

# Transformative Teaching and Scholarship in an Urban Context<sup>1</sup>

—Nami Kim

I live in a city that W.E.B. Du Bois once called “the city of a hundred hills” in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>2</sup> I teach at a historically black women’s college that is located in that city, making some people wonder how I, an “Asian woman,” ended up teaching there and what my experience of teaching “religion” at a historically black women’s college in the “Bible Belt” would be like. Of course, many assumptions are already embedded in these questions. The area where I live and the college where I teach were originally the place where the Cherokees used to live. The Cherokees were forcibly removed from their own land by the United States army under the command of General Winfield Scott a little less than two centuries ago (1838-1839).<sup>3</sup> Now, the area has grown into a metropolitan city that is “too busy to hate.” Atlanta was the heart of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, and it is one of the cities that is most favored by educated, middle-class African Americans for its seemingly good potential. The metropolitan city’s demographic change has been noticeable, as there are 250,000 new immigrants from South Korea, India and Mexico, among others, in less than ten years.<sup>4</sup> There are more than 120,000 Koreans living in metropolitan Atlanta. The increasing Asian and Latino/a<sup>5</sup> population is changing the racial and ethnic landscape in this large urban city, as well as in the entire state of Georgia. As sociologists have noted, Georgia can be renamed as “Georgiifornia” for its increasing population of Latino/as and Asians, as in California. Interestingly, but not so surprisingly, the third most spoken language in the state of Georgia is Korean, following English and Spanish. At the same time, the poverty rate is high, and it is called a hub of sex trafficking of women and girls in the United States. Gentrification has rapidly taken place, forcing people to move out of the city. Segregation continues not only on Sunday mornings at different houses of worship but also by zip codes. Its notorious traffic was made fun of when schools and businesses were closed for days due to a few “lousy” inches of snow a few years ago. I have lived in this city for more than a decade.

1 This paper was originally presented at the opening panel of the 31st PANAAWTM conference held at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary March, 2016. The theme of the conference was “Social Transformation in the Urban Context.”

2 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 69. First published in 1903.

3 “A Brief History of the Trail of Tears,” accessed February 10, 2016. <http://www.cherokee.org/AboutTheNation/History/TrailofTears/ABriefHistoryoftheTrailofTears.aspx>.

4 Welcoming America. <http://www.welcomingamerica.org>

5 More people use the term “Latinx” instead of “Latino/a” in order to avoid gender binary and to be inclusive of gender non-conforming people. See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/12/08/students-adopt-gender-nonspecific-term-latinx-be-more-inclusive>.



## Multiple Communities of Accountability

If you ask where I *really* am from, I am originally from Seoul, the world's 8th largest city, also known as the "Republic of Seoul," because the number of its residents consists of more than one fourth of South Korea's entire population of 50 million, along with the concentration of economic and political power due to the government-led urbanization and industrialization that took place for nearly three decades from the early 1960s until the late 1980s. Seoul is now one of the world's most wired cities, and is highly advanced in terms of technology, public transportation, and easy access to hospitals. Many of the food franchises one finds in U.S. cities, and all sorts of commodities with U.S. and European brand names, are also easily found in Seoul. Megachurches, including the world's largest single church, are another landmark of metropolitan Seoul. Yet, the gap between the haves and have-nots has widened, and "the super-rich" in Seoul have more commonalities in values, perspectives, and lifestyles with their counterparts in other metropolises around the world than with those impoverished, marginalized, and outcast living on the fringes of Seoul. Seoul is where all my childhood memories come from, both beautiful and distressing, including the constant fear of potential communist invasion from North Korea thanks to the state-led anticommunist propaganda under the three decades of U.S.-backed military dictatorships. The ideology of anticommunism still wields great power in South Korea, which has been in a state of truce since 1953 without an official ending of the Korean War, dubbed the "forgotten war." As such, my communities include both my community of origin and the community where I currently live and work. I also engage the Korean immigrant community in the metropolitan Atlanta area, my transnational feminist communities to whom I am indebted, and other communities that I have intentionally claimed.

What, then, is my role as a woman of color, feminist, scholar-teacher in social transformation? What kind of changes do I seek to bring, however small they might be, through my teaching and scholarship? In order to answer these questions, I need to first ask to whom and to which communities I am accountable, because those communities are where my teaching and scholarship primarily matter, and where I envision any slight signs of positive changes occurring that can also affect other connected communities. How can I be accountable to my multiple communities that are locally placed and transnational? In considering these questions, it is worth noting Arif Dirlik's point. Discussing the problems seen in the changing contours of the very notion of Asian America largely due to the new trans-Pacific formation, Dirlik points out two interrelated issues that arise when contemporary Asian Americans identify primarily with their societies of origin in Asia. One is that it will render them again susceptible to reproducing in their relationships the schisms and conflicts that plagued Asian societies.<sup>6</sup> In turn, "closer" relationships with their societies of origin engender the possibility of dissociating themselves from their immediate locations and neighbors, especially in their relations to other racial, ethnic minority communities.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Dirlik suggests place-based politics that "grounds transnationalism in the welfare of local communities," rather than identity-based community politics.<sup>8</sup> He argues that instead of making so-called diasporic populations into "foreigners in the context of everyday life," it is important "to enable people to feel at home where they live." As he puts it, "this does not require that people abandon their legacies, only that they recognize the historicity of their cultural identities and that those identities are subject to change in the course of historical encounters."<sup>9</sup> For those who claim transnational communities,

it is necessary to be reminded that, for instance, a Korean living in Atlanta or Chicago or Los Angeles has

6 Arif Dirlik, "Asians on the Rim: Transnational Capital and Local Community in Making of Contemporary Asian America," in *Places and Politics in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Roxann Prazniak and Arif Dirlik (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 84.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 94.

9 Ibid., 88.



more of a stake in associating with his/her African or Latino/a or Asian American neighbors than with some relatives or acquaintances living in South Korea. As Dirlik clearly indicates, this does not imply that “the two kinds of relationships need to be understood in zero-sum terms.”<sup>10</sup>

## A Context of Teaching

As a scholar-teacher, my primary community is my students. My students’ daily concerns matter to me: coming up with next semester’s tuition, juggling between academic work and work for living, struggling with mental health related issues, and trying to make it in a white supremacist capitalist society that does not value black lives. The students also try to reconcile with their religious teachings and their sexual and gender identities that are deemed “abnormal,” and try to figure out what the “right” intimate relationships look like in this misogynist, sexist, patriarchal society because they don’t know what such relationships look like or how to have them. At the same time, many of the students believe that they can do and achieve whatever they want, or the “American dream,” if they try hard. Some students believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and is not subject to any critical inquiry, while some view “other” women as victims of their religious traditions with the notion of religion as an unchanging system of patriarchal beliefs and practices transcending time and location.

When I talk about my teaching context, it includes understanding not only who my students are but also what kind of academic institution I am situated in. To what extent does this institution provide spaces for feminist engagement and practices? What are the institutional supports or barriers for teaching and engaging in feminist studies in religion? Asking these questions, I continue to struggle as to how I can challenge students to engage in critical thinking and socially, politically, and ethically responsible living in this historical juncture that calls for students to become competent global citizens in this competitive, ruthless, greed-driven neoliberal global market. I also try to enable the classroom to become, to use bell hooks’ phrase, “the most radical space of possibility in the academy” that, unlike what some people think, does not exist disconnected from the rest of the world but in the midst of it.<sup>11</sup> Talking about my teaching context also includes a critical assessment of my participation as a racialized-gendered person in the production and reproduction of various forms of knowledge in the U.S. academy. As Rey Chow reminds us, the “battles” that intellectuals fight are the “battles of words.” Chow further contends that what academic intellectuals must confront is “*not* their ‘victimization’ by society at large (or their victimization-in-solidarity-with-the-oppressed), but the power, wealth, and privilege that ironically accumulate from their ‘oppositional’ viewpoint, and the widening gap between the professed contents of their words and the upward mobility they gain from such words.”<sup>12</sup> Gayatri Spivak also proposes the continuing examination of one’s own privilege not to make one “feel guilty or to retire from working for a better world, but rather in order to de-center their own importance in their work.”<sup>13</sup> As we all know, the academy is not a power neutral place, and there exists what Chow has described as “an institutionalization of racialization of intellectual labor . . . resulting in an aristocracy and a subordinate class in terms of the production and dissemination of ‘knowledge.’”<sup>14</sup> We also know that the academy is a site where contestations over knowledge and power relations are taking place every day. At the same time, the academy

can be a meaningful place for feminist scholar-teachers because, as Chandra Mohanty points out, it is one of

10 Ibid., 89.

11 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12. See also Nami Kim, “Not a Luxury, But a Necessity: Toward Transgressive Teaching,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 112-17.

12 Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 17.

13 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, quoted in Elizabeth Bernstein and Laurie Schaffner, eds., *Regulating Sex: The Politics of Intimacy and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 79.

14 Rey Chow, *Ethics After Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), xvi.



the few “contested sites crucial to feminist struggles.”<sup>15</sup> As I said elsewhere, feminist scholar-teachers, particularly those of us who are marked by our different race and ethnicity are, then, engaged in “battles of words” in multiple ways. One of the battles is to confront our own upward mobility that we gain from our oppositional perspectives and words. Another battle is to challenge the hierarchy of knowledge production in the academy that consistently places women of color’s work in the margins, whether in scholarship or in curriculum, under the banner of “diversity” or “multiculturalism.” Women of color scholar-teachers also engage in a “battle” that struggles for transformative feminist practices through teaching and scholarship.<sup>16</sup>

### Teaching and Doing Feminist Scholarship Unapologetically

One of the difficulties in teaching the subject matter of *religion, women, and violence* in undergraduate classrooms is teaching religious traditions in relation to those whom the dominant Western knowledge calls “other” women. When “other” women are repeatedly mobilized by imperial feminism that serves the U.S. imperial project, how should we teach in a way that resists a temptation to “speak for” or “save” those who are allegedly lacking agency without discouraging students from desiring to learn about the “others” and different ways of living in relation to them so that “education becomes the practice of liberation”?<sup>17</sup> Or, to put it differently, how should we teach and write in ways that illuminate how my/our experiences as gendered, racialized women inside the belly of empire are inextricably interrelated with the experiences of women in other parts of the world? How do we teach in ways that students can “make sense” of the seemingly unrelated links between, for instance, sexual violence as a tool of colonialism, racism and patriarchy, and state violence, without viewing them as discrete forms of violence that affect women? I also ask, echoing Chicana feminist Cherrie Moraga, how do we understand “differences of location in a shared context of state-sanctioned violence”?<sup>18</sup> How do we expand the understanding of what is happening in Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Ferguson, Gaza, Okinawa, and Jeju Island to include U.S. imperialist militarism and the U.S. as a warfare nation-state where people of color are constantly subject to state violence, without making invisible their persistent resistance locally and transnationally? As some feminist scholar-teachers have pointed out, opposition to sexism, heterosexism, racism, and class exploitation in the United States “has never guaranteed the opposition to US global hegemony.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, if feminist scholar-teachers fail to critique U.S. military hegemony, feminist works can be appropriated without difficulty and used for the service of the imperial project.<sup>20</sup> A critical analysis of the interconnection between U. S. imperial policies inside and outside of its declared borders also requires a close examination of the role of religion, especially Christianity, which can be both an accomplice to imperialism and a source of resistance.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, how do we teach about not only overt forms of violence but also what Franz Fanon called “peaceful violence”<sup>22</sup> that cannot be categorized as a conventional form of violence. This oxymoronic phrase captures how people continue their daily lives in a heavily militarized and ruthlessly violent world

15 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminist Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 170. See also Kim, “Not a Luxury, But a Necessity,” 113.

16 This paragraph has been modified from my article. See Nami Kim, “Transformative ‘Moves’ to Join: A Transnational Feminist Pedagogical Practice,” in *Faith, Feminism, and Scholars: The Next Generation*, ed. Melanie L. Harris and Kate M. Ott (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 111.

17 Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, 200. See also Kim, “Transformative ‘Moves’ to Join,” 108.

18 Quoted in Keith P. Feldman, *A Shadow Over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 193.

19 Ella Shohat, ed., *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (Cambridge, MA: New Museum of Contemporary Art; MIT Press, 1998), 38. Quoted in Kim, “Transformative ‘Moves’ to Join,” 120.

20 Kim, “Transformative ‘Moves’ to Join,” 120.

21 See Nami Kim and Wonhee Anne Joh, *Critical Theology against U.S. Militarism in Asia: Decolonization and Deimperialization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), forthcoming.

22 Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 81. See also Haunani-Kay Trask, “The Color of Violence,” in *The Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology*, ed. Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006).



that is submerged in and maintained by racial, sexual, and economic subjugation, marginalization, and exploitation. The subjugated people have suffered from direct consequences of the “peaceful violence” that is entrenched in everyday life as “the way things are,” a characteristic of “the strength and resilience of racism.”<sup>23</sup>

Teaching and writing about intricately related violence and the resistance to it might be better done through a “relational” approach rather than “comparative” analysis. Asian American studies scholar Lisa Lowe captures this when she asks, “Instead of reading, teaching, and writing about our own histories separately, how would our theo-ethical discourse change if we try to see how ‘intimately’ our histories and experiences are interconnected?”<sup>24</sup> By “intimately,” Lowe does not mean the “privileged sign of liberal interiority or domesticity,”<sup>25</sup> but more of “close connection,” in the sense that it is “implied but less visible forms of alliance, affinity, and society among variously colonized peoples beyond the metropolitan national center.”<sup>26</sup>

For the past couple of years, my research has centered on a seemingly alien topic—the Korean Protestant Right. My prime motivation for this particular research project was my indignation at the Protestant Right’s sexism, homophobia, heteropatriarchy and Islamophobia. My interest in the Protestant Right and its gendered politics did not, however, arise from a third-person observing from outside what is happening in Protestant Christianity in Korea. Rather, my inquiry stemmed from what I have seen and experienced in the immigrant Korean community in Atlanta that has maintained transnational connections with the churches in Korea. For example, I learned that a transnational evangelical men’s manhood and fatherhood restoration movement called Father School, which is similar to Promise Keepers, was offered in immigrant Korean churches and other ethnic minority churches in Atlanta, as well as in other major U.S. cities. I witnessed a very strong anti-LGBT stance and homophobia prevalent in immigrant Korean churches alongside the larger immigrant community. I also observed increasing anti-Muslim racism and heard Islamophobic words expressed by Korean Christians. The more I thought about these three seemingly unrelated phenomena it became clearer that they were addressing a common issue: contested hegemonic masculinity in relation to the “others.” Connecting the dots among these three phenomena is what I have sought to do in my research. For me, it is a way of making some positive changes through my scholarship and writing in our different yet interconnected lives. As Robin D G. Kelly has put it, “Our job as intellectuals is to ask the hard questions, interrogate inherited categories, take nothing as self-evident, and go to the root of the problem. That includes the work of addressing contemporary social crises.”<sup>27</sup> We challenge dominant ways of knowing, suggest an alternative epistemology in shaping our ways of knowing, produce different knowledge, and encourage our students to pursue different ways of living through the engagement with such knowledge. As many people, including my mentors and colleagues, have already voiced, the task of the intellectuals is “speaking truth to power.”

### Troubling the Water Together

I see my teaching as an act of love. I love my primary community, my students, unapologetically. Like my teaching, I do my feminist scholarship, without an apology. At the same time, as bell hooks has reminded us, “any act of love takes a lot of your energy,”<sup>28</sup> so I try to find time to recharge myself, which, unfortunately I still do with an apology. After all, what I do probably looks like nothing significant, but as Buddhist teacher Thich

23 Trask, “The Color of Violence,” 83.

24 Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 18.

25 Ibid., 18.

26 Ibid., 19.

27 Dani McClain, “6 Scholars Who Are ‘Reimagining Black Politics’: *There’s a World of Urgent Discourse beyond Dyson, West, and Gates*,” *The Nation* April 30, 2015, accessed July 21, 2015, <http://www.thenation.com/article/205905/6-scholars-who-are-reimagining-black-politics>.

28 George Yancy and bell hooks, “bell hooks: Buddhism, the Beats and Loving Blackness,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 2015, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/10/bell-hooks-buddhism-the-beats-and-loving-blackness/>.



Nhat Hanh has reminded us, “when we throw a pebble into the water, it may not go far in the beginning, but it will ripple out.” When I throw a pebble into the water, it may stir the water just a little bit, but when we do it together from multiple places where we are located, they can potentially stir stronger waves that can bring changes into the still water. Let’s trouble the water together.



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