

themes that are rather standard at face value: Asia, North America, Asian America, women, religion, theology, activism. To invoke pop entertainment cooking vis-à-vis more respected culinary establishments runs the risk of downgrading the skillful work found in this anthology. However, such a maneuver might very well be in keeping with the spirit with which the 'chefs' constructed their *Menu*: it is, after all, intended to be a deliberate grassroots transgression of rigid boundaries, definitions, and bodies of knowledge. Their reflections take on theoretical, empirical, personal, and activist dimensions. The thematic categories they dissect do not remain fixed or distinct schemas, for each author employs them as any good chef would her ingredients: a pinch of this, a splash of that, all for the sake of layered taste. This transgressive spirit, combined with seasoned practice and feisty attitude, makes their discussion of standard themes a fresh, disruptive installment that promises to generate more to come.

*Off the Menu* includes sixteen essays, divided into four parts, by sixteen 'chef-scholars' who write from critical feminist perspectives on Asian/Asian North American history, identity, self and community, cultural, spiritual, and religious tradition, activism and agency, liturgical and pedagogical innovation. The scholars belong to what could be considered a 'praxis community' founded in 1984, called 'Pacific Asian and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry' (PANAAWTM). Their writings reflect the conviction that knowledge is generated in community and relationship. This review seeks to follow such ethos: to read with openness to future possibilities, where questions are moments of imagination rather than points of critique.

In this *Menu*, a variety of disciplines are brought together in the composition of variegated feminist perspectives: theology, religious studies, biblical studies, cultural studies, social theory, critical theory, Asian/Asian American/race/ethnic studies, history, psychology, queer theory, postcolonial theory. As a company of both renowned and emerging scholars, the authors insist that what makes their work 'off the menu' – something which one would not find in a typical scholarly program – is the way in which they combine these disciplines and the way they redefine questions, definitions, themes, and categories. The anthology is and is not just about Asian/Asian North American women's issues, because it frames issues in global, transnational matrices. How it (re)frames 'Asian woman', for instance, offers a more concrete picture of the 'global woman'. It reflects scholarly engagement – hence a helpful textbook – and yet the central stage for 'cooking'/conversation is not necessarily the academia. It seeks to be relevant to practicing religious communities, just as it utilizes everyday experiences of faith for scholarly reflection and critical analysis. Selected chapters, or the entire anthology, could very well be used either in a seminary classroom or in a faith community to generate conversation.

## HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

### An 'Iron-Chef' Showdown in Asian North American Religion & Theology

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**Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology**, Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-lan and Seung Ai Yang (eds.), Westminster John Knox Press, 2007 (ISBN 978-0-664-23140-8), xxi + 341 pp., pb \$49.95/£27.99

#### Abstract

*This review discusses a collection of essays by sixteen scholars who write from critical feminist perspectives on Asian/Asian North American history and identity; self and community; cultural, spiritual, and religious tradition; activism and agency; theological, liturgical and pedagogical innovation. With a play on culinary metaphors, the authors draw on multidisciplinary perspectives in cultural, religious, and theological studies to offer one-of-a-kind 'recipes' for complexifying our understanding of Asian North American women's cultural and religious experiences within a global, transnational framework. The anthology is a first installment that invites many questions for further inquiry.*

What do you get when you stir up a pleasant stock of 'Yan Can Cook' with a splash of Emerald's 'Bami', let it simmer in Alice Waters earthiness and Julia Child sophistication, then finish it off with a pinch of 'Hell's Kitchen' sharp tongue? An 'Iron Chef' showdown found in *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology*.

Indeed, to follow the book's culinary metaphor, *Off the Menu* is a collection of 'Iron Chef' –worthy recipes of critical discourse on some

The volume's formidable agenda and pace is set in the introduction by theologian Kwok Pui-lan: to employ 'transnationalism' as a critical lens to chart the constantly shifting geographies of cultural and religious 'identity' for Asia/Asian North America, within a global matrix of exploitation and commodification in which women are both racialized and sexualized 'subjects' and 'objects' in transnational exchanges of capital, labor, and ideas. Calling on feminist religious and theological writings to disrupt homogenous 'nationalist, imperialist, and Euro-American' agendas, Kwok makes imperative analyses of cultural, social, and economic formation, and of grassroots power and resistance. Such activity, she argues, locates God in the 'interstices' – the in-between spaces or nodal points of social systems where divine power 'is energizing and enabling... readjusts and shifts to find new strength, and discovers hope in the densely woven web of life that sustains us all' (p. 19).

With such 'themed menu' in place, the remaining essays take off in divergent yet harmonizing directions. Perhaps the divergence might have been better served without the four section headings, or with different headings, because the essays do not seem to fall neatly into sections, which is most likely what the authors want. One suspects that the essays came first, and then the question, 'How do they fit together?' One wonders what it would be like when knowledge emerges unfettered by categories. Perhaps culinary metaphors could have been extended to section headings, so that 'old' ingredients such as 'identity', 'self', 'spirit', 'tradition', or 'embodied agency', take on different savory forms? Perhaps this is an instance where the medium of the printed word may not be as transgressive as the substance it is delivering.

Restraint section headings notwithstanding, the essays demonstrate nicely what Kwok encapsulates in her introduction: persistent deconstruction of 'homogenous' agendas, paradigms, or narratives; rigorous analysis of social, cultural, and economic forces; and almost zealous attention to the power and agency of on-the-ground struggles. In Part One of the anthology, 'History and Identity', Nami Kim problematizes the 'indigestible' category of 'Asian' by tracing its historical development back to the context of anti-Western colonial aggression and nation-building in Asia alongside colonial aggression among Asian nations (in particular, Japan). Recalling its significance for 'third-world' solidarity at the time, Kim points to 'strategic usefulness' of the term 'Asian' with ongoing critique. The reader could also be served by a deconstruction of the equally 'indigestible' category of 'Euro-American', or other symbolic racial identities – including *mestizo* or 'hoppa' – that have emerged for social, political, and economic uses. That would be a worthwhile project for the next installment: how racial/ethnic identities are 'constructed' and 'performed' in the global,

transnational stage. In the same section, Gale Yee offers a reading of Ruth the Moabite woman as 'perpetual foreigner' and 'model minority', exposing the political economy of female (re)productive labor found in the biblical narrative. One is inspired to ask, in the face of such exploitation, where might one define 'interstitial power' in the in-between spaces, as Kwok calls for in the introduction?

Part Two contains three essays under the heading 'Reinventing Spiritual Traditions'. Jung-Ha Kim discusses the 'borrowing' of Asian/Eastern spiritual sources for privatized and Americanized spiritual palates. Kim warns of the consumption model of cultural adaptation, in which spiritual sources become commodities to be 'consumed' and 'forgotten'. The 'West' risks absorbing 'the (exotic) Other' once again. With a critical transnational lens, one wonders how 'absorption' has worked both ways across the Pacific, such that the 'East', too, has been consuming 'Western' spiritual traditions just as it consumes 'exported' American culture (with a dash of 'curry' or 'soy sauce'). One looks forward to such a discussion in the future. Rachel Bundang, meanwhile, demonstrates how ethnography can be done in the service of theology for theological construction rooted in everyday experience. Pondering the significance of devotional practices to Mary and Jesus in Filipino American Catholic communities of northeastern Florida, Bundang shows how a trip down dirt roads to visit Marian apparition sites might reveal an immigrant community's desire to connect to their root culture, remain true to religion as practiced at 'home', and be stubbornly defiant of official church teachings about religious experience. Examining the complexity of devotional/religious practices in this manner falls in line with Jane Naomi Iwamura's threefold method of 'retrieval', 'reexamination', and 'reconstruction' of the tradition of ancestor veneration for Asians in America. One imagines that perhaps a conversation between Iwamura, Bundang, and Greer Anne Werth-In Ng, whose essay is found in Part Four, would generate great insights on how 'retrieval' and 'reconstruction' might lead to interreligious *liturgical* implications for a faith community. Another possibility for the next installment.

The next four essays are categorized under Part Three, 'Reorienting We-Self'. In her essay, Rita Nakashima Brock pronounces: 'Asian American is a palimpsest' (p. 135) – an identity script that is written on multiple times, in multiple layers, with continuous erasure and redaction. Critiquing a 'narcissism of purity and piety' dominant in American Puritan cultural and religious heritage, Brock proposes the notion of 'interstitial integrity', a consciousness defined by 'integration' of disparate parts, and 'integrity' in self-awareness and self-acceptance. One is curious to ask, is there no 'interstitial integrity' to be found in Calvinistic Puritanism, Emersonian transcendentalism, or the mythic 'white male' which Brock deconstructs? Pushing that envelop might

yield interesting possibilities for deconstructing so-called 'homogeneity'. Wonhee Anne Joh points to this 'interstitial integrity' in her essay, beginning with a personal experience of post-9/11 racialized intimidation, a violation of her sense of self and citizenship as an American. Building upon the Korean cultural notion of *jeong* – the 'stickiness' of relationships – Joh calls for movement away from negation of that which is deemed as a threat to oneself, toward openness to the sense of connectedness found in *jeong*, where the self can be seen mirrored in the other, and 'justice' is related to 'sticky relationship'. The discussion inspires many questions of implication: how is *jeong* to be understood in the situation of the young Filipina raped by US military personnel, found in Kwok's introduction? How is it revealed in the Thai mother stricken with cancer after being tricked into prostitution, as introduced by Nantawan Boonprasad Lewis's essay in Part Four? Such discussions might bring to light the messiness of 'stickiness' found in *jeong*.

The messiness of relationships is echoed in Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan's reading of Jeremiah through the metaphor of 'bitter melon'. Perhaps more than other essays, Ngan's reflects the scholar's piety and personal theology as she compares the bitter life narrative of Jeremiah to that of bitter Asian American experiences. Ngan calls for marginal communities to find inspiration in this prophet, who 'ate bitterness', contests with God, forges a friendship with the Divine, and is compelled toward witness against injustice. Perhaps a conversation between this biblical scholar and theologian Joh might generate interesting possibilities for finding *jeong* in the sticky, messy divine-human relationship in the biblical narrative. Meanwhile biblical inspiration may be lacking for Indian Christian women, argues Anne Dondapati Allen. Naming a cultural milieu where social shame is attached to the spread of HIV/AIDS for women, Allen points to contradictory expectations placed on the woman's body and her sexual activity, a vestige of former cultural-religious construction of the 'pure' and 'chaste' Hindu female body in the face of British colonial aggression. Whereas some subversive narratives and gender performances can be found in Hindu cultural-religious repertoires, Allen suggests that Indian Christian theology in general has not critiqued adequately India's gender and caste structures. It is hard to say how this appraisal fares with other Indian Christian theologians, given that Allen's is the only essay addressing the vast South Asian context. Seems like a fruitful agenda for a future installment.

The last six essays are categorized in Part Four, 'Embodied Agency', highlight innovations in social, political, and religious activism, liturgy, and pedagogy. The order and grouping of the essays in this section is slightly harder to understand – arguably the most glaring evidence of how the essays defy neat categories. This review presents them in a different order, simply a 'reader-response' approach to how we make sense of what we read. Examining the problem of sex tourism, sex

trafficking in women, and the spread of HIV/AIDS in Asia, Nantawan Boonprasad Lewis points to the underlying socioeconomic reality which links poverty with disease and human exploitation. Unpacking how religion (Thai Theravada Buddhism), with its ancient interpretation of prostitutes as 'women who belong to all' and its notion of karma, colludes in its indifference and even tolerance of the sex industry, Lewis calls for more robust responses from faith traditions to a vexing global phenomenon. Meanwhile, Wan-Li Ho lifts up promising examples of women's religious environmental activism in Taiwan. Citing three particular groups (two Buddhist, one Christian), Ho points to religious elements of engaging 'hands, head and heart' found in their work, whether the motivation is to promote personal development, influence legislation, or raise public awareness through education. Rose Wu's essay assesses Hong Kong's queer community impressive strategic mobilization. Adopting the identity of *tongzhi*, the translesbian community in Hong Kong subtly connects with its Chinese cultural heritage in the midst of a delicate political relationship with Communist China, while avoiding Western paradigms which often restrict queer identities to sexual definitions. Together, this set of essays redraws the global map of grassroots activism, calling our attention to innovative strategizing across the Pacific, and implicitly undermining the 'West's' exclusive claim on 'action' and 'progress'. With a critical transnational lens which Kwok calls for, we eagerly anticipate future installments to address the connectedness of global, transnational, multidirectional movements for change.

The vigilant 'queering' of identities and relationships might find the biblical exegesis of Seung Ai Yang helpful, as she challenges common interpretations of Jesus' sayings on divorce in her essay. With an 'inter-cultural dialogue' between the two patriarchal social contexts – first-century Palestine and neo-Confucian Korea – Yang argues that the bottom line is really Jesus' 'prophetic condemnation' of patriarchal misuse of power in family systems where marriage assumed ownership of the woman by her husband. One might do a double-take when coming to the essay on interpretation of biblical sayings on divorce, located in a section on social and religious activism. However, while the genre may be somewhat different, the captivating essay offers critical deconstructions of gender roles and relationships as inscribed by scriptural authority. It is the work that makes activism possible.

Directing our attention to the Canadian scene, Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng describes a 'praxis of solidarity' found in the work between two 'nondominant' communities – Asian Canadian women and Aboriginal women – in a sociopolitical landscape where 'multiculturalism' is an official state policy. Given the delicate history of precarious 'privilege' experienced by the former group and oppression experienced by the latter, Ng calls for collaborative work which includes antiracist

education, liturgies of lament and lamentation, and participatory action against injustice. This inspires a US reader to ask, how is this reality of 'multiculturalism' compare and contrast with the USA? What lessons does this offer for post-9/11 America, where racial profiling and racialized discrimination makes solidarity necessary among 'nondominant' groups which heretofore have not found it important to interact (say, Americans of Japanese, Indian, or Pakistani descent)? Again, a possible theme to develop in the future installments. All together, the work of activism and solidarity discussed by Lewis, Ho, Wu, and Ng seems to require the intuitive skills of *sommat*, literally 'the taste of one's hands' (p. 293), which Boyung Lee employs in her essay to prescribe an 'embodied, communal, ontological, and political' pedagogical framework following the culinary analogy. It seems that more recipes along the lines of what is offered by Ng and Lee – recipes for liturgical and pedagogical innovation, not to mention other religious practices – would be welcomed by those looking for clues on how to practice faith, do justice, and form 'beloved communities' locally and concretely in an ever-changing global context.

Lee's article finishes up the *Menu* nicely in that it creatively spells out the basic 'culinary' steps which all sixteen of the authors followed to create their 'signature dishes' on Asian/Asian North American women's sociocultural-religious experiences, identities, and practices against a global, transnational political, and economic backdrop. As Lee names it, they 'gather ingredients' from disparate sources to cover multidisciplinary perspectives, paying attention to what is explicit, implicit, and null. They 'recall traditions, ancestors, and communities' in the act of cooking – these are the loci of their accountability and the contexts for which their cooking has practical implications. They 'taste' the dishes and ask, Who is nourished? Who is not eating? Who might have allergic reactions? Finally, they 'develop new recipes' by creating new out of old, keeping in mind that what they concoct theoretically must satisfy the everyday bodies that covet sustenance.

In this first-of-its-kind *Menu*, sixteen Asian North American scholars (one of whom is Canadian) of nearly three generations are featured: thirteen East Asians (of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean descent), two Southeast Asians (of Thai and Filipino descent), and one South Asian (Indian). Six of the essays are adapted from articles previously published elsewhere. Are they gathered strategically in this collection for historic value? As often seen in popular culinary competitions on television, these 'chefs' had at their disposal a rather eclectic mix of ingredients: some well-known and well-used, some unknown or newly discovered, and also some 'leftovers', out of which they must turn into epicurean delights that surprise, provoke, yet satisfy the taste buds. One eagerly anticipates future installments, as the academy (and publishers!) welcomes the ingenuity of this anthology's transgressive spirit.

As has been suggested throughout, what would happen if these chefs were to exchange recipes, and try to create new dishes out of the ones that are offered here? Might there be other mediums more conducive to expressing the transgressive spirit, other literary genres, other creative metaphors for complexifying 'homogenous' agendas? Might there be more eclectic representation of chefs, more fresh ingredients gathered from farther corners of the globe, more 'signature dishes' for new 'fusion' palates or new discerning taste buds?

No doubt the authors have already wrestled with the questions raised here. Naming them again does not take away from the value of this impressive first installment. Rather, it is to reinforce the conviction that good conversations often end with an enthusiastic, 'What's next?!' All in all, this company of Asian North American women scholars, in this anthology, makes evident the fact that – as with good cooking – satisfying 'recipes' come from intellectual curiosity, personal daringness, spiritual discipline, and the 'stickiness' of reciprocal relationships shared among friends.