only two other libraries carried copies of Sano's reader, one in Berkeley and one in New York City. The one I found looked, as New Testament scholar Seung Ai Yang described, "very much like one of today's 'readers' used for a course in colleges and graduate schools. Its handwritten page numbers, ring-binding, and different typefaces for each article reveals the urgency and necessity Sano felt for this work at that time as a pioneer in this field."⁴ Most of these works remain hidden in dusty archives, their existence known only to scholars and historians and perhaps other seekers of liberative Asian American theological traditions.⁵ The tattered, yellow pages with handwritten page numbers document the powerful activist theological energy of a bygone era. Here was a once loud, communal force that cried out for the liberation of Asians in the United States, in the civil rights era, for a theology of one's own, and for solidarity with oppressed people everywhere. This is our inheritance.

While Black, Latin American, and White feminist theologies of liberation are able to point to texts that mark the inauguration of new ways of doing theology beyond the White Western male norm, such as James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1971), Gustavo Gutiérrez's *Teología de la Liberación* (1971), and Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* (1973), the concurrent but informal reader *AmerAsian Theology of Liberation* (1973) was not followed by a similar landmark

publication to inspire later generations of Asian American theologians.⁶ This present book is in part a retrieval of this lesser-known history of Asian American contributions to liberation theology and at the same time a rearticulation of an Asian American theology of liberation that is urgently needed today. As such, this book is about fifty years too late and, hopefully, just in time.

Of course, any theology of liberation today must first address its own relevance in the twenty-first century. To do so, it is necessary to honestly assess the failures and the successes of earlier theologians and activists without reservation if we are to build forward. For one, theologies of liberation are now by and large the domain of academic study rather than the bottom-up, grassroots theologies of the masses they were intended to be. They have, in the sense of Marcella Althaus-Reid, become decent. According to her, the Latin American Christian discourse of liberation assumed that nothing had been outside of Christianity, declared the poor asexual, and did not challenge women's subordination or the sexual insubordination of the favelas or shanty towns.⁷ Liberation theology as such became a recognized theology, a commercial enterprise that made it fashionable to those on the margins, and "what is fashionable, sells."⁸ European theologians, suddenly interested in the Latin American poor, projected a colonial image of liberation theology through church tourism and theological voyeurism.

The material suffering of the people was expropriated from the oppressed classes and became the intellectual property of the owners of the intellectual system of production: the theologians.⁹ Theology became a surplus value of human suffering: "It alienates by taking possession, extorting from others what belongs to them, dismantling any relation that the workers may have with the sacred. The process gives value to human suffering as merchandise, objectified as an abstract commodity and sold for a price: the continuation of oppressive political systems in alliance with ecclesiastical ones."

All of this to say that theological reflection, even in liberation

theology, can become a commodity and betray the people. More recently, in assessing the place of liberation theology in a capitalistic theological market in 2000, Althaus-Reid writes:

A cultural shift took place. In recent years, in order to produce some difference in its analysis, especially since postcolonialism was underlying the liberationists' contradictions on issues of identity and agency, liberationists discovered the native people from the Original Nations who sometimes were not Christians . . . Instead of Christ and the poor, the new discourse was on Christ and the Mayan. Christianity suddenly became more plural. It was Christianity and *Mestizaje*; Christianity and *Santería* worship, or Umbanda; Christianity and Andean theology.¹⁰

The same can be seen in Asian American theological production where Christianity and Asian culture dominates. Theologies of liberation, whether willingly or unwillingly, have become irrelevant as a driving force of liberation, or even as a comrade of liberation movements, and instead have become what Althaus-Reid calls "theological science fiction," morally constructing its subjects as an undifferentiated and innocent mass. At least in the United States, they have been effectively decoupled from the masses in all but a handful of churches. Therefore, any attempt to deploy them today must first answer the question: Why now?

THEOLOGIES OF LIBERATION: WHY NOW?

We have been in crisis. I started writing this book before the coronavirus pandemic and the global rebellion that was ignited by the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. The list that started with Trayvon Martin grows longer every day. Global White nationalism had been on the rise with mass shootings and White supremacist rallies throughout Europe and its settler colonies. Geopolitical instability and climate change are causing mass

migrations—refugees from Syria and Yemen fleeing war risk death to arrive on European shores; over a million Rohingya Muslims fleeing ethnic cleansing in Myanmar live in the world’s largest refugee camp in Bangladesh; asylum seekers from Guatemala and Honduras are fleeing violence and economic hardship only to be faced with violence, family separation, and detention at the US–Mexico border.¹¹ Millions of Muslim Uyghurs are being detained and “reeducated” in China’s Xinjiang region, as Han Chinese take over Tibetan homes and erase their culture. Increasing tension in US–China relations threaten war, hot or cold.

Multiple climate reports indicate that the planet will soon become largely uninhabitable in just a few decades. The climate crisis can no longer be prevented, only mitigated, and we must instead ask after climate adaptation in the wake of the oncoming societal collapse, which itself will be unevenly distributed, disproportionately affecting poor people, communities of color, and the Third World.¹² The climate catastrophe will press deeper into the preexisting fissures in the social fabric just as the coronavirus pandemic has already provided a preview: from protective-equipment hoarding to vaccine nationalism to unvarnished xenophobia. Frighteningly, the end of the world as we know it is no longer hyperbole but hard science. The question is, What is the world to come?

While in some sense there is nothing new under the sun, it is also true that this is far from normal, and things are not okay. There is no ecological precedent for the future that our planet is hurtling toward. As it were, it had become fashionable for a time for social scientists to theorize about what geologists call the Anthropocene, the geological age in which destructive human activity is the defining event, where plastic is becoming a part of the rock record as plastiglomerate, a novel part-plastic, part-mineral rock formation.¹³ Microplastics have been found in the remotest regions from the Alps to the Arctic and in fetuses.¹⁴ It literally permeates our being and the air we breathe: the ongoing ecological collapse and

societal collapse are inseparable. And yet, as much as global crises are beginning to unfold at an alarming rate, everyday life remains business as usual for many. Until it isn't.

Numerous social movements have swept across the globe in the past decade, such as the 2011 Occupy movement, which finds roots in the earlier Arab Spring and which inspired Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in 2014 and antiextradition protests in 2019;¹⁵ the Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality in the United States that began in 2013 and reignited in 2020; the #MeToo and subsequent #ChurchToo movements against sexual harassment and rape culture; Indigenous movements in North America such as the Idle No More, the Standing Rock #NoDAPL protests, and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2S) movement; school climate strikes calling for climate action; worker strikes against tech giants; blockades on highways and ports resisting the flow of weapons, oil, and capital at large. Mass movements are now taking place with increasing frequency such as in Puerto Rico, Haiti, Sudan, Hong Kong, Hawai'i, Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka at such a pace that it is difficult keep up. In short, the irruption of the poor, the refugee, the queer, and the abused is here.

The social upheavals that continue to reverberate on a global scale demand an adequate and unequivocal theological response. This book focuses on struggles that link Asia and the United States, tracking how these struggles flow and interweave through the diaspora and form networks of solidarity. The mass protests and other direct actions against authoritarian regimes, against inaction toward climate change, and against the systematic dehumanization of others are a clarion call to action. Quite literally, the people are crying out. There is no ethical middle ground, no time to be lukewarm as global suffering reaches a crescendo. The coming years will see unprecedented turmoil, which the last decade has already foreshadowed. We cannot stand idly by.

White theology and Asian American theology, inasmuch as it

tries to approximate the latter, are not up to the task. By theology here I do not mean primarily the academic work of professional theologians, though theory will play a significant role in what follows, but rather the “God-talk” that is done in day-to-day churches and over kitchen tables by poor lay people of color. Asian American theology, as it stands, is ill-equipped to critique and interpret the structural and epistemic violence that are being dealt nor the institutional and cultural frameworks that have cultivated the present crisis. Nor is it capable of grounding and empowering the activism, solidarity, and engagement with such social movements that are waging attempts against the forces which collectively threaten human existence itself. Its interlocutors often have middle-class origins and concerns and skew East Asian.¹⁶ What has been lost for the sake of respectability? What was given up in exchange for the wages of Whiteness, for the comfort of tenure and the riches of nonprofit grants?¹⁷ How are we serving the people?

We desperately need a theological framework that has the firepower to engage the events of today, to enter into the fray. The landscape of Asian America has changed dramatically from the arrival of the first Filipinos with the Spanish ships in the 1500s to the various immigration laws and refugee acts in the mid-1900s. The younger generation on the streets today fighting for racial and economic justice, burning police cars and redistributing looted goods, and providing mutual aid must guide our theological reflection, not the other way around. At the same time, in order to close the loop on the hermeneutical circle, these reflections must be communicated back to the people in plain language. In this book, I draw on *Asian American* as a social location and coalitional identity that coheres a critical discourse and deconstructive analysis, and on *liberation theology* as the interpretive structure that grounds our struggle and constructive praxis.¹⁸ The vast heterogeneity of Asian Americanness, with the complexities of migration, belonging, and refuge that attend it provides an analytic, a vision of coalitional politics for a US future that is “majority-minority”

and a global future upended by climate change. It is no accident that the imperial and colonial violence and accumulation that have precipitated the current global disorders are also constitutive of Asian American identity. As the saying goes, we are here because you were there.¹⁹

Liberation theology is the interpretive key by which we apprehend God's actions as revealed in history and act faithfully according to this revelation. Theologies of liberation burst onto the scene in the 1960s, remaining forceful and influential until the 1980s, expanding and deepening their analyses of oppression and reflection on praxis. I use *oppression* here to mean the adverse effects of unequal power relations produced by those with power over others in disadvantaged positions. In the following decades, theologies of liberation began to lose their critical edge even as they gained respect and acceptance into the theological academy and the middle class. Today, theologians debate the usefulness of liberation theology. But theologies of liberation have always been aware of the chasm between vision and reality, the already and not-yet. The same is true of any kind of radical prefigurative politics. As Gayraud Wilmore's "A Revolution Unfulfilled but not Invalidated" and Eleazar Fernandez and Fernando Segovia's volume *A Dream Unfinished* both insist, the fundamental claims of theologies of liberation have not been falsified, only unrealized.²⁰ To put a spin on Marx and Engels, the specter of liberation is haunting us. If anything, the events of the last decade only underscore their continuing relevance. Rather than doing away with liberation theology, as some have suggested, what is needed is a deeper commitment to the principles of liberation and, as with all activist work, to view the work as a lifelong struggle that must be passed on from generation to generation.

The task at hand, I shall argue, is to realize an Asian radical tradition, learning from the past and building for the future. The poor you have with you always, Jesus pointed out. For theology to center the oppression of the poor is not simply a passing fad but

rather a cornerstone of Christian theology, the grammar of God-talk.²¹ Asian American theology, in particular, must become radical, returning to its prophetic role in Asian American liberation. To do so, we must first ask what the proper sources of an Asian American theology of liberation are.

ASIAN AMERICAN THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION: SOURCES

Asian American theology finds its roots in Asian American liberation theology.²² This historical consciousness is the first source of a radical Asian American theology. Asian theologians such as Shoki Coe, Aloysius Pieris, and Peter Phan emphasized the need to inculturate theology in Asia. Early Asian American theologians, too, called for producing a theology indigenous to Asian Americans. An Asian American theology of liberation cannot survive playing by the rules of respectability and identity politics, dictated by Whites who know nothing of the experience of Asian Americans. Neither is it primarily articulated by Asian Americans in ivory towers, who know little of the suffering of working-class migrant Asians at risk of deportation, economic precarity, and sexual exploitation. The role of Asian American theologians is to interpret the signs of the times, to recognize the work of God in the liberation of poor Asians in diaspora. As the readers compiled by Roy Sano reveal, the early Asian American theology was not articulated by erudite scholars or professors chasing tenure or the next book deal but instead by dozens of lay people and clergy personally invested in the struggles of their communities. They knew how to apply insights from social theory and other forms of knowledge. They saw the social movements of their time fighting for the liberation of the colonized Third World and of what they saw as the internal colonies of the United States and sought to build a theology that did not turn away from the call of these movements, from the suffering of the oppressed.

The lived experiences, migration histories, and cultural memories of the Asian American community are the primary sources for an Asian American theology built from the bottom up. It is precisely because of the distinctiveness of the Asian American experience that White theology has nothing of practical use to say to Asian Americans, and even Black, Latine, and other theologies can only be in dialogue with the Asian American community.²³ They cannot determine the content of Asian American theology, even if they may have a great deal to teach us. At the same time, not all Asian American experiences are equally valued. While a select group of Asians rise in prominence, whether as political candidates, billionaire tech executives, or Hollywood stars, their narratives often fit into a model-minority myth of the so-called Asian American dream and do little to interrogate or challenge the US settler-colonial and racial capitalist empire.

Instead, it is the subaltern experience of Hmong, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Bangladeshis, Nepalese, Filipino, and similarly overlooked Asians in the United States—undocumented, undereducated, and disadvantaged—that serves as the touchstone for a radical and grounded Asian American theology. The Asian American church cannot stay silent as people cry out against sexual abuse, police brutality, economic oppression, and environmental racism. It cannot stand idly by when people are fighting and dying in the streets for freedom. Asian American theology must point to the God who is for the poor and against the rich, who speaks from the mouths of Asian children participating in strikes and protests. There is no neutral ground for Asian American theology to stand upon: it can only be against oppression and repression of any kind in any place, aligning itself with the masses, the 99 percent, the *minjung*.²⁴ As activist Grace Lee Boggs writes, rather than viewing “the masses” as a faceless abstraction to be mobilized in increasingly aggressive struggles, we should see ourselves as organizing a community base of caring individuals transforming ourselves and becoming the change we want to see.²⁵

Another source of Asian American theology is of course Asian theologies, which have given corrective insights that look beyond the borders and concerns of the US mainland. It is highly significant that many theologies generated from the Asian continent share liberation as a central theme, though they may not use such language. While “liberation” as a concept is itself European in origin, the struggle for freedom is universal. Theologies of liberation attend to their respective social contexts, making no claim to universality as White theology does. At the same time, they recognize that each struggle is linked to one another through global capitalism, imperialism, neocolonialism, and heteropatriarchy. As theological traditions in Asia continue to develop in their own distinct manner, it will be important to dialogue with these creative sources that provide a counter-narrative to White theological traditions and a grounding for Asian American reflections, with neither nostalgia nor idealization. To be radically Asian American calls for an outright decolonial refusal of Asian American activism as merely a politics of inclusion and representation bounded by the nation-state. Instead, it needs to be fiercely internationalist in outlook and identity.

Besides working against frameworks of nationalism and citizenship, Asian American theology also complicates binaries of race, class, nationality, religion, and gender that structure US cultural politics. Liberation theologies draw upon social analyses in order to sharpen their theological critique of power, without allowing themselves to be subsumed into totalizing theories. It was a fear of such totalization that led the Vatican to condemn the early Latin American liberation theology’s use of Marxism. The same fear also animates conservative Christian anxiety surrounding postmodernism, more recently critical race theory. Asian American theology cannot afford to ignore these insights; it is also strengthened by dialogues with Black, Latine, feminist, queer, and Indigenous theologies. While the particularity of liberation theologies is easily mistaken for a kind of narrow-minded theological

identity politics or tribalism, in reality the shared struggle for collective liberation must be waged through the richness of particular contexts and solidarities between struggles without ignoring the real differences and tensions between groups. We bring our whole selves to the fight.

Unbeknownst to many, Asian American theologies of liberation have already existed in the past, inspired by Black theology and Third World revolutionary movements. They sought to establish a theology relevant to the Asian American experience of White racist domination and US empire, to interpret God's work of liberation in their own communities. Today, the social upheavals witnessed worldwide in the last decade and the deepening crisis call for a renewed Asian American theology of liberation for such a time as this, a theology that learns from past theologies of liberation, especially those arising from struggles in Asian contexts and leverages the complicated nature of Asian American identity to reveal the different forms of violence that are produced by ideologies of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nation. A radical approach to Asian American theology renews the commitment to the liberation of working-class, migrant, and colonized Asians while expanding the view to include queer and refugee Asians.

This book is concerned about the lived experiences of Asians in relation to structures of power and domination. As theology is a reflection on praxis, or what Latin American liberation theologians call *la caminata*, the see-judge-act hermeneutic circle of suspicion exemplified by the Indigenous Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, through questioning while walking, *preguntando caminamos*, we will also do theology by discussing social theory in subway trains, washing dishes in kitchens, and struggling in protests everywhere. Moreover, I shall argue that liberation theology is better said to be reflection *through* praxis, to emphasize that it is only in love and struggle that we realize what is liberation theology. More than just God-talk, it is a God-walk, or theopraxis.²⁶ There is no such thing as "liberation theology for armchair theologians," as Miguel de la

Torre, in a booklet of the same ironic title, insists that the very ethos of being a liberation theologian is the *doing* of liberation theology.²⁷ And, I would add, all those who *do* liberation theology are the true liberation theologians.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

To set the stage, chapter 1 begins with a disambiguation of inculturation and liberation, followed by a retrieval of Asian American theologies of liberation. The latter can be found in the archival material of the early 1970s, squarely within the zeitgeist of Asian America's becoming, traditionally understood. While this might seem ironic given that I shall argue against a nostalgia complex in dominant Asian American historiography relating to that era, by locating Asian American liberation theology in direct colineage with Asian, Black, and Latin American theologies of liberation, I show this project resonates with a rich theological tradition of liberation, even as it takes into account historical, theological, and intellectual developments in the intervening time.

This is not an inherently innovative project that presents a novel theological method *ex nihilo*, but neither is it one frozen in the twentieth century or that dreams of failed 1960s-era coalitions. Instead, our mandate is to renew and reinterpret tradition in ways that preserve the memory and honor the lives, losses, and loves of those gone before us. Indeed, in doing so we will make completely new mistakes of our own, which future generations will have to correct for. In fact, any theology of liberation *requires* such dynamism: the hermeneutic circle connecting immanent reality and theological reflection is what animates it. Or, as Frantz Fanon writes, "Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity" and "for us who are determined to break the back of colonialism, our historic mission is to authorize every revolt, every desperate act, and every attack aborted or drowned in blood."²⁸

With these clarifications in place, chapter 2 turns to the perpetual question of who is Asian American and who are the subjects of Asian American theology, considering views both from the state and from below. The first is intimately related to representational politics, how Asians are discussed and portrayed in the public sphere. The second invokes a subaltern politics: Asian American farmers, garment workers, and others who have organized around labor, against racial discrimination and exploitation in the workplace, followed by refugees and victims of sex and labor trafficking.²⁹ The construction of Asian American identity has several touchstones. They are all worn out. Its genesis is invariably located in the fight for ethnic studies in San Francisco and Berkeley in the late sixties. On the other side of the 1965 Immigration Act, it is the murder of Vincent Chin and the Los Angeles riots that underpin most attempts to outline a hagiography of Asian American existence through a narrative of legal and extralegal exclusion.³⁰ Look at how we have never been wanted. These events are unified by a thread of victimization or resilience; in some versions a moralistic parable of overcoming adversity, of attaining success in spite of discrimination—the immigrant American dream par excellence. No matter how much they reject us, we still love them back, like a fucked-up Gospel story. While these violent ruptures indeed define Asian America in important ways, not least in its own self-conception, they also elide alternative genealogies of Asian resistance and radicalism in the forms of labor organizing, anti-racist coalitions, and anti-colonial struggles.

With these in mind, chapter 3 turns to the fraughtness of Asian American theological identity, drawing from Asian American scholar Kandice Chuh's notion of the *subjectlessness* of Asian American studies. At a certain point this will seem to be an overly academic endeavor and have nothing to do with the liberation of human beings, but from a theological standpoint the question of who, what, and how we are is a central one, one that will be taken up again in chapter 5. I draw also on the combination of

psychoanalytic and critical race theoretic analyses of David Eng and Shinhee Han that propose racial melancholia and racial disassociation as the psycho-affective character of certain Gen X and Gen Y Asian Americans, suggesting that the Chuh's subjectlessness as a theoretical intervention is also an accurate diagnostic.³¹ Relating our lived—racialized, gendered, and bordered—experiences to the power structures that determine them is the work that the subjectlessness does for us: the psychic instability that Asian Americans feel about their social location has a grounding in material reality. Simply put, the difficulties we have in agreeing on what we mean by *Asian American* has everything to do with the larger forces of imperialism, racial capitalism, colonialism, orientalism, and sexuality.

The external reality of oppression and historical trauma is in constant dialectical relation with our internal worlds. The negotiation of these two realities is called intersubjectivity, which opens up into what Eng and Han call a racial third space, a space of play that forms but one aspect of the liberation that I am attempting to describe. Play, here, is a psychoanalytic expression of the notion of free response, and which I later revisit on different registers through Walter Benjamin's divine violence (Chapters 8) and queer theology (Chapter 9). The thrust of these considerations is that we must constantly be aware of the tentativeness of Asian American theological identity and in doing so we are freed to weaponize it for both critique and coalition-building. Its inherent constructedness—subjectlessness—should free us from trying to fit into preconceived notions of who we are and move toward adaptive racial dissociation: being able to be many and one without collapsing in on ourselves. As David Graeber, one of the key figures of the Occupy Wall Street movement, asserted: the ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make and could just as easily make differently.³² The same is true of the malleable and fluid thing that is Asian American identity. It is ours for the making.

Having laid the foundation of subjectivity, I turn to the first steps of a theological construction. Building an Asian American theology of liberation for the future requires, first and foremost, a decolonization of contemporary Asian American theology, thus a reckoning with Asian settler colonialism, with our positionality that Hawaiian activist Haunani-Kay Trask refers to as “settlers of color.”³³ With this in mind, chapter 4 dialogues with Indigenous scholars and theologians, in particular Vine Deloria Jr. and George Tinker whose works lay out the realities that any form of settler or non-Indigenous theology in North America must confront. In contrast to these claims, I argue that Asian American theology is characterized by *landlessness*—a foreignness in perpetuity that must be in solidarity with Indigenous struggles for sovereignty and resurgence.³⁴ In other words, Asian American theology must not seek to indigenize or be grounded in any territorial sense but rather embrace its inherent transnationality and dislocation. I draw also from Naim Ateek’s Palestinian liberation theology, which, along with Native American theologians, rejects the problematic Exodus narrative, a paradigmatic text of liberation theologies, and constructs a theology of freedom that centers concern for the land and its stewards. This theology of landlessness is in dialectical opposition with earlier Asian American theologies that seek particular forms of belonging within US settler society, whereas a theology of landlessness proposes a capitulation of any such desire. There is no ultimately defensible position for inclusion in the anti-Black US settler-colonial empire.

Having cleared the way for an Asian American theology of migration that is in harmony with the land and its Indigenous people, chapter 5 turns to Asian American theology as a means of critiquing Asian anti-Blackness and learning from the Black radical tradition, Black liberation theology, and Dalit theology. Historical Black-Asian coalitions lay a foundation for an Asian radical tradition that might begin to parallel Cedric Robinson’s articulation of the Black radical tradition.³⁵ The real question, still, is: How do we struggle

alongside each other today? Dalit theology can serve as a point of contact for an Asian American theology of liberation that is able to build power and solidarity despite incommensurable differences and Afro-pessimist arguments. Indeed, a closer reading reveals resonances between the open invitations of Black and Dalit liberation to non-Black and non-Dalit communities to, as in Hebrews, “go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured,” he who “suffered outside the gate.”³⁶ So are we called to a kenosis of social death and nonbeing, to become outcaste or, as James Cone writes unambiguously, to become Black.³⁷ At the overlap of Dalit theology, Afro-pessimism, and Fanonian theory is the problem of the human being, the possibility of a new humanism at the horizon of decolonization, abolition, and the ontological rupture required by Afro-pessimism. In approaching the confluence of these multiple horizons, Asian American theology must divest from not only Whiteness but the ontology of non-Blackness and the hierarchical structure of casteism in favor of nonbeing, or *beinglessness*.

Chapter 6 turns to the means of struggle and visions worthy of revolutionary action in the current political moment of mass movements around the world and in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The struggles of Hong Kong serve as a crucial point of reflection, connecting with an earlier Korean *minjung* theology and a theology of the multitude, in the sense of Kwok Pui-Lan and Joerg Rieger. Understanding Asian American theology of liberation as a grassroots theology, it is necessary to consider the multitude, the 99 percent, the masses whom Jesus had compassion on, as the movement out of which theological reflections must be grounded in and whose sufferings must be shared. Parallel to the earlier calls for divestment, I draw upon Jonathan Tran’s notion of the after-market of racial capitalism, to locate Asian Americans within racial capitalism. Tran locates Asian Americans within the material reality structured by anti-Black racism: the political-economic afterlife of slavery, we might say. This framing is critical as the demographic shift in Asian Americans post-1965 resulted in the average Asian

American being upper-middle class, despite protestations about the internal economic inequalities and experiences of racism. For a theology that intends to be for the poor and oppressed, this places most Asian Americans in an awkward spot. The material consequences of the previous chapter's call to beinglessness are now brought to bear in what I call *havelessness*, which simply harkens to Jesus's unambiguous invitation to "sell all that you have," or what Tran calls dispossession. I propose that the only way out is through, a path that lies in the revolutionary calls of Amílcar Cabral to "return to the source," Walter Rodney's "groundings with my brothers," and Filipino theologian Eleazar Fernandez's theology of struggle. This is the prerogative of so-called middle minorities, the petite bourgeoisie, or what Afro-pessimist Frank Wilderson calls civil society's junior partners, in service of revolution. Building upon these, a theology of class struggle emerges that must undergird future struggles of mass movements and activists. We are workers together with God, yes, as the apostle Paul writes, but we are also workers together with those who work in Amazon warehouses, nail salons, nursing facilities, restaurant kitchens, factory lines, and industrial farms.

With this in view, I broach in chapter 7 the question of violence in the context of revolutionary struggle and liberation. At the opposite end is the quasireligious adherence to nonviolence, which Ward Churchill demonstrates to be pathological and counter-revolutionary. The false moral high ground of absolute pacifism mirrors what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang refer to as a "settler move to innocence" whereby settler identity is deflected through equating different kinds of oppressions and privileging decolonization in the abstract while continuing to enjoy settler privilege and occupy stolen land.³⁸ Setting aside the pathology of pacifism allows for clearer thinking around the question of violence. For that, the riddle of John Brown presents itself as a useful prism through which it might be apprehended. Brown's use of deadly violence as a White abolitionist poses ethical and political prob-

lems not otherwise present in considerations of Black abolitionists or, say, anti-colonial fighters. (This parallels the problem that the preferential option for the poor poses to wealthy Asian Americans.)

Drawing on theologian Ted Smith's use of political theology to circumscribe the limits of ethics, in particular what Smith calls the "frame of universalizable immanent ethical obligation," I place Smith's interpretation of Walter Benjamin's notion of divine violence and relief of law in conversation with Fanon's treatise on violence in the context of decolonization. Whereas Smith's analysis locates revolutionary violence outside the limit of ethics, Fanon's diagnosis finds violence to be all but necessary for the liberation of the colonized, closer perhaps to the assessments of Black revolutionaries in the United States. I argue that *both* perspectives inform the Asian American position, caricatured as timid and non-confrontational, as opposed to the rich history of militancy and protest in Asia and Asian America. We can and must also hold in view the totality. We are not yet free as long as any of us is not free.

Chapter 8 is a supplement to the previous one, considering the problem of anti-Asian violence, with an emphasis on the spectacle of a Black male assailant and Asian female victim. Even though such incidents make up only a small fraction of what might be called anti-Asian racism, it is a hard conversation to have, one that liberal establishments carefully avoid but also permeates private chats on Kakao, WeChat, and WhatsApp. In this brief meditation, I offer an interpretation of such events as a subconscious, metabolic waste product of racial capitalism, wherein the actual solution to all forms of anti-Asian violence must include Black liberation. I also draw on Iyko Day's analysis of Asians as the "new Jew" and Anne Annlin Cheng's notion of ornamentalism, drawing together again Marxist and ontological readings as a means of understanding the social location of Asian American women. Combined with the themes of the previous chapters, this points us to a broader will to *powerlessness*, a call to relinquish the desire for retribution and an exploration of what it might mean to love one's enemies.

With each notion of subjectlessness, landlessness, beinglessness, havelessness, and powerlessness, I outline a nonlinear path for building an Asian American theology of liberation that remembers its history, works in solidarity with others, and is not afraid of the fight. Broadening the field of vision, in the concluding chapter 9, I draw all these threads together to suggest that Asian Americanness, understood through each of these refusals of rigid binaries, opens up into a queer future of liberation, where freedom is marked by indeterminacy, free response, and free identification. Such is the in-between space that is neither/nor, rather than both/and, echoing the Christian notion of the already but not yet. For the unbounded joy at the horizon, I call this the erotics of liberation, drawing from Althaus-Reid's indecent theology and archbishop Rowan Williams's meditations on the body's grace. Whereas the disorders of racial melancholia and racial dissociation, the psychic and geographic nowhere, the anxieties of being a racial middleman are all inscribed on the Asian body, the resolution of these tensions—muscular tension according to Fanon and sexual tension according to Freud—is also manifested in release and liberation through the body, both sexual and spiritual. The freedom to be found in Asian American liberation is a deeply queer space. “The borderlands,” according to Gloria Anzaldúa, “are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.”³⁹ Liberation, likewise, is a space of limitless potential and creativity, just as Fanon declared, “In the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself.”⁴⁰

LIBERATION THEOLOGY UNBOUND

Anthropologist Patrick Wolfe wrote in the context of settler colonialism that invasion is a structure, not an event.⁴¹ So is liberation also a structure and not an event. That is to say that freedom, as

with the Jewish concept of shalom, is a pervasive, jubilant presence that must be built and sustained through structural means, forbidding hegemonic systems of domination to take root and requiring expansive and prophetic visions of new Jerusalems. It is a journey without destination, a means without end.

To declare liberation theology unbound is a nod to historian Gary Okihiro's *American History Unbound*, a historical and anti-historical project that writes with and against existing representations of Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States. In it, Okihiro narrates from the perspective of ocean worlds, assigning historical significance to oceans and islands over continents, which are also islands in themselves, seas of islands connected by water. Oceans and Oceania, according to Okihiro, are decolonizing discourses and material conditions, fluid worlds untethered from the seemingly fixed, immobile continents.⁴² In the unbinding of liberation theology I also mean to gesture to a complete abolition of borders and boundaries that yet maintains selfhood and integrity, as in Fanon: "When there are no more slaves, there are no masters."⁴³ Beyond the horizon of liberation is a new humanity—a new ontology, a fundamental transformation of every social relation, love without end.

This book is written with Asian Americans in mind, those who have found themselves theologically unmoored and adrift in the wake of the last decade's social upheavals, Asian Americans who have found themselves like me, as Nikki Toyama-Szeto put it, spiritually homeless.⁴⁴ I write for the community of those who have found White theology to be an irredeemably bankrupt modern-day Pharisaism and have found other liberation theologies, while inspiring and challenging, to be outdated or one step removed from the Asian American struggle. I write against armchair theologians for whom class struggle, deportations, and poverty are abstract issues to theorize about and profit from. I write for a street-fighting Asian American theology of liberation, unapologetic and unreserved in its commitment to the liberation of oppressed and exploited Asians and Asian Americans, for a theology most concerned with the plight and

freedom of the global diaspora of Asian working-class poor, migrant laborers, asylum seekers, and trafficked persons.

There is a place for subtle arguments and systematic theories about theology, race, power, and so on; this is not the place. At the same time, even as I draw from academic theologies and theories to scaffold an Asian American theology of liberation, this by itself is *not* the content of liberation theology: it is in the “groanings which cannot be uttered,” in which the Spirit of God dwells, in the riots and strikes and barrios and ghettos and street corners. The work of theology is to interpret these groanings, to perform the negating work of divine violence. Such reverberations can be felt in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 where the Catholic Vietnamese American community in New Orleans participated in the rebuilding process, of which the regional director of the National Association of Vietnamese Service Agencies James Bui remarked, “This is the first time I’ve seen the Vietnamese church practicing liberation theology.”⁴⁵ It is this liberation theology that Bui intuitively reached for that this book is about.

While liberation theology is meant to be theology from the ground up, theological reflection on the suffering of the poor and the downtrodden, theology that participates in a hermeneutic circle of reflection and praxis, it may not always be immediately legible to the people whom it is written for. Fanon opposed this opaqueness plainly:

But if we speak in plain language, if we are not obsessed with a perverse determination to confuse the issues and exclude the people, then it will be clear that the masses comprehend all the finer points and every artifice. Resorting to technical language means you are determined to treat the masses as uninitiated. Such language is a poor front for the lecturer’s intent to deceive the people and leave them on the sidelines. Language’s endeavor to confuse is a mask behind which looms an even greater undertaking to dispossess. The intention is to strip the people of their possessions as

well as their sovereignty. You can explain anything to the people provided you really want them to understand.⁴⁶

In attempting to translate and synthesize ideas from the academy in service of the people who live outside of it, this book has quite possibly failed in this regard. Time will tell.

Liberation theology is reflection through praxis, and it is only in love and struggle that our theology is realized. There is nothing new under the sun. We already know enough to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before our God. In the context of the struggle for Algerian independence, Fanon asserted:

We would not be so naive as to believe that the appeals for reason or respect for human dignity can change reality. For the Antillean working in the sugarcane plantations in Le Robert, to fight is the only solution. And he will undertake and carry out this struggle not as the result of a Marxist or idealistic analysis but because quite simply he cannot conceive his life otherwise than as a kind of combat against exploitation, poverty, and hunger.⁴⁷

And again: “We would be overjoyed to learn of the existence of a correspondence between some black philosopher and Plato. But we can absolutely not see how this fact would change the lives of eight-year-old kids working in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe.”⁴⁸ James Cone similarly asserted: “It is so easy to make [Jesus’s] name mean intellectual analysis, and we already have too much of that garbage in seminary libraries. What is needed is an application of the name to concrete affairs. What does the name mean when black people are burning buildings and white people are responding with riot-police control? Whose side is Jesus on?”⁴⁹ Though this book is primarily for and about Asian Americans, it is the unyielding, revolutionary spirit of Fanon and Cone that burns within, who set their faces like flint toward the complete annihilation of colonialism and Whiteness. So fiercely must our love burn.

I am not myself a theologian, nor the child of a theologian. I write in the urgency of the now, from the social location of a Malaysian resident alien in the United States, as glaciers melt and social unrest boils over. I wrestle with my own complicity in the settler-colonial state and complicated relationship with the term *Asian American* itself. Despite any misgivings of my own, Thomas Szasz writes that in the human kingdom the rule is define or be defined, and so do the activist roots of Asian American identity remind us that what we are called can also be weaponized.⁵⁰ Of course, the master's tool will not dismantle the master's house, as Audre Lorde famously wrote, but in claiming Asian America in all its contradictions we may still assert a coalitional politics that builds power across incommensurable differences, to bring about radical change and loving resistance.⁵¹

Paradoxically, the emptiness of Asian American identity is also its strength: it provides a deconstructive lens through which it may be apprehended that in liberation Asian Americanness will also pass away. I thus write from outside the fold of professional theology, as it were, offering an invitation to the Asian American church to struggle for the total liberation that God has redeemed us for. It is for liberation that the Messiah has liberated us. The Indigenous peoples of the Americas, Africa, and Asia have all lived through the end of the world after the Europeans arrived. Soon the climate catastrophe will bring again an end of the world to the masses, this time including the Europeans. As the ecological collapse begins, as we look back half a century to the political awakening of Asians in the United States and the liberation theology they had begun to build in the 1970s, we must ask if fifty years on others will look back on the 2020s and be inspired or disappointed. That is up to us. This book is not the first word on Asian American liberation theology, nor will it be the last. This is an opening salvo, as we follow God into the streets and rebuild a movement, working out our salvation with fear and trembling.

