

A User's Guide to
Asian American Theologies of Liberation

version 0.01

We have nothing to lose but our chains.

— Assata Shakur

To the user:

Welcome to a User's Guide 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 just staged its biggest protest ever. The Yellow Vests were on the streets. #MeToo is still reverberating around the world, also #ChurchToo. The Movement for Black Lives is less prominent now, 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.

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All the political theologies, the theologies of hope, of revolution, and of liberation, are not worth one act of genuine solidarity with exploited social classes. They are not worth one act of faith, love, and hope, committed—in one way or another—in active participation to liberate humankind from everything that dehumanizes it and prevents it from living according to the will of the Father.

— Gustavo Gutiérrez

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 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 “indecented” 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 tries 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 —):

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There was a time [...] when the term “Asian American” was not merely a demographic category, but a fight you were picking with the world, an argument you intended to draw out with indifferent or hostile parties.

— Jeff Chang

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.

In those days, especially before the 1965 immigration act, Asians in the US were largely Filipinx, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. The US bombed the Philippines and Japan and Korea. Next they bombed Vietnam and Cambodia and Laos, and then let some refugees in. Then they bombed Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria and Yemen—and Palestine by association—and don't want to let refugees in. As the saying goes, we are here because you were there.

Asian American identity is broader than ever. We are far richer and poorer than ever. We are still being trafficked, abused, exploited, orientalized, and made other. We oppose white supremacist domination. We must destroy racial capitalism.

It is time to make Asian America radical again.

White appeals to “wait and talk it over” are irrelevant when children are dying and men and women are being tortured. We will not let whitey cool this one with his pious love ethic but will seek to enhance our hostility, bringing it to its full manifestation.

To be black is to be committed to destroying everything this country loves and adores. Creativity and passion are possible when one stands where the black person stands, the one who has visions of the future because the present is unbearable.

The black experience is the feeling one has when attacking the enemy of black humanity by throwing a Molotov cocktail into a white-owned building and watching it go up in flames. We know, of course, that getting rid of evil takes something more than burning down buildings, but one must start somewhere.

— James Cone

Black Lives Matter

Recognize Asian American anti-blackness as a cancer to our community and call for its death.

The year 2019 is the 50th anniversary of the demand from white churches and synagogues for \$500,000,000 in reparations. We demand reparations for African Americans.

James Cone in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* says there is no way in the US to talk about the crucifixion of Jesus without talking about lynching of blacks and other nonwhites.

The largest lynching in US history was of about 20 Chinese in LA Chinatown on October 24, 1871.

Even the UN recognizes that police killing of blacks is equal to lynching. The police in the US began as slave-catchers.

Internalize these connections and oppose police brutality, surveillance, and racial profiling.

Police beat Kang Wong, Jessica Klyzek, and Sureshbhai Patel. Police shot and killed Fong Lee, Cau Bich Tran, Yong Xin Huang, and Michael Cho.

They lynch us too, and so with Jesus we rise.

Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

— Jesus

Class struggle

Any theology of liberation must side with the poor. In Roman Catholic language, this is the “preferential option for the poor.”

That God sides with the oppressed, with those in poverty is completely obvious from the Bible. We have only been too afraid to follow Jesus, to “sell all that you have and give it to the poor, then come, follow me.”

Asian Americans have been used to blame the poor for their poverty.

to deny racism against people of color.

to keep darker skinned people out of schools.

As Mari Matsuda asserts, we will not be used. We will not be a racial bourgeoisie. We reject all middle-class aspirations, respectability politics, and the nightmare of the (Asian) American dream.

Asian Americans are the fastest growing demographic in the US, 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](#).

Capitalism is exploiting Asia, re-colonizing Africa, and impoverishing people of color everywhere. Southeast Asia is being enslaved through the garment, fishing, and sex industry. Black USA is being enslaved still through the new Jim Crow, the mass incarceration, and predatory finance.

Destroy racial and carceral capitalism. Abolish all prisons. Set the captives free. We are the 99%.

Bomb that wall

Asian American churches must provide 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](#)?

They have been us. They are us. They will be us.

Abolish ICE.

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

The rhetoric of citizenship is of primary importance to the state. As they say, “we didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.” Borders do untold violence whenever they are drawn. Palestine/Israel. Pakistan/India. Jammu and Kashmir. Tibet. All of European colonization and mission. The Scramble for Africa.

To those who chant “build that wall,” we scream, “bomb that wall!” Open all borders. No more deaths.

Islamophobia

Muslims are being shot up in mosques like Christchurch, New Zealand.

The US is goading Iran into war.

Trump's Muslim ban is still in effect.

Millions of Uighurs are detained in Xinjiang.

The Rohingya genocide in Myanmar produced a million refugees in Bangladesh.

Aung San Su Kyi from Myanmar shakes hands with Viktor Orban from Hungary, and Narendra Modi from India with Benjamin Netanyahu from Israel, all in the shared cause of destroying Islam.

We oppose them all.

The U.S. census designates "white" as including people from the Middle East, rather than "Asian." We categorically reject this assimilation into whiteness. We will not join the white devil.

We cannot only offer cheap solidarity. Fight back.

Give back the land

Acknowledge that the land, the Americas belong to all indigenous tribes, and that it was stolen by force, deception, rape, and genocide by white settlers.

Recall that Asians arrived in the Americas as indentured laborers, to replace the labor of emancipated African slaves.

This land is not our land. We may have been born or brought here, but our parents were not killed and scalped and erased for this land.

Also recall 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.

We recognize the global white settler colonial network of USA, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia. And the other settler colonies in the Philippines, Palestine, Taiwan and Tibet.

We join the fight for indigenous resurgence, self-determination, and land rights.

When resurgence requires insurgency, we will not back down.

Revolution calls us to revolt.

For every pipeline blockade, for every occupation as in Standing Rock, for every Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman and Girl, we cannot be idle no more.

God on the move, we cannot stay.

Smash the heteropatriarchy

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.

White and Asian heteropatriarchy oppress and repress us.

Misogyny, transphobia, homophobia are deadly symptoms of rape culture.

White feminism and “lean-in” feminism do not have a good word for poor women of color. A white woman in the White House will not do much better than a black man in the White House. The problem is the White House. The problem is the Sheryl Sandbergs and Nikki Haleys and whoever excuses “locker-room talk.”

Believe poor women of color. Intersectionality is for real.

Sexual and gender violence manifests at all levels of race, class, and nation. Oppose them all, oppose them altogether.

Smash the heteropatriarchy.

Climate change

Mother earth is dying.

Christian America has done the most damage. China is trying to catch up.

Environmental justice has tended to be the domain of white activists because they don't have to worry about racism or poverty or citizenship.

But Asians too must 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?

Climate scientists tell us the end is near. There is no more time to waste. To save ourselves, to save our neighbors we must save the planet.

Freedom for all.

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.

Asian American theology of liberation must support righteous protest, strikes, blockades, occupations and other means of direct action.

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

¹ Activist Tarana Burke started the phrase in 2006.

- #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)

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.