

A User's Guide to
Asian American Theologies of Liberation

version 0.0

We have nothing to lose but our chains.

— Assata Shakur

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To the user:

Welcome to a user's to Asian American theologies of liberation. It is intended to raise the consciousness of peoples everywhere regarding theologies of liberation, and to be deployed in community. Reflect, discuss, build, organize, protest, strike, write, dream, pray, sing, fight, act.

This is an "alpha" version; I have rushed to do this because it feels so incredibly urgent. Hong Kong staged its biggest protest ever. The Yellow Vests were on the streets. #MeToo is still reverberating around the world, especially with #ChurchToo. The Movement for Black Lives is less prominent, but Black folks are sure as hell still getting shot by cops,

I am intentionally making it available in .doc format so that you may make adjustments, improvements as you see fit. And it was always be in process. Make changes. Make it your own. Don't take my word for any of this. A key principle of any theology of liberation is the primacy of context, and I don't presume to know yours, and as good critical pedagogy goes, the power belongs to all of us. I say *theologies*, plural, because each of us brings our own. Freedom is also yours to interpret, to dream of, to fight for.

Your feedback is very welcome. Send me your versions of this document. Please direct it to wongtianan at protonmail dot com.

Now let us build.

Introduction and Selected Bibliography

Theologies of liberation center the experienced of the oppressed, the poor, the marginalized in society. In our day, that means the working-class, the undocumented, the migrant, the exploited, the trafficked, the incarcerated, the racialized, the gender non-conforming, the racial minorities, the indigenous, the trafficked, the abused.

Theologies of liberation are a reflection on praxis, theologize from the viewpoint of the oppressed, and take seriously God's preferential option for the poor. According to James Cone, "any message that is not related to the liberation of the poor in a society is not Christ's message. Any theology that is indifferent to the theme of liberation is not Christian theology."

a) First generation (1960 — 1980):

- *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1971) James Cone.

Black theology was a theological response to the Black Power movement, showing that Black theology was consistent with the aims of Black liberation. After the assassination of Martin King, Black theology grew less accommodating of whiteness, echoing the sentiments of Malcolm X, who was also murdered and held by Yuri Kochiyama as he lay dying. In hindsight, Cone believed that the Black (male) theology developed required a critique of sexism, class, and solidarity with Third World struggles and other marginalized people in the USA. Other important figures were Gayraud Wilmore, Albert Cleage, James Forman, and the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC) in general.

- *Teología de la liberación* (1971) Gustavo Gutiérrez

Theology of liberation in the Latin Americas began with the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) which emphasized social oppression and the preferential option for the poor. It was developed through the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) meetings in Medellín, Colombia (1968) and Puebla, Mexico (1979). Its focus was on the poor Catholic communities in Latin America, oppressed by the global capitalist order that was being established. The theology was condemned by the Vatican for its Marxist leanings.

- *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1974) Mary Daly

White feminist theology was a theological response to the white women's liberation movement, or Second Wave feminism. Its main critique lies in the heteropatriarchal foundations of Western Christianity, grappling with the maleness of Jesus and the questioning the fatherhood of God.

b) Second generation (1980 — 2000):

- *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. (1983) Alice Walker

Womanist theology centers the experience of Black women, even before critical legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined “intersectionality” to explain the suffering of Black women, in contrast to Black men or White women. According Delores Williams, “womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women's struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women's and the family's freedom and well-being.” It can be understood also as a feminist intervention into the maleness of Black theology up till this point.

- *Asian theology of liberation* (1988) Aloysius Pieris
- *Justice and Only Justice: Palestinian liberation theology* (1989) Naim Stifan Ateek.
- *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (1990) Chung Hyun Kyung
- *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (1990) Arvind P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam

Each of these represent theologies of liberation developed in the context of Asia, specifically Sri Lanka, Palestine, Korea, and India. Pieris focuses on the majority non-Christian Asian population; Ateek develops a theology of liberation questioning the Exodus narrative and land claims; Kyung uses Minjung theology, a theology of the masses, and identifies women as the “minjung within the minjung.” Dalit theology does not have a single go to text, but has rather generated substantial reflections on caste and liberation.

c) Third generation (2000 — 2020):

- *Indecent theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (2001) Marcella Althaus-Reid

Probably the most important text in the tradition of liberation theology to be written in the 21st century. Althaus-Reids' basic claim is that liberation theology has become decent, acceptable, and tamed, therefore it needs to be “indecent” through understanding that all theologies are sexual theologies, explicitly claiming the sexual in theological discourse, drawing heavily from queer theory and focusing on the poor woman in Latin America.

- *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (2008) George Tinker

A short text introducing ideas about indigenous theology and liberation, drawing from the foundational works of Native American Vine Deloria Jr. who eviscerated White Christianity as antithetical to Native American life. Among Deloria's works *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969), and *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (1972) has challenged every Native American theologian

since.

- *Beyond liberation theology* (2013) Ivan Petrella

One of several texts that mark the general trend in the 21st century questioning the relevance of theologies of liberation. On the other hand *The Reemergence of Liberation Theologies* (2013) edited by Thia Cooper try to suggest that theologies of liberation may see a return. So far, this seems to not yet have been the case. But what might the future hold?

Fourth generation (2020 —):

- ?

Facing Ourselves: Reflecting on Praxis

o. Asian American identity

Asian American identity was established around the time of the Third World Liberation Front strikes in 1968 at San Francisco State University and UC Berkeley in 1968. This started the fight to establish Asian American studies at various universities across the USA. This struggle remained largely academic until the 1982 murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin in Detroit by two white men, accusing him for the success of the Japanese auto industry and its effects on the US market. Asian Americans rose in protest of the \$3000 fine and no jail time given to the murderers.

Do you identify as Asian American? Why or why not? Who does the Asian American under- and over-represent?

Now look up “Asian” in the 2010 US census. Who is included? (Extra credit: find out when Asian first appeared in the US census, and how did its definition evolve)

Pacific Islanders sometimes object to the umbrella term AAPI (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders). What do you think?

Go back a little further. When do you think the first Asians arrive in the Americas, also known as Turtle Island?

1. Antiblackness

How can Asian American churches not only acknowledge but also dismantle their own antiblackness?

Why have there been so few Asian faces in the Movement for Black Lives, and why was the larger turnout of Asians in response to police brutality in *defense* of Peter Liang's murder of Akai Gurley?

Solidarity between Blacks and non-Blacks is by far not a given, despite figures such as Grace Lee Boggs and Yuri Kochiyama and histories of [Asian American protest](#). Historically, Asian immigrants have argued for citizenship and civil rights on the basis of being *not* black, and therefore deserving the same access and privileges as Whites.

Also, why have Asian Americans been silent over the recent calls for [reparations](#) to African Americans, on the 50th anniversary of the demand from white churches and synagogues for [\\$500,000,000 in reparations](#)?

What reparations do Asian Americans *owe* to other people of color for their complicity in racist domination and antiblackness?

James Cone in his last book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* says that there is no way in the US to talk about the crucifixion of Jesus rightly without talking about lynching of Blacks and other nonwhites. What does that mean for us?

2. Model/middle minorities

In spite of the model minority myth, Asian Americans are the fastest growing demographic, with the largest and fastest rising [income inequality](#) in the U.S. Bangladeshi, Hmong, Nepalese, and Burmese median households incomes are well below the [national average](#).

What does the Asian American church have to say to the educational attainment, economic success, and [home ownership](#) of its constituents, in stark contrast to the stubbornly depressed numbers in certain Asian, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities?

How shall Asian American theology focus on the poor when for example, in 2017 over [50 percent](#) of employed Asians worked in management and professional occupations, a higher percentage than other racial groups?

Is it possible to celebrate the achievements of some Asian Americans if this upward mobility only reveals the selectivity of inclusion into whiteness?

3. Migration

What role have Asian American churches played in providing sanctuary and refuge to those at risk of deportation, detention, and family separation?

Not only are Central and South Americans suffering at the U.S.-Mexico border and at detention centers throughout the continental U.S., but [Cambodian](#) and [Vietnamese Americans](#) and [refugees](#) also continue to be detained and deported. What more needs to be said about the migrant children now being held at what used to be a [Japanese internment camp](#)?

Moreover, undocumented Asians form a significant part of the working-class Asian community, and are often supported by immigrant churches or other religious institutions.

How can an Asian American theology of liberation critique the prevailing narratives of *immigration* which center the citizenship of “Americanness,” while centering the *migration* of Third World peoples across borders, real and imagined?

4. Islamophobia

Asian American Christians enjoy certain privileges being in a culturally Christian nation, more so than their Muslim neighbors. What solidarity is being offered to Muslims in light of the attacks in mosques, the unstable geopolitics with Iran, the detention of Uighurs in Xinjiang, China, and the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar?

Also, what does it mean that the U.S. census designates “white” as including people from the Middle East, rather than “Asian”?

According to Asian liberation theologian Aloysius Pieris, a distinguishing feature of Asian theology is its multi-religious, largely non-Christian cultural backgrounds, which will be important to consider in a so-called “[post-Christian](#)” U.S.

What about other religions that are dominant among Asian communities?

5. Settler colonialism

What do Asian American Christians have to say about their participation in settler colonialism in the Americas?

Indigenous peoples insist that settler colonialism is an ongoing reality of violence and dispossession. How does that square with Asian Americans who often identify as immigrants or children of immigrants?

Even more so is the situation in Hawai'i, where Asians together form the largest demographic, and whom activist Haunani Kay Trask calls [settlers of color](#). Crazy rich Asians are a *problem* rather than something to be celebrated – empty homes owned by rich Asians contribute to homelessness and gentrification in urban centers in the U.S. and Canada.

And what be about the connections to settler colonies in the Philippines, Palestine, Taiwan and Tibet?

6. Solidarity

Closer to home, Asian American communities have organized not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) protests against homeless shelters being set up in their neighborhoods, such as in [Queens, NY](#), and [Los Angeles, CA](#).

The lawsuit against Harvard's affirmative action is not the first time Asian Americans have challenged affirmative action. What were the contexts and the effects of the past incidents?

Together with the Peter Liang protests, it is clear that the Asian American community has deep work to do around solidarity with poor people of color. Is the Asian American church enabling an Asian American petit bourgeoisie by its silence on such issues?

As Asian American theology continues to build upon identity-based projects, does the label “Asian American” have any value left for class struggle and antiracism?

7. #MeToo

The #MeToo movement has led to the [#ChurchToo](#) movement, bringing to light thousands of allegations of sexual abuse within churches across the [denominational spectrum](#). Make a list of the #ChurchToo related scandals that have broke.

It is obvious that sexual abuse is *ecumenical*, not to mention the struggles for LGBTQ+ rights. Where are the Asian American voices on this?

Even if Asian American churches are not the problem – a generous concession – can they be a part of the solution?

The added layers of shame and heteropatriarchy from Asian cultural backgrounds on top of Western Christianity must certainly lead to further silencing and deeper oppression of women and queer people.

8. Climate change

As residents in the heart of capitalism, which is ravaging the climate, what is the responsibility of Asian American Christians towards climate change?

According to one study, the emissions of the average person in the U.S. are responsible for the suffering or death of two [future people](#). More importantly, unproblematic participation in corporate USA implicates Asian Americans, as it is corporations, not individuals, who are responsible for the scale of ecological destruction and [greenwashing](#).

While environmental justice has tended to be the domain of white activists, racialized Asians can bring the fight through the dimensions of environmental racism and stewardship, as climate change disproportionately affects [poor communities of color](#) and U.S. plastic waste is overwhelming [Malaysia and Thailand](#).

Moreover, the effects of climate change could see over [140 million migrations](#) by 2050. How will this exacerbate all the other issues?

9. White theology

Asian American churches, insofar as they approximate White churches by attending white seminaries, reading white theologians, studying white church history, and modeling white evangelism, maintain the status quo at best, and at worst lead to problematic situations like the death of missionary [John Allen Chau](#), who attempted to evangelize a remote hostile Indian tribe in 2018, echoing the glorified death of Jim Elliot and four other missionaries to Ecuador in 1956.

If Asian Americans are to be serious about theology, then Asian American churches that model White Christianity must be fundamentally re-examined. How can Asian American Churches decolonize from Whiteness, and renounce honorary white supremacy?

10. Empire

There is the imperialism and militarism abroad, particularly in Asia as tensions with Iran and China continue to grow, not to mention the entire history of U.S. militarism in Asia – from the Philippines to Korea to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan.

What does it matter if the one ordering the drone strike is white or black or brown or yellow?

Also, there is the global supply chain, which leads back to sweatshop labor and trafficking in South and Southeast Asia.

Should not the Asian American church be critical of these practices, of how consumer life in the U.S. and Canada depend on these ongoing exploitations and violence?

How does nationalism and patriotism shape our theologies, implicitly or explicitly?

How have we been imposing our beliefs and values upon others, and vice versa?

The Work

Theology of Protest

Talking about the work is not the work. Talking about doing work is not the work. The work remains to be done; the work is never finished. The poor you will always have with you.

How can we develop a theology that supports righteous protest, strikes, blockades, occupations and other means of direct action? Note that mass protests generally do not have a single narrative, but represents a coming together of various groups with various interests.

Some protests that have occurred in the last decade, mostly U.S.-based ones:

- Brazil general strike
- Hong Kong anti-China extradition protests (Jun 2019)
- Tiananmen 30th anniversary memorials and protests (May — Jun 2019)
- Uber and Lyft driver strikes (Mar 2019)
- Climate strikes: #FridaysForFuture worldwide and the Extinction Rebellion mostly in the UK (2018 – present)
- Sudan protests and general strike (Dec 2018 — present)
- Yellow Vests movement, Paris (Nov 2018 — present)
- Amazon Black Friday strike, Spain & Germany (Nov 23, 2018)
- Amazon Prime day strike, Spain & Germany (Jul 16, 2018)
- Trump Family Separation Policy protests (Jun 2018)
- Great March of Return, Gaza (Mar 2018 –present)
- Day Without a Woman strike (Mar 8 2017)
- Women's March (Jan 2017, 2018, 2019)
- Trump Muslim Ban airport protests (Jan 2017)
- #ChurchToo by Emily Joy and Hannah Paasch (Nov 2017)

- #MeToo against Harvey Weinstein (Oct 2017)¹
- #NoDAPL, Standing Rock (Apr 2016 — Feb 2017)
- Rise up October by Black Lives Matter (Oct 2015)
- #SayHerName (May 2015)
- Baltimore protests for Freddie Gray (Apr, May 2015)²
- Umbrella Movement/Occupy Central (Sep — Dec 2014)
- Ferguson uprising for Michael Brown (Aug, Nov 2014)
- New York City protests for Eric Garner (July 2014)
- Fight for \$15 (2012 — present)
- Idle No More protests and blockades (2012 — present)
- Trayvon Martin protests (Mar 2012)
- Occupy Wall Street (Sep 2011)
- Arab Spring, starting in Tunisia, also Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen (Dec 2010)
- Missing and murdered Indigenous women (ongoing)

¹ Activist Tarana Burke started the phrase in 2006.

² There's just so many. Have a look

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Lives_Matter#Timeline_of_notable_US_events_and_demonstrations, say their names.

On Violence

What is the role of violence and nonviolence in liberation of the oppressed?

Do we follow Jesus in cleansing the temple of thieves who exploit the poor, or do we follow Jesus to the cross?