Marianne Katoppo's Unsaid Postcolonial Theory

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Introduction

In Indonesian universities, Henriette Marianne Katoppo (1943-2007) is famously celebrated as a novelist. But theology students and professors, weirdly uninterested in her novels, recognize her influence in Asian and global theological discourse as an "irruption within irruption" of Third World theologies. A similar degree of appreciation also comes from Asian American theologians.

Chun Hyun Kyung, back in 1990, praises Katoppo to be one of the proponents of "Asian women's liberation theology," along with Elizabeth Tapia, Park Soon Kyung, and Kwok Pui Lan. Kwok herself, following Wong Wai-Ching Angela's suggestion, crowns her with other luminous "pioneering Asian theologians" such as M. M. Thomas, D. T. Niles, Aloysius Pieris, and C. S. Song. In the Candler Foundry's course on *Asian and Asian American Womanist Theologies* in 2021, Katoppo was revered as the earliest advocate of "Asian womanist theology," alluding to the title of her most cited book, *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's Theology* (1979).³

Katoppo's theological insights are surely enticing. She highlights the expansive nature of women's liberation, clarifying matriarchy as "not patriarchy spelled with an 'm'." With that, she appeals to the sacred, life-giving metaphor of the womb. She is steeped in geopolitics and case studies, which shatters the unproductive dichotomy between theological and religious studies. She also accounts for the figure of the divine Goddess worshipped in other religious communities, a stance that unfurls her inclusive theology of religions.

And the most famous one is her counterintuitive reading of the Virgin Mary as being compassionate and free, which is still relevant to this day, considering the ubiquitous hermeneutical problem that Saba Mahmood classifies as the blinder of Western liberal conception of agency.⁵

However, it might be worth asking what has politically, and thus theoretically, underlain Katoppo's theological stances. The more I read her works through colonial discourse, the more I learn that it's due to her less foregrounded postcolonial theory.

What I mean by *her* postcolonial theory is not just a discourse that Katoppo deploys to describe Asian women's theology—in fact, she was already influential before the figures

¹ Hyun Kyung Chung, Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology (Orbis Books, 1990), 6, 77ff.

² Kwok Pui Lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World*, First edition (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 100.

³ Marianne Katoppo, Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's Theology, U.S. ed (Orbis Books, 1980).

⁴ Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free*, 10. Elsewhere, she writes: "Feminism is bigger than just women's emancipation, as it involves being accepted, provided that we don't challenge the foundational injustices in the current structure. And a feminist is not a woman who has been coopted into that structure, for the sake of attaining a 'better' place for her, compared to for all her women compatriots" (Marianne Katoppo, "'Tetapi Maria Berdiri di Dekat Kubur Itu dan Menangis': Pergeseran Paradigma demi Suatu Theologia Relevant," in Tabah Melangkah: Ulang Tahun ke-50 S.T.T. Jakarta, edited by S. Wismoadi Wahono, P. D. Latuihamallo, and F. Ukur [Sekolah Tinggi Theologia Jakarta, 1984], 404).

⁵ Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," in *Readings in the Theory of Religion*, ed. Scott S. Elliot and Matthew Waggoner (Routledge, 2010).

such as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha were widely received in the studies of theology and religion. Rather, I refer to her invocation of a term, "the Third," and her concern with the Pacific during the late Cold War, which, I argue, might amount to her autochthonous postcolonial theory. To show this, I will put Katoppo's use of the term in contrast with Bhabha's famous "third space," given the prevalence of the Bhabhian framework in Asian American theology.⁶

In the 85th Anniversary Lecture of Jakarta Theological Seminary, an institution Katoppo once lamented for neglecting her, theologian Septemmy Lakawa read Katoppo's theology and novels through the lens of Spivak's subalternity, asking whether the intersectional canvas of Katoppo's stance might be categorized as postcolonial discourse. Although I would answer "Yes," I will also warn that we can never appreciate Katoppo's writings as postcolonial discourse if we are only mesmerized by the spectacular relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

Appealing to theological writings in the hope of contributing to conversations on postcolonial theory is always risky. Theology is often taken as an "importing" discipline, rather than an "exporting" one. More than that, one's innermost sense of the divine is prone to dismissal as it is deemed insignificant and less productive to anticolonial work.

But as Ashis Nandy, back in 1983, and An Yountae recently suggested, such cavalier undermining of religion comes from the false unuttered equation of decolonization to Western progressivism, along with its widespread secular pretense.⁸

Concerned about the marginalization of Katoppo, Indonesian decolonial feminist Intan Paramaditha urges us to follow María Lugones' call for "learning from other resisters," an epistemic labor best expressed in an "active search for missing pieces" in postcolonial theorization, a trove that might be found in underrepresented figures.⁹

With this call, Paramaditha hopes to feature Katoppo on the same exalted stage with Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, and Nawal El Sa'adawi.

So do I.

Third

Katoppo seems to deliberately forgo detailing her positionality of "the Third." But her accounts of Asian women (in the face of both the Western regime of knowledge and Indonesian patriarchy) and Asia Pacific (in the context of the late Cold War) couldn't be more explanatory. ¹⁰ The Third is the position of particularity that was historically set to be

⁶ Further conversations could be done to explore Edward Soja's relevant term of "Thirdspace" and Jacques Derrida's "another Other."

⁷ Septemmy E. Lakawa, "Marianne Katoppo: Yang Disruptif, Yang Konstruktif, Yang Estetis," Jakarta Theological Seminary 85th Anniversary Public Lecture, Jakarta, Agustus 28, 2019.

⁸ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Yountae An, *The Coloniality of the Secular: Race, Religion, and Poetics of World-Making* (Duke University Press, 2024).

⁹ Intan Paramaditha, "Radicalising 'Learning From Other Resisters' in Decolonial Feminism," *Feminist Review* 131, no. 1 (2022): 4. Septemmy E. Lakawa notes that Katoppo is a "visionary sojourner" who couldn't find her place and even felt alienated in "the spaces that she desires to transform, such as theology, church, or ecumenical institutions" This means, Katoppo's non-theological writings might have carried more radical, aesthetically appealing insights that "were never explicitly expressed" in aforementioned institutions she related to. In short, she gains more "theological independence" in her novels ("Marianne Katoppo: Yang Disruptif, yang Konstruktif, yang Estetis," Public Lecture of 85th Anniversary of Jakarta Theological Seminary, August 28, 2019)

¹⁰ Readers might be tempted to read her accounts of women and Asia Pacific as almost unrelated or even imbalanced—that her emphasis on women is more apparent than her postcolonial politics. This reading is understandable, as she never articulates the theoretical congruence between the twos. At best, she once asserts

alienating, that excludes one from any available representational options, yet can be transformed into a liberating one.

The Third is Katoppo's political theory, precisely her postcolonial theory. At the beginning of her assertion of women as "the Other" in Compassionate and Free, she writes in the footnote,

I use the terms "First/Second/Third World" only for simplicity's sake. However, it should be pointed out that "Third" has often been misunderstood as "Third-class," "Third-rate," etc., while the original meaning (1956) of "Tiers" in the French expression "Tiers Monde" is primarily "the third person, who is not involved with either first (capitalist) and second (socialist), and who does not participate in the dialogue between the two." In other words, "Third" means "the Outsider," "the Other."11

It should be noted comparatively that her association of "the Third" with "the Other" signifies an ignored Other, rather than an absolute Other, as in Levinas's Totalité et Infini (1961), an already famous text in Katoppo's time. 12

Unlike the confrontational scene in Levinas, this type of Other is rendered unseen from the eves of the Subject. Like the "third world" in the Cold War, this Other is utterly uninvolved in the competition or conversation at all. 13 Also, the Other in Katoppo's scene does not demand an ethical act from the Subject, but is instead a passive body who experiences a series of negations. 14

A person of her time, enacted in her involvement as a founding member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) since the 1970s, Katoppo inherits what has been traditionally called the "spirit of Bandung." ¹⁵ It is the fervent spirit of decolonization, first globalized in 1955, by which, according to Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Third World people (artists, poets, intellectuals, community organizers, political leaders, etc.) could join to explore and think about the future, and that their options were not limited by the sociopolitical models of any single major power or hegemonic bloc. 16

As Katoppo describes, the Third World people, especially Asian women and the Pacific people, are like the "third person" in the grammar, who have not been involved in the conversation on the divine, let alone being given serious challenges. The Other is a product of

that "feminist theology," a flamboyant term she uses to refer to any theology based on experience of women, "is profoundly relevant for the liberation theology of the Third World." Cf. Katoppo, "Tetapi Maria Berdiri di Dekat Kubur Itu dan Menangis," 408.

¹¹ Katoppo, Compassionate and Free, 1.

¹² Neither was it alluded to Karl Barth's *Der Römerbrief* (1922), which refers to an infinite qualitative distinction, that is, God's wholly otherness.

¹³ Later in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida responded to Levinas and the critiques of his dualistic and speciesist view. Invoking the neglected figure, the animal, Derrida uses the term "animal-other," "other-as-animal," or the animal that "occupies the place of the third person." With that, Derrida tries to emancipate the animal as "another other." Jacques Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (Fordham University Press, 2008), 107–14. Derrida's figure of "another other," I submit, is more equivalent to Katoppo than that of Levinas. But let's keep this for other conversations.

¹⁴ As Katoppo made triple cases of "Asian Christian women," she preceded the intersectional analyses famously associated with Delores S. Williams's theology and Kimberlé Crenshaw's legal theory.

¹⁵ Tracing the emergence of world feminist theology, Rosemary Rashford Ruether names Katoppo as one among first women theologians who called for gender issues in EATWOT but "received a cold shoulder from their male colleagues." Rosemary R. Ruether, "The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology," in The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14. ¹⁶ Nelson Maldonado-Torres et al., "Editorial Introduction: Frantz Fanon, Decoloniality, and the Spirit of Bandung," Bandung 6, no. 2 (2019): 155.

historical, constant alienations. The Other is the "exploited non-person," Katoppo pronounces, and, therefore, unworthy of any stage.

Elision

It should also be clarified that none of the spatial imagination of the likes of Homi Bhabha was in her mind. But this is not just because Katoppo wrote relatively prior to Bhabha. Bhabha's category of third space has been widely used by Asian theologians to subvert the binary of colonizer and colonized, as it points to their "in-between" space. ¹⁷ Also, this spatial notion makes us aware of the plurivocality of the postcolonies and helps us undermine the absolute power of the colonizer. For all types of resistance are dependent on the "negotiation" between each colonized subject and its oppressor.

But regardless of how potent and liberative the notion of "third space" or "hybridity" is intended to be, Bhabha's thesis proceeds primarily with the scene of duality between two predetermined cultures, the colonizer and colonized, a scene upon which he tries to locate the form of anticolonial power.¹⁸

On the contrary, Katoppo's geopolitical world is comprised of a triadic relationship, in which the non-aligned group tried to articulate a new form of power beyond the spectacle of capitalist and socialist blocs that remained "on the stage" at that time. ¹⁹ The assumed duality is between the two regimes, between two mainstream liberatory options, not between the colonizer and colonized. This means Katoppo wants to underscore the pluriformity of colonial power. The colonized is heterogeneous, as we know it. But so is the colonizer.

Moreover, if, for Bhabha, the transformative value of the third space depends on the "rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the [colonizer]* ... *nor the [colonized]* ... *but something else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both,"²⁰ for Katoppo, transformation lies within the space that does not contest the definitions of the hegemonic powers. That is to say, she does not want to belittle the empire's material distinctiveness.

Put starkly. Bhabha's third is the name for a blessing in disguise of blending; whereas Katoppo's third is the stage of an impasse. Not a state of ambiguity, as Bhabha focuses on, but a clear state of elision, whose transformative hope is still in search.

This is also why Bhabha's theorization can't account for a case where the relation of domination is reproduced—some argue, he might have even contributed to it. Precisely, the idea that partial belonging and intercultural connectivity would result in a transformation *via* "formal process of disavowal" has already been put into question. Variants of critique posted by Frantz Fanon, Benita Parry, Achille Mbembe, or Naglaa Abou-Agag have cautioned that

¹⁷ I can't think of a better example of an eloquent use of Bhabhian spatial theory other than the Christology of Wonhee Anne Joh in *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology*, 1st ed (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

¹⁸ To remind, Bhabha believes that hybridity is not simply an "effect" of merging of two *equal* cultures, thus, suggesting a cultural relativism. Hybridity, he clarifies, "is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialists disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition." Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 2004), 162. Put it in different words, only because it is problematic in the first place, according to Bhabha, that we then can recognize its surprising ambivalence.

¹⁹ I use the term "on the stage" to invite connecting Katoppo's political presupposition with James C. Scott's distinction between two practices, that is, between those "on stage" and "off-stage." Cf. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990). Regardless of the degree of oppression or the imbalanced relation between the capitalist and socialist blocs, they were both operating on the stage, as oppose to many countries in Asia and Africa which were completely outside of the scene.

²⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 41.

this model of transformation might have been merely psychological, virtual, or "formal," thus compromising the regimes' capacity to reformulate their ruling procedures over time for their own reproduction.²¹

In her speech, "Toward the Pacific Being an Ocean of Peace," addressed at the Christian Responsibility for Pacific Civilization Conference, in 1991, the year of the Soviets' dissolution, Katoppo emphasizes that the Pacific has been treated as a "battleground, testing ground, playground, and dumping ground" by distant countries, and international ecclesial leaders and theology academics were less attentive to it because they have been too focused on the "dry intellectualism, so lacking in the vibrant radiant life-giving spirituality."²²

Again, the striking image that concerns her is not the mixture or interculturality of Asian nations with their former colonizers, as commonly illustrated by today's cases of South Korea, Japan, Singapore, or Hong Kong, but rather the staggering elision of "the necessary and indispensable preludes" to imperialism itself: the exploitation of the Third World countries.²³

That is, when classifying several communities in Asia or women as the Third, Katoppo wants to make vivid those who are historically put into the realm of neglect, the territory of the unseen.

But what may transformation mean for Katoppo if it is not the "formal" affirmation of colonizer-colonized ambivalent hybridity? What kind of strategic recourse does the third have left in hand? And how can the Other find the source of power without dismissing the regime's ability to adjust to the multitudes?

Emergence

Perhaps, there is no easy answer to those questions. Yet, Katoppo insists that transformation does not arise simply from partial embrace of the imperialist form of life—a politics accused as "assimilationist" by some, or normalized with the cloth of "strategic essentialism" by others.

This is apparent in Katoppo's critical account of RA Kartini (1879-1904), an Indonesian woman liberationist figure, who is always praised for her adoption of Western education as a way of emancipation and liberation. Contrary to Kartini, Katoppo was cynical of the empire's pedagogical character. She goes,

It must have pleased the Dutch considerably to hear her plead over and over again: "Give the Javanese education ... let us be like you," etc. It fitted in very well with their ethical policy of the time, that the exploitation of the "natives" could be supplemented with a little education as well.²⁴

²¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, First edition, New edition, trans. Richard Philcox, Get Political (Grove Press, 2008); Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," *Oxford Literary Review* 9, no. 1/2 (1987): 27–58; Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steve Corcoran, Theory in Forms (Duke University Press, 2019); Naglaa Abou-Agag, "Homi Bhabha's Third Space and Neocolonialism," *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences* 9, no. 3 (2021): 25–43.

²² Marianne Katoppo - Toward the Pacific Being an Ocean of Peace, directed by Center for Process Studies, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQwOJ3UK32E.

²³ I am are inspired by Sylvia Wynter's defining the relationship between Columbus and the European clerics, whose hegemonic schema have begun to rupture. Although it's common to read Columbus' 1492 moment as either a violent encounter or a productive epistemic shift, Wynter reminds us that perhaps we must begin to attend to the broader planetary communities, including the Taíno people or the now Senegal, whose schema were "the necessary and indispensable preludes" to Columbus' articulating his counter-hegemonic attempt in the first place. See Vincent Lloyd and Abel K. Aruan, "From the Messy Middle," *Political Theology Network*, July 1, 2025, https://politicaltheology.com/from-the-messy-middle/.

²⁴ Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free*, 13.

More blatantly, she indicts Kartini as "herself the oppressor." "Kartini's ideal image of the fully liberated human being was apparently personified in the Dutchman/woman, a mistake which many oppressed people have made when viewing their oppressors."²⁵

For Katoppo, transformation is not sufficiently locatable in the culture that is "almost the same, but not quite" to the colonizers, but may be found instead within the unpredictable richness and the extraordinariness of the Third, the elided culture itself.

For instance, she perceives the establishment of an unexpected, unrooted nationhood as the "binding factor to unite the people groaning under the yoke of Dutch colonial oppression." When speaking of Trinity, Katoppo writes, "Forcing people to relate to an allmale Trinity is oppression. In the context of Asian cosmic religion and metacosmic soteriologies, it is also ridiculous." It is this very realization of the complex relation in Asia that led her to account for the "cosmic religion and metacosmic soteriologies."

That says, political transformation is not simply an unintended consequence of colonial culturing *via* the colonized's formal reframing. Nor does it come from the inner nature of humanity, as in the logic of liberal politics. It's instead an accidental emergence due to the highly complex relation in that particular space of neglect, a relation that consists of not just two merged cultures, the colonized and the colonizer, but the pluriversal vulnerabilities gradually caused by the multiple empires.

The Third is the space where an assemblage of people experience a series of neglect or are continuously being "dumped," to use her own word, *to the point* that such an assemblage accidentalizes an accumulation of power. And this is not a simple solidarity; this is an emergence.²⁸

Perhaps no postcolonialist author could explain this emergence better than Caribbean essayist Édouard Glissant. As he writes in *Poétique de la relation* (1990), in the space regulated by the colonizers, a certain movement can take place, a movement that is neither simply straightforward (or "arrow-like" or Columbus-like) nor aimless (or circular). It is a transformative politics made possible by the rhizomatic relation of the creolized community. It is not a simple synthesis—as in his case, *métissage*—but a limitless network that is rootless, nomadic, and multipolar, but still politically generative, thus poetic if it is handled carefully.²⁹

Knowledge (thus power), according to Glissant, is found within this very relation. But it is not a priori terms imposed by the authorities of the plantation system that are later adopted and reframed by the oppressor's opponent. It is rather a self-emancipatory cradling of the web-like reality that occurs during acts of survival and then scales up over time.³⁰

In sum, the transformative value of the Third community lies in the last instance when the generativity of this rhizomatic relation is realized and then, politically scaled up. It is neither an egalitarian capillary power found everywhere and anywhere, nor is it dramatically given or overthrown.

Disparticipation

²⁵ Katoppo, 14.

²⁶ Marianne Katoppo, "Women in Indonesia," *In God's Image* (September 1987): 27.

²⁷ Katoppo, Compassionate and Free, 73.

²⁸ Chandra Mohanty's works have reminded us that in the name of solidarity, Western feminist discourse often collides women experience in the Third World as "singular monolithic subject." Cf. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, 5th print (Duke University Press, 2006).

²⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, Nachdr. (University of Michigan Press, 2009), 5–44.

³⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 89–182.

What is the relevance of Katoppo's postcolonial stance for today's studies of Asian American theology? In the last few years, I have been fascinated by how religious scholars have adopted the geopolitical category of "transpacific," which seeks to bring together the lands of the Americas and Asian communities into a single scene of power and religious relations.³¹ It is precisely in this conversation, I submit, that Katoppo's theology and politics offer a theoretical mooring for transpacific political theology.

For example, several scholars in the *Transpacific Political Theology* volume, edited by Kwok Pui Lan, examine the impact of US-China competition on techno-digital race, militarism, and geopolitics. Among others, Ki Joo Choi is particularly attentive to how Asian Americans are caught in the middle, positioned to potentially perform a Christian "prophetic witness," that is, to bring into light the experience of "neither here nor there." Yet he warns that Asian Americans can in fact "participate in both" imperialist cultures, which prompts theologians and Christian ethicists to reconsider the common spatial sense of hybridity.³²

Katoppo's spatial notion of the Third can be a conceptual alternative to this problem of double assimilation—the betrayal of such prophetic witness—Choi worries about. Her reclaiming of the Third positionality reminds us that being a witness might mean being faithful to the complex relation among the neglected in this multipolar world that refuses straightforward or "arrow-like" politics. With Katoppo, the notion of "neither here nor there" shall not be taken as the *blending of both*, but instead the *disparticipating from both*.³³

For the Hebrew bible sings this truth to me: To be truly prophetic is neither to assimilate nor to withdraw, but to engage with empires via active (perhaps playful) diss-ing, disidentifying, and disparticipating.

Conclusion

This short essay may not fully reconstruct the postcolonial theory at work in Katoppo's writings. And you can always disagree with it, or just claim her as simply an Asian feminist or womanist. But I wish this would sustain the conversations on life and knowledge with a non-assimilationist attitude in such a time as this, which perhaps sounds romanticizing the Third World internationalism. In this 70-year mark of Bandung Spirit, I might have been romanticizing.

³¹ See Keun-Joo Christine Pae, A Transpacific Imagination of Theology, Ethics, and Spiritual Activism: Doing Feminist Ethics Transnationally, 1st ed, New Approaches to Religion and Power Series (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); Kwok Pui Lan, ed., Transpacific Political Theology: Perspectives, Paradigms, Proposals (Baylor University Press, 2024).

³² Ki Joo Choi, "'Neither Here nor There' as Prophetic Witness: On Asian American Politics between Empires," in *Transpacific Political Theology: Perspectives, Paradigms, Proposals*, ed. Kwok Pui Lan (Baylor University Press, 2024).

³³ With José Esteban Muñoz, rhetoric scholar Matthew Salzano views disparticipation as a participatory action. It is an active "diss." It is not a "withdrawal," to use another word, from the struggle with empires. Cf. Matthew Salzano, "Beyond Participation, toward Disparticipation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 110, no. 2 (2024): 153–73.