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Postcolonial Feminist Theologies

Eleanor Tiplady Higgs

Postcolonial feminist theology applies the insights of postcolonial feminist academic and political projects to theology, asking critical questions about colonialism, race, and gender in relation to concepts of God. It highlights the fact that the majority of feminist theologians have posited a universal category “woman” as the subject of their work. As described in detail by postcolonial feminists (see Mohanty 1988), this universalism privileges the voices of affluent white Western women over the voices of others. Following this critique, postcolonial feminist theologians assert that gender difference and inequality in religious contexts cannot be analyzed satisfactorily by feminist theologies invested in such false universalism. Therefore, postcolonial feminist theology enlarges and challenges the scope of feminist theology by redefining the subject of feminism and imagining different theological possibilities, moving beyond the narrow confines of academic enterprise to reflect and encompass the religious practices of women in (post)colonial contexts.

While feminist theology is not necessarily Christian, it emerged out of Christian European and North American contexts. This chapter focuses on postcolonial feminist theological interventions in Christianity because of the inextricable connections between Christianity, gender, racism, and European colonialism. Postcolonial feminist theology asserts that Christian actors and epistemologies—frameworks of knowledge—perform a central role in European colonial projects of the past and present. Thus, Christianity’s continuing significance in national and global politics; individual, local, and national identity formation; and the constitution of gendered subjectivity necessitates further analysis and critique (Donaldson and Kwok 2002). While the particular conditions of European colonial regimes varied enormously over time and between each colonized territory, Christianity, in general, spread alongside political and cultural colonization, through the dismantling, exclusion, and disparagement of indigenous peoples’ worldviews. Widespread hostility and suspicion of indigenous traditions and practices resulted from unconscious and overt Eurocentric evaluations of indigenous cultures. Eurocentrism, the measuring of other cultures according to European Christian social and cultural ideals, also encouraged colonizers to interpret indigenous gender roles, social structures, and systems of knowledge as evidence of savagery and the absence of “civilization.” Therefore, postcolonial feminist theologies are particularly concerned with imagining and enacting new concepts of, and relationships with, God that depart from the imperialistic theologies of colonizer cultures and restore indigenous traditions and practices as inherent aspects of their theological imaginaries.

Postcolonial feminist theology seeks to remake theology with a conscious effort to identify, critique, and supplant its colonizing history and tendencies. This “redoing” implies centering the point of view or “embodied perspectives” of those who theology excludes from the Christian institutions of the (former) colonial center or “metropole” (Kwok 2005). In so doing, postcolonial feminist theology asserts that the failure to interrogate and analyze the colonizing values, strategies, and effects of mainstream theologies serves to “maintain the imperialistic paradigm of the West” (Dube 2000, 19). This assertion recognizes that imperialism—the ideology that underpins and justifies colonialism (Said 1993)—is deeply embedded within theological concepts, methods, and institutions. Postcolonial feminist theology is also critical of churches, academic institutions, clergy, and theologians for their complicity in the maintenance of a colonialist status quo, and it thus poses a profound challenge not only to mainstream Western categories of academic theological discourse but also to the everyday practices of Christian institutions. In this chapter the work of significant postcolonial theologians who work on gender and feminist theology is considered: Hong Kong-born theologian Kwok Pui-lan (1952–), Botswanan theologian Musa W. Dube (1964–), and Puerto Rican scholar Mayra Rivera (1968–) serve as the

primary illustrations of the creative and transformative scope of postcolonial feminist theologies. First, Kwok's influential survey of the field in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (2005) serves as an exemplar of postcolonial feminist theological methodology. Second, a textual approach to redoing theology is encountered in Dube's decolonial Biblical scholarship. Third, Rivera's theology of "relational transcendence" demonstrates the wide-ranging implications of rethinking models of God. Finally, the ethical and political implications of postcolonial feminist theology are discussed in relation to three broad themes: (1) the ethics of relationality; (2) sexuality; and (3) the environment.

Decolonizing Theology and Religion

To decolonize theology is to engage in a process of contesting, critiquing, and creatively reworking the imperial, patriarchal, and colonial institutions and categories of Christianity. Postcolonial feminist theology is concerned with decolonizing theology both as an academic discipline and a constitutive element in religious practice, first, by removing colonial elements, such as doctrines of God, from existing theologies and reimagining or replacing them. In African contexts this is often known as the "Africanization" or "inculturation" of theology. Second, decolonization requires an analysis of theology's role(s) in the creation and maintenance of empire (Dube 2000; Kwok 2005). Crucially, this project also produces new theological narratives, categories, and insights that facilitate the decolonization of Christian practices, discourses, and institutions. Thus, theology is both the subject of decolonization and a means through which the decolonized transformation of Christianity may be achieved (Dube 2002a).

Decolonizing theology proceeds from one of the primary tenets of postcolonial theory: the necessity of revealing the specifically Eurocentric assumptions underlying the Christian sociocultural values and structures of the colonizer, particularly the idea that theologies produced by and for Europeans have universal application and validity. Additionally, feminist postcolonial critics suggest that the imperialist projects of Europe must be analyzed with due attention to gender, as white women from colonizing centers have also been beneficiaries of material, social, and political changes fueled by colonization. Thus, postcolonial feminist theology reframes the history of mainstream theology as proceeding from the perspective of elite white men (and women) located in the power base of the colonial empire. Reimagining God from any other perspective has historically been controversial because the particular perspective of the white male European Christian theologian has been obscured by pervasive Eurocentrism. Because the development of theology has been largely a reflection of elite male interests and concerns, it has tended at certain points to codify patriarchal and imperialistic attitudes. Often, the imperialism of Christianity has been explicit; as is described in more detail below, Musa Dube demonstrates that the Bible is itself "imperializing literature" (Dube 2000, 57). Its narratives of heroic characters and chosen peoples journeying to other lands, conquering them, and saving them have been a rich resource for Christians to justify their colonial and expansionist ambitions. Biblical scholarship that fails to recognize the imperialism of the Bible will reinforce it and therefore cannot provide the grounds or the means for resisting imperialism and (neo)colonialism (Dube 2000).

Contrary to popular (self-)representations of theologians and other scholars as rational and objective, their theology's underlying epistemology and explicit content has been imperialistic in its intentions and effects. The Eurocentrism of the interrelated academic disciplines of theology and religious studies in the Western academy has meant that the practices, traditions, and beliefs of other peoples have been evaluated against standards provided by European Christianity. Religion as an object of study was produced by these fields, which primarily took either a developmental or a comparative approach. Developmental approaches to religion asserted a narrative of religious and social progress wherein the inferior, primitive "superstitions" of non-European societies were deemed to lag behind European cultures, which had apparently achieved the most superior form

of religion, Christianity. Comparative approaches promoted a similar hierarchical ranking of religions based on a definition of religion that inherently privileged Christian practices and doctrine as the paradigmatic model of religion (Kwok 2005). Both approaches asserted the inherent superiority of Christianity and ignored the relation between Christianity and concepts of civilization and primitivity that organized their problematic and self-aggrandizing evaluations.

Although the study of religions has branched out from these approaches since the 1990s, many of the assumptions underlying mainstream scholarship on religion remain unaltered. The traces of the aforementioned Christianized model of religion have resulted in the devaluation of non-Christian traditions, stories, and symbols and have motivated a purist attitude that marginalizes emergent forms, such as the blending of Pentecostal Christianity and Islam (known as Chrislam) in Nigeria (Janson 2016). Such devaluation means that the theological contributions of Christians from non-European backgrounds are policed in an attempt to avoid syncretism (the mixing of religious traditions, beliefs, or practices considered distinct from one another). For example, at a conference of the World Council of Churches in 1991, Korean theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung presented a re-visioning of the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit as the popular Korean goddess Kwan Yin. Her intervention met with a hostile reception, and she was accused of going too far in her effort to contextualize the Christian God using symbolism to which Korean women could relate (Kwok 2005; Ku"ster 2010). Yet, this aversion to syncretism ignores the historical and ongoing combination of traditions, practices, and myths that have produced European forms of Christianity (Dube 2000).

In contrast, postcolonial feminist theologies embrace hybridity as an essential source of theological insight (Dube 2002a; Kanyoro 1999; Kwok 2005): "Hybridity becomes a form of resistance, for it dispenses with dualistic and hierarchical constructions of cultures" (Dube 2000, 51). The figure and concept of the mestizo/a in Latin American feminist (and) liberation theologies provides a good example of hybridity, signifying not only the "genetic" mixing of the (white) colonizer with the (indigenous, Amerindian) colonized but also the continuing echoes of that history in the present. These reverberations include the migration of people from former colonies to North America and western Europe, forming diaspora communities. Many diasporic communities experience a tension between being "at home" and being an "outsider." Indeed, this tension is also felt by many postcolonial Christians who did not migrate to the First World, who describe the sense of being pulled between "[indigenous] religion and culture" and "the Church and western culture" (Kanyoro 2001, 39). This tension may be unsettling, but it also grants "insider" knowledge of both diasporic/ indigenous culture and the colonizer's culture, facilitating a valuable perspective on both.

The figure of the mestiza is, as already noted, an example of hybridity and has thus been championed by some as a model for the imaginative (re)production of mythic and divine symbols from the perspective of the outsider-within (Anzaldú'a 2012; Dube 2000). The outsider-within is a term coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1998) to signify the location of individuals who have no clear-cut membership in any one group but are the product of two or more communities and who thus exist at the border between groups. The hybrid mestiza body provides a model of human interrelationality, as it is "inscribed by the multiple relations from which it emerges" (Rivera 2007, 96). The interrelational quality of hybridity emphasizes not just that human relationships are significant but that the physical and material interaction of people's bodies must be analyzed with reference to their sociopolitical contexts. The mixing of people, along with the resulting cultural and religious hybridity, takes place within individual and global relations of power that influence their outcomes and meanings. Mayra Rivera (2007) suggests that theological recognition of this hybridity and interrelationality must have implications for the idea that human beings are formed in the image of God.

Decolonizing Feminist Theology

Although feminist theologies originating in the West have often noted the need to avoid ethnocentrism, imperialism, and (neo)colonialism, this has much less often been translated into effective strategies and methodologies for decolonization. Kwok Pui-lan describes postcolonial feminist theology as “revolving around three loci . . . resignifying gender, requeering sexuality, and redoing theology” (Kwok 2005, 128). Within each of these three focal points postcolonial feminist theology highlights the absence of attention to colonization, noting that where gender has been resignified by white feminist theologians, it has typically been abstracted from the concerns of any particular context and from its intersections with race, class, and imperialism (Kwok 2005; Vuola 2002). When sexuality has been queered by white Western theorists, this has been done without due attention to the sexualized elements of colonial encounters, so redoing theology from a postcolonial feminist perspective will necessarily work to address these neglected areas (Kwok 2005).

Resignifying Gender

The importance of resignifying gender is clear when considering the legacy of white feminist theological scholarship. Foundational texts that continue to have great influence on the field were written under the influence of pervasive Eurocentric assumptions about the nature of gender, sex, and the oppression apparently shared by all women (Dube 2002a; Kwok 2005).

Mary Daly, a pioneering American feminist theologian, offered a critique (1978) of women’s experiences of patriarchy in different cultures around the world. Her analysis, however, prioritized her definition of sexist oppression over all other structural inequalities, as if the world was divided only along the fault line of gender. Along with the binary conception of gender as man/woman, the idea of a universal, transhistorical patriarchy contributes to a range of misapprehensions; it also fed into a political perspective (white feminism) that is unable to identify or challenge the complex ways in which gender inequality is tied up with racism, heterosexism, and imperialism (Kwok 2005). As noted, postcolonial feminist theologies equally resist “transhistorical account[s] of patriarchy” and the implication that formerly colonized territories are particularly patriarchal compared to an enlightened gender-equal West (Kwok 2002, 74).

In postcolonial feminist theology, by contrast, great care is taken to delineate specific patriarchal norms and social structures in particular geographical and historical locations (Donaldson and Kwok 2002). By breaking down the monolithic “woman” into plural “women,” postcolonial feminist theologians refocus attention onto the challenges of patriarchal religious practices specific to the context in which they work, as in Kwok’s *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (2000) and Ghanaian Methodist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (2001). Postcolonial feminist theology identifies gendered bodies, relations, and processes in their particular “local, regional and national” sociocultural and political contexts (Kwok 2005, 136). For example, in *Hearing and Knowing* ([1986] 2000) Oduyoye argues for the necessity of feminist analysis in what she names African Christian theology by presenting an overview of women’s experiences of misogyny in African contexts. She focuses on the dynamics of gender in the global ecumenical movement (which stresses unities between different Christian denominations), drawing parallels between local and global attitudes toward women in the church to highlight cross-cultural dynamics and “networks of relations” (Kwok 2005, 136), including racism and imperialism. Applied more broadly, this methodology makes clear how gendered inequalities are inflected by transnational dynamics, for example in the context of migration, in systems and patterns of incarceration, and in militarism and war.

Requeering Sexuality

Likewise, the postcolonial feminist theological project to requeer sexuality is a necessary corrective to the gaps in predominantly white Western feminist and queer sexuality scholarship (e.g., Goss 2002; Stuart et al. 1997). Historically, feminist theologians have tended to rely on uncritical heteronormative assumptions, while queer theorists working on religion have ignored imperialism; those working on imperialism have overlooked religion. The “intersection of homophobia, ethnocentrism, and other religious practices” can be traced throughout Christian history, from narratives of colonial encounter in the Bible to present-day Western representations of Muslims (Kwok 2005, 140). Here, religious difference is represented through the figure of what Kwok calls the “sexual Other”: Christianity and heterosexuality align in contrast to apparent sexual and religious “deviance.” In fact, queer and antiracist theorists have suggested that in North American and western European contexts, racialized people are always positioned as queer or sexually deviant, regardless of their sexuality (Hall 1990; Haritaworn 2008). Kwok suggests that postcolonial feminist theology can help trace “the origin and development of moral teachings about sexuality” (2005, 142) in order to answer the pressing question of why “the religious Other and the sexual Other mutually constitute each other” (139).

Redoing Theology

These efforts to analyze the mutual influence of gender, sexuality, class, and race in colonial and imperial sociopolitical and cultural contexts are characteristic of postcolonial feminisms.

Redoing theology thus involves “writ[ing] back to a masculinist theological tradition defined by white, middle-class, Eurocentric norms” (Kwok 2005, 144). The theological issues to which Kwok suggests postcolonial feminist theologians may contribute are organized under three distinct themes: (1) thinking through the use and effects of theological symbols in postcolonial cultural contexts; (2) the theological implications of syncretism and religious difference; and (3) the role of theology in defending the environment in the face of industrialization and the contradictions of sustainable development (Kwok 2005).

In the next two sections, the work of two scholars provides a frame with which to observe the breadth of redoing postcolonial feminist theology and the diverse ways in which the methodological approach outlined by Kwok has been implemented. First, the way in which postcolonial theory has informed African feminist theologian Musa Dube’s (2000) critical and reconstructive reading of the Bible is examined. Dube’s work focuses on the rhetorical use and gendered and imperialist effects of theological symbols, including God, Israel, migration, and purity. Second, Mayra Rivera’s (2007) rich analysis of transcendence is reviewed, as it enumerates the wide-ranging implications of Eurocentric models of human and divine being that have sustained and perpetuated hierarchical dynamics both in theology and in the Christian societies these theologies influence. While Dube’s work is rather different from Rivera’s, their shared decolonial commitments lead them both to recommend an ethical orientation toward relationality and liberation.

Decolonizing the Bible

In *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (2000), Musa Dube interrogates the Old and New Testaments to “cultivate postcolonial strategies of reading the Bible that resist and decolonize both patriarchy and imperial oppression,” with particular reference to African contexts (Dube 2000, 43; Dube 2002b). Dube is one among many African theologians who write decolonial theologies as part of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter, “the Circle”). Founded in 1989 by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the Circle was conceived as a space for African women to speak and write about religion and culture in response to the male domination of African theology and religious studies. The Circle has been so successful in gathering women

theologians from the continent under its auspices that it is now virtually synonymous with African women's theologies and includes such prominent scholars such as Dube, Sarojini Nadar, Esther Mombo, and Musimbi Kanyoro. These theologians variously describe their work as "feminist," "women's," "contextual," "narrative," or "womanist" theology.

Circle theologians center African women as "actors, agents and thinkers" whose experiences deserve theological attention (Oduyoye 2001, 10), often through the retelling of personal stories or by reclaiming indigenous myths. The output of the Circle is characterized by an emphasis on innovative contextual and gender-sensitive interpretative principles that are employed to analyze and reimagine Christian and African traditions and practices (Kanyoro 2002; Mombo 2003). Reflecting the background of many of its founding members in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, the Circle is committed to the "critical analysis of the cultural, economic, political and social as well as ... religious realities" (Mombo 2003, 93). The form such analyses take is typically highly specific to the writer's local or national context and based on a mixed methodology of ethnographic research, social criticism, and theological reflection. Generally taking a strongly anti-imperialist and antiglobalization perspective, the Circle seeks to reform Christian institutions and communities in Africa and defines the task of theology as the transformation of cultures to reflect the principle of gender equality.

In pursuit of these goals, Dube applies postcolonial literary theory to read the Bible as a "cultural text" used in "both the imposition of and resistance to imperialism" (Dube 2000, 47). She demonstrates that colonial "relationships of domination and subjugation" have historical precedent in the imperialism that she finds woven into foundational Christian (and Jewish) narratives (70). By juxtaposing her analysis of the Old Testament book of Exodus with other texts, including Virgil's *Aeneid* (ca. 30–19 BCE) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Dube denies that the Bible should be exempt from critique and demonstrates the similarities between the imperializing rhetoric in ancient and modern texts. Thus, although Exodus speaks to and about ancient Israelites, the methods it uses to justify imperialism are not unique to Jewish or Christian texts; modern secular literature is equally liable to repeat the imperializing gestures found therein (Dube 2000).

Dube establishes that the Bible employs distinct rhetorical strategies to sanction travelling to, entering, and violently possessing "distant and inhabited lands" (57). This is achieved by repeated assertions of the exceptional status of the Israelites and the existential danger posed by the cultures of the peoples whose lands they colonized, such as Canaan. In particular, the narrative singles out the women of the colonized as impure, "lacking and undeserving," warning the Israelites not to marry them (76). Such representations are mirrored by those of the colonizing Israelite women as "the measure and keepers of the purity or holiness of their nation" (75). In between these figures stands the character of Rahab, a Canaanite woman who Dube suggests represents the successful domestication of Canaan and the "perfectly colonized mind" (80). Dube argues that Rahab appears in the narrative as a mouthpiece for the interests of the author, who speaks to and for the colonizing Israelites. Rahab is "doubly colonized," first by Canaanite patriarchy and then by the imperial force of Israelite patriarchy, and her person and her voice are appropriated and used against her.

To guide decolonial interpretations of the Bible, Dube formulates a reading strategy that she calls "Rahab's reading prism," a constellation of postcolonial feminist hermeneutic principles (121). In contrast to other one-dimensional feminist readings of Rahab's story, Dube insists that only through a prismatic focus on the "multifaceted angles" of the text can the double colonization of Rahab be identified and, importantly, resisted (121). Thus, Rahab lends her name to Dube's hermeneutical approach as an apt reminder that a singular focus on patriarchy or imperialism cannot produce a liberating reading of the Bible for (post)colonized women.

As a reading strategy, Rahab's reading prism is characterized by three primary methods of interpretation. First, it foregrounds the "tension of colonizer and colonized" in order to maintain a critical distinction between

women, feminisms, and anti-imperialism (122). That is, women are not necessarily feminists, and feminism is not necessarily anti-imperialist, so the appearance of a woman in a Biblical text is not enough to make it useful for postcolonial feminist theology. The character of Rahab must be analyzed before she can be reclaimed: "Once this is recognized, resisting feminist readers of colonizing nations can choose to also read for decolonization," as the connection between women and feminism is destabilized (122). Second, acknowledging that the character of Rahab has been objectified and used as part of the imperializing narrative of Exodus, the reading prism reimagines the suppressed dimensions of women in Biblical texts as "bodies that rise against ... imperial annihilation" (122). Dube also suggests that readers who identify as doubly colonized can excavate other "Rahabs" from Biblical texts and imaginatively reinterpret them to recover their perspectives. Third, taking inspiration from such characters' resistance, the reader is called on to affirm the new forms and practices emerging from hybridity and oppose the policing of Christianity's limits (Dube 2000).

Dube applies Rahab's reading prism to produce a postcolonial feminist reading of the New Testament Gospel according to Matthew 15:21–28, a passage in which Jesus traveled to "the region of Tyre and Sidon," where he encountered a Canaanite woman who wished him to heal her daughter. In answer, Jesus declared, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," causing the woman to beg for his help. As in the story of Rahab, Dube reads the Canaanite woman as representing her nation and suggests that Jesus intervened only after she acknowledged her, and by implication Canaan's, subordinate status. Analyzing this narrative, Dube shows how imperialism and colonization are justified in the Bible and that gender is central to achieving this effect: Jesus travels away from his home and encounters a woman who accepts his authority over her. The construction of dominated nations as feminine, as in this story, has the dual effect of asserting a hierarchy of peoples and of "naturaliz[ing] the subjugation of women" (Dube 2000, 144).

As implied by point three of the reading prism, the reach and influence of imperialism and patriarchy are so pervasive that decolonial theology cannot be content with only "spinning hybrid rereadings of the colonizer's text" (116). Decolonial and postcolonial feminist theology must move beyond the limits imposed by mainstream theological assumptions. Dube offers the example of Semoya interpretative strategies found among women in the African Independent Churches (AICs) of Botswana in the 1990s as an illustration of the female subaltern (re)claiming the space to cultivate "new frameworks" for "imagining reality" (116) and for redoing theology. The Semoya approach is based on the guidance and empowerment of Moya, or the Spirit, as demonstrated in a fourfold communal method of participation in AIC church services. The communal nature of the service ideally allows the participation of any member of the congregation. This participation primarily takes the form of sung interjections, whether from the congregation or the one preaching, to expand or dwell on the meaning being conveyed by the passage. Sermons at Semoya church services are further characteristically reliant on dramatized narration, with great value placed on the ability to tell a story well, and the use of repetition to underline significant points and ultimately to mold the narrative toward a particular message (Dube 2000).

While Dube's focus is textual analysis of the Bible as imperializing literature, her nuanced and ethnographically informed perspective and her use of Rahab's reading prism prevent her from repeating the imperializing gesture of emphasizing reading the Bible above all other expressions or dimensions of Christian practice. Many Christian women in African contexts are unable to read the Bible themselves, and thus their interaction with the text is oral and aural. Indeed, reading the Bible is neither necessary nor sufficient; one female bishop in an AIC testified that "the Spirit that reveals and gives one a vocation and power operates with a significant independence from the written word ... 'when God spoke to me through the Spirit [Moya], God never opened the Bible to me'" (Dube 2000, 42; italics in the original). Thus, Dube affirms that African women have other ways of knowing God and other ways of theologizing than engaging with a text that facilitated the colonization of Africa. The intervention of God in the world as Spirit—Moya—and the interactive, relational

character of Semoya interpretive practices reflect a vision of what Dube calls “liberating interdependence” (185). Liberating interdependence suggests that recognizing the interconnections between “histories, economic structures, and political structures . . . cultural texts, races, classes, and genders” is a crucial first step in opposing those interconnections based on exploitation, as in colonization (185). Dube’s vision of liberating interdependence shares several key assumptions about the nature of human life and subjectivity in common with Mayra Rivera’s theology of relational transcendence.

Relational Transcendence

In *The Touch of Transcendence* (2007), Rivera argues that dominant understandings of God’s transcendence have imperialistic tendencies. Specifically, in the “western imaginary,” to transcend is to “move beyond the same,” whether physically, temporally, or in terms of a transformation (5). Christian theology has long described God as transcendent, considering God to be other to and separate from the world, or “otherworldly” (1). From a postcolonial feminist perspective, however, the transcendence of God has been described in ways that have served imperialistic and patriarchal interests. Dominant Christian theological understandings of God’s transcendence describe God as separate from and above the material world, “always vertically beyond,” distant, and external (29). Rivera suggests that this conception of transcendence has been a theological support for European colonizers to assert and justify “disembodied controlling power” over colonized peoples (5). Transcendence between God and human, or between self and other, is an inherently unequal relation across irreducible difference, marked by (sometimes extreme) imbalances of power. The (human) other is defined and positioned as different by the sociopolitical realities of objectifying categories, relations of domination, and exclusions. In a colonial context, difference has been defined as deviation from the European norm of heterosexual Christian masculinity; women are different from men and thus subordinate, and the colonized are different from the colonizer and thus inferior. Postcolonial critique pays particular attention to the historical production of these differences, recognizes the ways they have been mobilized in support of colonization and patriarchy, and emphasizes that they are not natural or unchangeable.

One of the major concerns of feminist theology has been the gender of God. In the Western Christian imaginary, God is overwhelmingly male. “He” is called “Father,” “Son,” and “King,” addressed with masculine pronouns, and depicted as a bearded white man. God’s masculinity has become associated with “his” power, holiness, and transcendence above and beyond the physical world. This alignment also establishes a connection between all the things God is not—feminine, weak, embodied, and mundane. The model of God as a detached, masculine, all-powerful, transcendent being has been a central tenet of the cosmic dualism found in much Christian theology, revealed in a series of foundational binary oppositions. These oppositions imply that creation, the physical world, and human embodiment are below, lesser than, and restricted by their material limits. From this underlying belief about the nature of God and of human beings emerges a parallel hierarchy that places men above women and the colonizer above the colonized; some people are considered closer to God. The body, associated with femininity and weakness, is viewed with suspicion and imagined to be an obstacle to Christian man’s attempts to transcend (away from) the material world. Women, by contrast, are considered less able or unable to do so. The idea of overcoming the limitations of embodiment has allowed elite male theologians to neglect the significance of relationships that sustain physical life, particularly intimate relationships of interdependence—mothering, for instance—which have been considered women’s responsibility (Rivera 2007).

As the colonial Christian missionary legacy in the Americas, Africa, and Asia testifies, such a model of a detached God also lends support to a rigid raced and gendered social hierarchy. European colonizers claimed that as Christians they had special access to and knowledge of God. The content of such “knowledge” extended

to God's attributes (absolute separation from, and ultimate power over, the material world), and the politically convenient claim that the white, Western Christian man, insofar as he is rational and independent, is the proper and full expression of *imago Dei* (image of God). The simultaneous devaluation of intimate physical touch, sexuality and eroticism, as well as maternal contact, similarly reflects the need, generated by conceiving otherness as absolute, to assert a boundary between self and other (Rivera 2007). Drawing on American feminist theologian Catherine Keller's description, in her 1986 book *From a Broken Web*, of this illusion of masculine independence, named the "separative self," Rivera identifies a parallel dynamic in the division of labor between the First and Third Worlds. Just as the separative self rejects the thought that "he" exists in a relation of "interdependence and mutuality" with the other and reacts by asserting his power over the other, the colonizer denies its dependence on the colonized other by dominating them (Rivera 2007, 7).

To counter the model of the separative self, Rivera offers a model of what she terms "relational transcendence" informed by Latin American liberation philosophy, feminist theology, and postcolonial theory. Rivera emphasizes a providential God whose participation in creation sustains and holds together the world, God's creation. However, she asserts a panentheistic reality in which God is manifest as the "gleam ... in the flesh of the Other" (Rivera 2007, 138), a concept that avoids the bifurcation of reality into the spiritual and the material. A rearticulation of transcendence as relational locates God in the physical world, but not in a pantheistic identification of God with the world itself. God is indeed transcendent, but this transcendence consists of God's intimate enveloping of the material world, a gesture that connects creation with itself. God's embrace does not seal everything together, erasing the differences that constitute otherness. Instead, it affirms the singularity of everyone it touches.

The boundaries that distinguish self from other are a necessary precondition for transcendence, which requires two or more beings in relation to one another. Rivera finds valuable insight in the model of interhuman transcendence described by Lithuanian-French Jewish moral philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), which emphasizes the indefinable, uncontainable reality of every human being. Rivera agrees with Levinas that transcendence characterizes ethical relations between human beings, but not that human beings are defined by their "absolute" otherness to one another. Rivera demonstrates that the concept of absolute otherness, found in Levinas's and other twentieth-century theories of transcendence, is flawed and bears a striking resemblance to justifications offered for oppressive social systems and the objectification and categorization of the other throughout European history. In Rivera's model of relational transcendence, God acts like a placenta or a membrane that simultaneously connects and separates two beings inevitably held together; like a skin covering the body of the world, God is "over" but not "above" all things (136). This reformulation of transcendence challenges the historical and continuing objectification of others, such as racialized and feminized bodies considered impure or otherwise unacceptable and excluded from positions of religious leadership. In Rivera's language of transcendent relationality, the aim of postcolonial feminist theology is to reinstate the female subaltern to her rightful status as a singular and precious part of God's creation, one who is capable of transcendence.

Rivera thus reframes transcendence to include interhuman, as well as divine-human, relationships. Echoing the intimate transcendence of God, interhuman transcendence is similarly found in a "body-to-body" encounter with the other modeled on the embrace of lovers or on gestation in the womb (Rivera 2007, 117). This type of transcendence draws on Belgian feminist theorist Luce Irigaray's (1993) use of sexual and maternal imagery to articulate an ethic of sexual difference and "intimacy." Interhuman transcendence includes the close physical relations between self and other that inspire wonder and give pleasure. Rivera uses this imagery to elucidate the effects of contact with the other: a separateness that induces one to "touch" the other, "a relation with a reality irreducibly different from my own reality" (Rivera 2007, 97). This touch, in and of transcendence, recognizes the irreducible difference between self and other "without this difference destroying this relation

and without the relation destroying this difference” (125). As a term used in theology, social structures, and history meaning whatever is the excluded and objectified, the other plays a critical role in Rivera’s postcolonial theology of transcendence. It is often ambiguous whether Rivera is referring to the divine other or a human other, and such ambiguity is a necessary dimension of the transcendence Rivera articulates: “Being in relation to the Other is the mark of the beginning of our very life in a reality underived from us. Theology names that reality God—as that which exceeds all names and with which our very existence is related” (126). Conceiving of reality or creation as fundamentally “relational” means that every person, each encounter, and the effects of one’s behavior together form a web connecting people in the present, past, and future (Rivera 2007). This web of relationships in which people, God, and creation coexist is not itself transcendent, but is that which makes interhuman transcendence possible and imaginable. Thus, in Rivera’s understanding, the widespread understanding of transcendence as absolute separation militates against the experience of real, relational transcendence.

Any attempt to understand the other according to familiar categories amounts to objectifying the other; God is other precisely because God “exceeds all representation” (Rivera 2007, 11). For Rivera, the acceptable response to the other is based on acknowledging one’s interconnections and maintaining an openness to transcendence and transformation by each other. Rivera thereby asserts that creation is holy in all its variegated forms, a stance that implies a utopian “ethics of responsibility.” That is, our connections through the web of relationships, our interdependence with creation, and our debt to the creator-God demand a response that recognizes the singular uniqueness and transcendence of the other (Rivera 2007). This theology of relational transcendence rejects the model of an infinitely superior being condescending to its inferiors that has marked universalist and imperialistic theologies. In fact, Rivera is explicit that a model of transcendence based in separation and absolute difference contributes toward totalitarian sociopolitical structures, whereas a theology of God-as-transcendent in the enveloping sense that she proposes has the potential to effect the opposite. As a decolonial theology, Rivera’s reimagining of God as relationally transcendent and embracing creation is intended to catalyze sociopolitical change and to counter the imperialistic model of transcendence against which she writes. Her theology of transcendence, like Dube’s, thus draws ethical conclusions that have specific application to the imperialistic and neocolonial reality of the present day. Along those lines, the broader political and ethical dimensions and lessons of postcolonial feminist theology are discussed in more detail below.

Political and Ethical Theology

Postcolonial feminist theology articulates a political orientation toward decolonial social and ethical transformation. The extent of postcolonial feminist theology’s implications for politics and ethics cannot be presented in full here, but three areas of particular relevance—relationality, sexuality, and environmentalism—are highlighted.

Ethics of Relationality

Drawing on feminist and poststructuralist critiques of enlightenment rationalism, postcolonial feminist theology (re)turns to women’s experiences to ground its ethics in interdependence and situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). In rejecting the separative self, the man of reason, and the universal woman of white feminism, postcolonial feminist theologies insist that the subject of theology is “constructed in relation to others” and positioned in a specific time and place relative to structures of gender, race, class, sexuality, colonialism, and so on (Kwok 2005, 73). This relational ontology has implications for at least three critical dimensions of postcolonial feminist theology. First, the category “women” is loosely defined, and the differences between women are

politically, theologically, and ethically significant (Kwok 2005). Second, the irreducible differences between people ought to be valued in interpersonal and transnational relationships, while also remembering that many of these differences are produced by oppressive material conditions (Rivera 2007; Dube 2000). Relational ethics reflect a commitment to center and prioritize the experiences and knowledges of subaltern women as valuable sites of theology. Third, postcolonial feminist theology recognizes the necessity of remembering the past as a strategy for healing—to make the present livable by recognizing the connection between communal survival in the present and distant or recent experiences of oppression and pain (Kwok 2005; Rivera 2007). This is critical also because colonizer states and their populations continue to benefit from the wealth, infrastructure, and resources generated through colonization—just as those who were and are colonized continue to be oppressed and excluded. The relational ethics of postcolonial feminist theology urge people to act with care because their actions will echo through history.

Sexual Theology

Postcolonial feminist theology advocates incorporating sexuality into interrogations of a “broader network of power relations” to highlight sexuality’s part in the construction of race, gender, and class in postcolonial contexts (Kwok 2005, 142). Doing so opens new possibilities for sexual ethics, including revaluing physical desires and pleasures that have historically been strictly policed and condemned in Christian moral thought. More than this, it recognizes that since “transcendence takes place in the flesh,” in the physical world and in the bodies of self and other, all bodies are of absolute value (Rivera 2007, 97). Given the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the continuing oppression of sexual minorities, realities that compound one another and intersect with other structural inequalities, the reclamation of sexuality by postcolonial feminist theology has the potential to interrupt the inscription of destructive social sexual stigma on the (nonnormative) body.

It is not a coincidence that colonized “others” in the Bible and in recent history are represented as both religiously and sexually abhorrent (Kwok 2005, 138–140). Analyses of Biblical narratives reveal that the representation of religious others as sexual others reinforces the connection between Christian group identity and morality of “pure” sexual behavior. As a result, intermarriage between Christians and non-Christians (or, in the Bible, between Jews and Gentiles), prostitution, and relationships that differ from monogamous heterosexuality are used to identify “outsiders” and render them “impure.” Postcolonial feminist theology offers a corrective to this problem, by refusing to consider non-Christians as “abhorrent” and by reclaiming sexuality, sexual behavior, and sexual desires as relevant theological “data.” The work of queer postcolonial theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid is emblematic of this approach, particularly in *Indecent Theology* (2000). Althaus-Reid critiques the heterosexist assumptions of theology and explicitly describes the intimate, sexual physicality of the body as a source of theological insight. Similarly, Rivera calls for an “ethics of the passions,” an ethical perspective that opposes the too-neat separation of justice from the erotic in the work of many male thinkers (2007, 87). Rivera rejects the idea that ethical or just behavior requires detached objectivity and evenhandedness, and insists instead on an “ethics of the passions” based on the idea that “in the beginning was touch;” in other words, ethics ought to be based on the primacy of physical encounters between the self and the irreducible other (89; italics in the original). Intimate, everyday sexual and familial relationships provide alternative, perhaps more realistic models of ethical behavior—the (ideal) relationship between parent and child or between lovers. In postcolonial feminist theology, erotic, caring, and intimate encounters are reinstated to ethical significance, providing a model not only for good interpersonal behavior but also, as discussed above, a way of understanding God’s transcendence.

Environmental Theology

The ultimate value of the world as creation informs postcolonial feminist theological approaches to the environment. The colonizer and the colonized have had complex, sometimes overlapping interests in the environment, the land, its resources, and the status of nature. Land is critical in Dube's methodology for decolonial biblical interpretation, as the issue of seizure and dispossession of land is central to colonization: "Here land is not just a slab of a physical body, but a web of intricately woven tales of power and disempowerment ... also written on the bodies of people" (2000, 119). Historical forms of imperialism—including imagining "undiscovered" lands as female bodies, or as new gardens of Eden—align with more recent "green imperialism," including the commodification and privatization of water, natural resources, and genetic material (Kwok 2005). In the face of these dynamics of possession and exploitation, many postcolonial feminist theologies draw on non-Christian (indigenous) symbolism and myths to affirm the sacred status of the environment but resist the use of those symbols to reproduce social structures that subordinate women.

In a different approach, Rivera identifies creation as the "space of divine transcendence" (2007, 131), echoing Luce Irigaray's gestational symbolism (1993) to describe the intimate relation of dependence of persons on one another and the material world. The fact of human birth into and dependence on creation "entails a structure of responsibility" toward it, an acknowledgement that ethics must extend beyond what is narrowly defined as human (Rivera 2007, 131). Earlier work by (white) feminist theologians includes numerous articulations of environmental spirituality, often based on an imagined/imaginative affinity between women and nature (Christ 1997; Starhawk 1982). This putative connection has been critiqued by women whose ancestors were enslaved or colonized, whose domination was justified by defining them as animals or lesser humans (Williams 1993). Postcolonial feminist theology's constant attention to material sociopolitical realities entails an environmentalism that affirms the fundamental dependence of humans on the natural world while opposing racialized, hierarchical definitions of humanity.

Summary

Postcolonial feminist theology is a wide and varied field, the contours of which this chapter has only begun to outline; but several key features have been identified. It is equally an academic and a political-ethical project that is fundamentally concerned with reformulating theology from the position of the excluded female subaltern. It is only from such a position that the experience of colonization and the "situated knowledge" of the (formerly) colonized can be brought to bear on gender-critical analyses of doctrine, scripture, and the role of Christianity in empire building. Theology done from the perspective of elite European men and women has been insufficient to address the situations and needs of subaltern women in postcolonial contexts and has usually contained within it imperialist assumptions. In particular, God has been used as a rhetorical device to justify and authorize the conquest and domination of entire peoples, nations, and (sub)continents, a rhetoric that "is central to the narrative strategies of imperialism" (Dube 2000, 117). When God has been imagined to be vertically transcendent, "He" has been made into the ultimate symbol of imperial power.

Postcolonial feminist theology has therefore sought to transcend the limits of academic theology, while neither abandoning its insights nor forgetting its complicity in colonization. Even as it participates in academic discourses, postcolonial feminist theology sets its own agenda of resignifying gender, requeering sexuality, and redoing theology for decolonization. The careful contextual methodologies of postcolonial feminism are crucial to this project because other decolonizing theologies—including liberation, black, and postcolonial theologies—have not consistently given sufficient attention to the always gendered dimensions of imperialism and colonization. Recognizing the divine other, as well as responding to the human other with responsibility, is the political and ethical demand made by postcolonial feminist theology. The relational ontology that is woven

throughout the theology of relational transcendence recognizes the central importance of the reality that human lives extend through a web of interrelation that links individuals to “others beyond the present,” in the past, in the future, and perhaps those who are geographically distant (Rivera 2007, 99). In a move that is equally forgiving and pragmatic, postcolonial feminist theologians have invited the distant “feminists ... of colonizing nations” to contribute their labor to the task of producing decolonial feminist theologies (Dube 2000, 122). It remains to be seen whether this invitation will be acknowledged and accepted, and if the field of feminist theology will be thoroughly decolonized.

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