The Future of Asian/North American Theological Education:

Architectural Reflections

—Mai-Anh Le Tran

In 2011, Executive Director Dan Aleshire of the Association of Theological Schools declared that “the future has arrived.” Echoing what just about everyone in theological education had learned to say by then, Aleshire reminded citizens of theological schools that “the times they are a changing” for religion in North America—from obsolescence of denominational identities and affiliation, to growing and often “stormy” religious pluralism, to technological re-ordering of human knowing and learning, to shifting economic formulas for calculating the cost-benefits of clergy training, to the ironic world-wide character of Christianity (particularly of the charismatic and fundamentalist variety).

Of the set of bedazzling statistics that Aleshire offered, one might be of relevance to our conversation here this weekend—though not with the same effect that Mr. Aleshire may have intended. Assuring that ATS schools have not been “asleep at the switch,” Aleshire pointed out that while in 1990 only 13% of students in ATS schools were persons of color, there is in the 2000s a whopping 24%. Faculty of color used to be only at 8%; they are now at a formidable 15%. “…[T]his is a great deal of change.”

Yes, we have been at enough of these gatherings to know how to put on our thinking caps to interpret and respond to these statistical realities. We know that these numbers are both good and not so good, and that they do constitute a present reality that is in fact changing—incrementally perhaps, but paradigmatically and with seismic consequences. But underneath our ability to analyze and strategize, there lie deep, visceral sighs when we are overcome by what premier theologian Fumitaka Matsuoka, borrowing the words of Donald Shriver, Jr., refers to as “profound…despair caused by the chaotic present”—a not-yet reality that threatens even the best of what critical pedagogist Henry Giroux calls “educated hope.”

2 Ibid., 72.
What is this “profound despair” for today’s racial/ethnic minoritized academics in theological education? To follow the metaphors employed by Willie James Jennings in the recent anthology edited by Eleazar Fernandez, *Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World*: it is the pain of recognition that “[a]t heart, we [race/marked academic Subjects] are still confronted with living in a house we did not build.”6 Describing theological curricular design as analogous to “an architectural structuring of intellectual desire,” propelled by particularly configured white, male, hetero-normative “historical inertia,” Jennings describes a “love/hate psychic condition”7 suffered by “otherly” marked academics who love what they do with passionate desire, despite being told every now and then, one way or another, that they are not quite “right” for the job. Jennings puts it bluntly: we live in a house/empire built by the Master8 for his sons, and we have been trained to employ—with skill and artistry—disciplinary tools created within historic moments in which we were never imagined as likely inheritors. More disconcerting is the reminder from scholars in fields such as the natural and social sciences that a number of academic disciplines, of which theological scholars are contemporary borrowers, were “from their inception” used to master us—e.g., geology, tropical medicine, anthropology were born “in service of Europe’s colonial enterprise.”9

This “love/hate psychic condition” has been translated into a vast array of dialectics by racial/ethnic and women scholars of color in the U.S. and Canada—we need not rehearse them here. A helpful example from Eleazar Fernandez’s important anthology for theological education is the essay by Mary Dana Hinton, recently inaugurated 15th President of the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota. Addressing the “weight of race”10 for administrators of color, Hinton identified the following tensions of bureaucratized racial performativity: 1) “unrealistic power vs. powerlessness;” 2) “underutilization/low expectations vs. being overworked;” 3) “engaging authentically” vs. doing whatever it takes to “attain and maintain a place at the leadership table.”11

Perhaps, to amplify my own imaginings about the adaptive challenges of Asian/North American theological developments, I need to learn more about the adaptive challenges of *Asian* theological contexts—especially given the emergence of works like *Asia as Method,*12 a book and a hermeneutic that has challenged Asian/North American scholars’ continuous reproductions of “Asia” and “Asian North America.” Having had the opportunity to teach and learn in 12 countries (and counting, I hope), I have sensed at least four tensions for *Asian* theological education—and I hope Asian colleagues would extend to this 1.5-generation refugee-turned-diasporic Subject the privilege of claiming both emic and etic perspectives:

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7 Ibid., 111.
10 David Theo Goldberg and Susan Sears Goroux, *Sites of Race: Conversations with Susan Sears Goroux* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), 58. Here, South African-born social theorist Goldberg discusses his earlier critiques of neoliberalism’s facilitation of the privatization and “invisibilization” of race, the effect of which is the palpable “heaviness of the racial...[as] it weighs on and weights down its targeted population.” Ibid.
1. the tension with curricular designs and disciplinary tools inherited from “the West;”

2. the tension with ongoing Western orientalizing impulses;

3. the tension with diasporic caricatures of “the East”;  

4. the tension with the disimagination of Asian subjects within their own shifting landscapes—for instance, the “organized forgetting” of Asia’s internal colonial histories and contemporary geopolitical gestures/postures.

So, between optimistic statistics, complicated dialectics, and deep sighs, we remember that all composites change over time. And so with every effort to look into the future, we do well to look at the deeper currents that drive the change. We have been reminded that over the years, even the Master and his Empire have changed—meaning the house which the Master built is in fact standing on shifting sand, as the entire enterprise (or empire) of theological education is undergoing tectonic shifts, inevitably with new forms and technologies for “Master-speak.” In other wor(l)ds—to invoke Gayatri Spivak—do we know yet what kind of new “house” we want to build to replace the “old Master’s House”?

AANATE as a network and its participating members are not without bold visions. AANATE’s Mission Statement alone looks impressive: cultivate collaboration and exchange; advance Asian/North American theological legacy and heritage; develop new leadership and programs; provide resources to institutions; and generate new scholarship. But the question remains, What for?

Put differently, if we were “successful” at implementing all of these programmatic initiatives, then what would the new state of theological education for North America and Asia look like? To continue with Jennings’ architectural metaphor, do we know if we are constructing new “domiciles” for theological inquiry and praxis—or simply just building around/atop the old foundations? Or perhaps we’re just busy fighting for management of the Master’s household? Or, better yet, are we bending over backwards trying to make the Master’s house more “hospitable” to the Master’s guests, thereby domesticating the tasks of theological inquiry to only acceptable sites and spaces—the classroom, scholarly publications, academic guilds—and only with acceptable grammars and syntax?

I am mindful of my statement earlier about the shape-shifting nature of this so-called “Master” within theological education. The Master may have once been the Bible-and-bullwhip-wielding master, or the missionary-explorer-translator-civilizer of foreign lands and cultures. For today’s transnational theological schools, however, the Master may very well be the globalized Market, with its lexicon of “success, expediency, performance, profit.” Perhaps another Master is the repressive tolerance of neoliberalism, which claims that statistical diversity is proof of equal rights, equal power, and equal opportunity. Perhaps there are mini-Masters to be found in the methodological paucity and rigidity of theological fields, or implicit tensions among disciplinary hierarchies, resulting in the siloed existence of theology, biblical studies, history, and practical theology. Perhaps even the former edge space of liminality or interstitiality—the betwixt-and-between discursive space for Asian North American scholars—has become too comfortable and safe within the Master’s house.

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15 Sugirtharajah, Postcolonial Configurations, 32.
I do not mean to undermine the incredible genius and generativity of existing currents of Asian/North American developments across theological disciplines—breath-takingly polydoxic, polymorphic, polyphonic, to use the now-quaint descriptors. Nor do I give in to the false divide between theory and practice, anxious about theology’s contextual practicality. Rather, I am restless about the future architectural designs of Asian North American theology’s intellectual desire. I live and teach in a suburb 15 miles southwest of Ferguson, Missouri, where race has become an overwrought leitmotif for tenuous civil religious discourse. Less than five miles from my professional and personal domicile is a small Vietnamese-J’Rai congregation the members of which were boat refugees in the ’70s and ’80s. The freestanding seminary where I teach traces its heritage back to German Reformed and Evangelical roots. We constantly wonder whether the theological “house” which we occupy is large enough for the “world house” which Martin Luther King, Jr., once imagined.16 Every travel opportunity to venture abroad—to such destinations as Kenya, Turkey, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia—has been a mind-altering opportunity for me to “see Christianity again for the first time,” to invoke Philip Jenkins’s challenge.17 If by 2050, a new “Christendom” will exist with centers in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, and in the U.S. Christian predominance will continue to exist, but no longer represented by a non-Hispanic White majority,18 then how shall we continent-leaping, border-crossing theological educators prepare ourselves for such a future?

Theological education for global Christianities today needs new architects, and I wonder how Asian North American scholars will step up to that challenge.

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Works Cited


18 Ibid., 3, 16, 125-33.


