

POSTCOLONIAL
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God at the Crossroads

A Postcolonial Reading of Sophia

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*At the crossroads
Where her spirit shocks
She comes sweeping
Through the night,
Spirits and hounds
Baying behind her.
Her wings keep me warm.*

Gloria Anzaldúa, "Canción de la diosa de la noche"¹

*Does not [Sophia] call,
And does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way,
At the crossroads she takes her stand...*

Proverbs 8:1-2²

At the crossroads Sophia takes her stand...³ But why there? Is the crossroads not a confusing, dangerous place to take a stance? Who would

¹Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 218.

²NRSV uses the word *wisdom* rather than *Sophia*.

³Prov. 8:2. "Sophia" is used in the Septuagint to translate *Hokmâ*, the Hebrew word for "wisdom." Because Proverbs gives wisdom personal attributes, I will use Sophia as a personal name.

turn to such a space of diverging paths, conflicting choices, contingency, and crisis—in order to find Wisdom? Who would look for God at a crossroads? In our postmodern world, crossroads, borderlands, *fronteras* traverse the lives of an increasing number of people. These are the ones who experience firsthand the risks and tragedies of crossing paths. But they also encounter the paradoxes, ironies, and creative potential of the crossroads. Thus, for Chicana feminist poet Gloria Anzaldúa, images of crossroads evoke the complexities of life at the Southwest/Mexican border and of the *mestiza* identities that it brings forth.⁴ The crossroads also lead Anzaldúa to meditate more generally on the psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands found wherever different persons or groups come in contact with one another. At these multiple crossroads, one encounters *los atravesados* (“the crossed”): “squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead.”⁵ *Los atravesados*; those who do not fit the dominant categories; those whose presence shocks. Not from here; not from there.

Crossroads also converge on my postcolonial feminist perspective—a perspective that is more (or perhaps less) than a theoretical choice. Raised in what has been called “the oldest colony in the world,”⁶ I can hardly ignore the complexities, perplexities, and subtleties to which postcolonial theory attends. “Puerto Rico,” like the rest of “Latin America,” endured—indeed, emerged from—the early conquests of Spanish and/or Portuguese empires. Unlike the rest of Latin America, however, Puerto Rico got trapped in the conflict between the old Spanish empire and the then-emerging U.S. empire, which left it, to this date, subject to the U.S. Politically, I am a U.S. citizen by right of birth in a country with no right to participate in the U.S. electoral process. “Racially” as much African and Taina as Spanish, linguistically nurtured by a Spanish too anglicized for Spain and an English too foreign for the U.S., I share a Protestantism brought with the U.S. invasion but transformed by the Catholic and African heritages of our culture. As a woman moving always on crisscrossing paths, living and loving all the while between two starkly different patriarchies—how could I not feel strangely attuned to *los atravesados*? Is this a symptom of my secret taste for the *in-between*? Perhaps. It certainly signals my alertness to the strategies and limits of systems of domination through classification. It

⁴During Spanish/Portuguese colonial control over Latin America, the word *mestiza/o* was used to refer to the offspring of a Spaniard and an Amerindian. Currently, Latin Americans tend to use the word *mestizaje* more generally to refer to the complex intermixture—biological or cultural—that comprises the Latin American heritage. That is, the meaning of *mestizaje* has been expanded to include Spanish, Amerindian, African, and, in many cases, U.S. cultural influences. It is related to the term *hybridity*, but it alludes specifically to the Latino context.

⁵Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 25.

⁶José Triás Monge, *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World* (New Haven, Conn. & London: Yale University Press, 1997).

betrays my familiarity with the desires and frustrations of this power, its endless demands to the other to yield her secrets, to perform a given role, to inform—and with its resulting puzzlement, fascination, fear, and denial.

Perhaps it is not so surprising, then, that a divine figure who takes her stand at the crossroads, a female whose origin remains uncertain—she who seems to escape fixed theological categories—has caught my attention. And so do the reactions that she elicits: puzzlement, disavowal, abject horror as she reappears—and also, though rarely, intense appreciation. Among theologians, Sophia has been recognized in the multidimensionality of the Trinity as Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, and Mother-Sophia,⁷ or, contrastingly, as “a principle ‘other’ than [God’s] hypostases,” as the “living and loving substance” of God.⁸ Most theologians see Sophia as a mere primitive precursor of the Logos and thus quickly turn to the Logos to continue the conversation. Although some suspect that “Western theology constantly hovers on the brink of sophiological problems,”⁹ Sophia’s presence goes often simply unnoticed.

A scrutiny of ancient testimonies of Sophia’s presence begins to bring into focus the complexities of Sophia’s identity. But it does not dispel its uncertainties. Biblical scholars’ debates around the “origin” of Sophia tend to place her somewhere—else. Somewhere *other*. She must be, they argue, the daughter of somebody else’s goddess, be it the “Canaanite love goddess, Astarte, the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, the Egyptian goddess Maat, the Semitic mother goddess...the Hellenized form of Egyptian goddess Isis.”¹⁰ A female divinity cannot be *native* to Israel—can she? Biblical scholars also debate whether she bears any resemblances to real women in Israel. Was her portrayal inspired by Israelite women? Or was Sophia created by male scribes trying to set a standard for appropriate female behavior? And what about her relation to the Creator? “The LORD created me,” she announces in Proverbs 8, “at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago...When he established the heavens, I was there.”¹¹ But she also describes herself as a source of life. God or not-God? Creator or creature? Native woman or foreign goddess? Here also, Sophia stands at the crossroads: not from here; not from there.

The questions that biblical and theological scholars raise about Sophia’s origin and identity are crucial to my engagement with her, for it seems to me that the figure of Sophia raises those questions, that she has precisely that effect. How then should one approach Sophia? Postcolonial

⁷Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads, 1992).

⁸Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God*, trans. Xenia Braikevitc, Library of Russian Philosophy (Hudson, N.Y.: Lindisfarne, 1993), 55, 35.

⁹Ibid., 5.

¹⁰Johnson, *She Who Is*, 92.

¹¹Prov. 8:22, 27.

thought, I suggest, will help us engage this elusive character. Postcolonial theory's analysis of the complexities of identity, the perplexities of power, and the subtle strategies of subversion within situations of oppression seems well suited for reading Sophia. For it is in the indefiniteness of her identity that I approach Sophia—as a living hybrid. I intend to test how the postcolonial concept of hybridity may offer us liberating possibilities even within a textual terrain marked by structures of domination, indeed within that very space in which Sophia has—remarkably—managed to survive. What postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha writes of the hybrid can be applied to Sophia: Even if she is “an effect of colonial power,” her “irremediably estranging”¹² presence may disrupt the categories that authorize the very exercise of power: patriarchal, social, national, or cosmological. She “reverses the effects of colonial representation, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority, its *rules of recognition*.”¹³ Might a postcolonial theology, then, give voice to a Sophia who “disturbs, intervenes, unsettles, interrogates, ironizes, denaturalizes and transgresses by refusing to ‘fit’ into established categories”?¹⁴

Encountering Sophia

The first full biblical personification of Sophia appears in the book of Proverbs.¹⁵ There, Sophia introduces herself as a proclaimer of truth: “Hear, for I will speak noble things. And from my lips will come what is right; for my mouth will utter truth...” (Prov. 8:6–7a). “My fruit is better than gold” (8:19). Sophia claims to have been an active participant in the creation of the world as well as its source of love, strength, justice, and life: “Whosoever finds me finds life” (8:35). Proverbs’ readers are thus advised to love Sophia: to take her instruction instead of silver, to wait for her, and to keep her ways in order to see their days multiplied and years added to their life (9:11). But Proverbs seems at least as interested in the shadowy figure who serves as Sophia’s foil, the one the text names the Strange (or Foreign) Woman, against whom it advises: “Do not let your hearts turn aside to her ways; do not stray into her paths, for many are those she has laid low, and numerous are her victims. Her house is the way to Sheol...” (Prov. 7:25–27). In this Strange Woman, the Foreign Woman, we see Proverbs’ personification of the Other. In other (later) books in the Hebrew Scripture—Sirach, Baruch, and Wisdom of Solomon—Sophia is

¹²Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 114.

¹³Ibid. (italics added).

¹⁴Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 89.

¹⁵See Prov. 1:20–33; 8; 9:4–6.

¹⁶See Sir. 24; Bar. 3:9–4:4; Wis. 7–9.

also represented in roles associated with the Divine.¹⁶ Their ambiguous responses to her suggest their bewildering reactions to the complex identity of Sophia, the hybrid.

Already in her first appearance in the book of Proverbs, her gender alone makes Sophia stand out as a rarity in the Bible. So no wonder she raises numerous questions for her feminist readers. What was the writers' intention in creating this female image? Was Sophia imagined as a reflection of real or idealized women's roles in Proverbs' community? Was she meant as an exaltation of women? Or was she intended as a controlling symbol defining acceptable behavior for women? Most feminist biblical scholars argue that only the social roles of real women, or an idealization of them, can explain Proverbs' disposition to imagine Sophia as female. Carole Fontaine holds that both Sophia and the Strange Woman "embody the social roles, positive and negative, which women filled within the society at large and the wisdom movement in particular."¹⁷ Similarly, Silvia Schroer considers the roles of personified Sophia to reflect the counseling functions that women did perform in the community.¹⁸ It is further believed that the decentralization of authority resulting from the lack of formal public structures during the postexilic period brought about an increase in the importance of the family, thus heightening women's authority.¹⁹ But the strong presence of the Strange Woman in the text and her striking similarities with Sophia do not allow a simple reading of Proverbs' "intentions." Rather, they invite us to ponder the complexities and ambiguities of its agenda.

Despite difficulties determining the dates of compilation of the book of Proverbs, most biblical scholars locate it in the post-exilic period. This period was characterized by the conflicts between the "Israelites" who returned to Judah after the Babylonian exile and those who had stayed in the land. Both groups were claiming political power, religious authority, and territorial rights. Hence, the returning group faced the challenge of finding a way to legitimize its own claims over and against those of the people who had been inhabiting the land for fifty years. Ironically, at the end their oppression under Babylonian rule, some of the formerly colonized struggled to assert their role as ruling power through the exclusion of others. The returning elites attempted to define an Other against whom a communal self could be asserted, thus performing—perhaps mimicking—a typical colonial scene. Homi Bhabha describes this

¹⁶Carole R. Fontaine, "The Social Role of Women in the World of Wisdom," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 46.

¹⁸Silvia Schroer, "Wise and Counseling Women in Ancient Israel: Literary and Historical Ideas of the Personified Hokmā," in *Feminist Companion*.

¹⁹Gail Paterson Corrington, *Her Image of Salvation, Female Saviors and Formative Christianity* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 117.

sort of self-legitimizing process as that in which the “narratorial voice” of authority articulates the narcissistic demand “that the Other should authorize the self, recognize its priority, fulfill its outlines.”²⁰ Naturally, that self-legitimizing process produced narratives that combined and confused social practices with an ideological rhetoric of identity. Writing on Proverbs, Claudia Camp points out that such processes of identity-formation involve internal as much as external battles; they entail the definition of those inside and outside the internal spheres of power, as well as those inside and outside the community.²¹

These processes, however, come fraught with contradiction. Do we perhaps see in Proverbs the marks of the incongruities produced by its own attempt to define a pure identity? It is the very attempt to construct a stable self-definition that prompted the construction of a “myth of historical origination,”²² a myth based on (real or fictitious) genealogies.²³ The identity of the “others” was constructed on equally fictitious, even anachronistic, genealogies.²⁴ The deep ambiguity and ironic outcomes of these projects are exemplified by the fact that “those called ‘foreign’ were often residents of the land; those called ‘strange’ were often former members of a priestly lineage.”²⁵ Also integral to the agenda of creating the community’s identity was an increased emphasis on separation from “others,” typically expressed as admonitions against intermarriage. Rather than protecting the borders against the possible intrusion of the other, these admonitions typically function, according to postcolonial theory, as rhetorical masks to cover the absence of a pure identity. In other words, discourses against mixing with the other most often attempt to hide the fact that the other is already among us, indeed, integral to us.

In addition to the words *foreign* and *strange*, which are prominent in the book of Proverbs, *Woman* was also a crucial element in constructions of identity, and it was strongly associated with both *foreign* and *strange*. Camp notes that the Hebrew Bible frequently collapsed language of “illicit sex, illicit worship and intermarriage with foreigners, especially foreign women.”²⁶ Thus, these discourses about the *outsiders* relied on associations between *foreign*, *strange*, and *woman*. As a consequence of these close associations, it was not unusual to find references to “women’s blood standing for all pollution, foreign wives standing for all things foreign, adulterous women standing for idolatrous Israel.” As a result,

²⁰Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 98.

²¹Claudia V. Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 31.

²²Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 74.

²³Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy*, 32.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 17.

woman could readily function as a signifier of strangeness.²⁷ In Camp's words, "*Proverbs* makes the metaphorical connection between woman and the strange, thus identifying woman as that which is not proper to 'Israel.' National/ethnic distinction has been assimilated to and named by gender distinction."²⁸ The figure of a woman is, then, suggestive of threats to national identity, religious faithfulness, ritual purity—that is, threats to the social order and, as a consequence, to the cosmological order as well.

In the textual homeland of Sophia, femaleness is anything but a neutral sign reflecting social realities. It is a problematic sign—and a sign of the problematic—in regard not only to gender roles but also to a conglomerate of categories, all highly contested in the political, social, and religious arenas. Camp's conclusion does not exclude the possibility that women did perform roles analogous to those in which Sophia is portrayed. It does alert us, nonetheless, to the strong tensions and instabilities that lie behind deceptively simple categories: woman, foreigner, strange. "In the Borderlands/ You are the battleground/ Where enemies are kin to each other; /You are at home, a stranger..."²⁹

This gendering of otherness is epitomized in the Strange Woman, *Proverbs*' representation of oppositional otherness.³⁰ And it might be the Strange Woman who best captures the text's intentions. Be that as it may, my main interest is in that which escapes those intentions. For all its harsh admonitions against the Other, the divine image that one encounters in *Proverbs* conforms neither to the text's insiders (the young men who receive *Proverbs*' advise) nor of its characterization of the antithetical Other. *Proverbs*' divine figure is actually a female, a female who resembles the "Other." We look at her. We are puzzled, disturbed. In a community in which identity is defined in reference to its male members, doesn't the fact that Sophia is a female make her an odd image of authority? Moreover, if her gender is like that of the "Other," if *woman* stands for *strangeness*, are we not forced to ask if the "we" (the *insiders* of *Proverbs*' community), of which Sophia is an authorized image of identity, is already strange to itself?

Socially, religiously, and even cosmologically, Sophia occupies the space of the hybrid. In her manifold *in-betweenness* she "intervenes in the exercise of authority not merely to indicate the impossibility of its identity but to represent the unpredictability of its presence."³¹ "Out in

²⁷Female ethnic foreignness," according to Camp, "is intimately linked, via several different modes, to other significant conceptual fields; it is linked, by ideological framing, to worship of foreign gods; by metaphor, to sexual strangeness (adultery, prostitution and, in general, women's control of their own sexuality); by extension of the sexual metaphor, to deceitful language; by metonymy to correct ritual practice; by moral logic to evil; by onto-logic to death; and by patri-logic, to loss of inheritance and lineage." *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 59.

²⁹Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 216.

³⁰See Prov. 2:16–19; 5:11; 6:24–35; 7:14–20; 9:16–17.

³¹Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 114.

the street...in the squares...[a]t the busiest corner..." (Prov. 1:20, 21)—literally and symbolically, Sophia stands at the crossroads. "On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front on the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out" (Prov. 8:2–3). The contrast with Proverbs' "capable wife," undoubtedly a "proper Israelite woman," is telling. In the case of the "capable wife," it is her husband who is "known in the city gates" (Prov. 31:23). Sophia instead stands there herself. She is where the text locates honorable men and "loose women" (Prov. 7:12)—thus resisting any simple opposition to the Strange Woman. She is at the crossroads of "proper" gender roles.

Depicted as mother, lover, and wife, Sophia is not a stable sign of any of those categories. Consider the role of wife. Like the "capable wife," Sophia is beloved (Prov. 4:6–9; 7:4). Like the "capable wife," Sophia brings "favor of the Lord" to those who find her (Prov. 18:22, 8:35). But Sophia violates Proverbs' admonitions to restrain her speech and to guard her mouth (Prov. 9:13); instead, she follows other Proverbs instructions: to cry out, raise the voice, seek, and search. These instructions, however, were not addressed to women but to young men: "Cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding" (Prov. 2:3). Sophia is "almost the same, but not quite,"³² for she doesn't cry out to receive wisdom but to offer it. The "capable wife" brings happiness; Sophia brings life. Almost the same, but not quite.

Sophia's speech also betrays her hybridity. Is the language of Israel her "first language"? On the one hand, there is no doubt that Sophia is closely related to Israel and that she is well versed in its traditions. Her words are recognized as the language of Israel, and her "call...is the voice of the Lord."³³ Wisdom of Solomon even identifies Sophia as the fountain of wisdom for Israel's great king Solomon. But her speeches also betray her relation to Babylonian Ishtar, Canaanite Astarte, and especially to the Egyptian goddess Maat. As Maat, she is "an amulet worn for protection and life."³⁴ Also like Maat, Sophia declares her existence before creation and her authority over kings.³⁵ She even resembles the already hybrid Isis. Sophia's use of the formula "I am" (Prov. 22:17ff) resembles that of the Egyptian *Wisdom of Ameneope*.³⁶ "Like Isis, she is concerned with justice; like Isis, who taught writing and the arts of civilization and humanity, Sophia continues to instruct the wise in the arts, particularly scripture; like Isis, Sophia is concerned with the protection of kings and rulers."³⁷ All these traits, however, are intrinsic to

³²Ibid., 86.

³³Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life, An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 138.

³⁴Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, Ga.: JSOT Press, 1985), 29.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 161.

³⁷Corrington, *Her Image of Salvation*, 107.

the character of Sophia herself, who Proverbs exalted as the ideal native and who confidently walks Israel's streets, speaks JHWH's words, and demands to be heard and followed (Prov. 8:32). Yet the fact that she can be compared to—perhaps even confused with, but not identified as—a “foreign woman” threatens the very basis of the “rules of recognition.” In her, the boundaries between the native and the foreign blur. She is “*neither One...nor the Other...but something besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both.”³⁸ Biblical scholars have had to admit (not without disappointment) that she has “clearly borrowed” “the style of a specific Egyptian divine proclamation...ideas which had roots *elsewhere*.”³⁹ In other words: *Sophia speaks with an accent*. “‘Denied’ knowledges” have entered the privileged discourse and “estrang[e]d the basis of its authority.”⁴⁰ Moreover, not only does Sophia evidence the presence, always already within Israel, of traditions from the *outside*, but her proclamation also carries the wisdom of the *inside* to the *outside* of Israel, to “whosoever” finds her (Prov. 8:35), whosoever loves her (Prov. 8:17–20).

And if Sophia's social context places her in an interstitial position between the normative subject and the multitudinous *other*, her cosmological position is also at the crossroads. She moves between the divine and the created realms. Just what type of being is Sophia? On the one hand, she unmistakably resembles God.⁴¹ Who but God can claim, as Sophia does: “Whosoever finds me, finds life” (Prov. 8:35)? Expanding Proverbs' portrayal, the authors of Wisdom of Solomon assert that Sophia is all-pervasive, all-powerful, and enlivening (Wis. 7:22, 27; 8:1), that she gives immortality (Wis. 10:17), that she has been the protecting and delivering power in Israel's history (Wis. 10), and that she is omniscient (Wis. 9:11). But the text will not allow for an easy substitution of Sophia for God, or an equation of Sophia with God, either. Sophia stands in and as the difference, the interval, between God and creation. Her very origin at once asserts her unity with God and makes a difference, although admittedly a very fluid one. In her presence God founded the earth; she is an intimate in the knowledge of God.⁴² In the beginning was Sophia; Sophia was with God, and Sophia was God.

This ontological undecidability creates, when noticed, theological discomfort. To explain the indeterminacy of Sophia's ontological identity, Roland Murphy describes her as a feminine apparition of God—of a male God, that is. “Wisdom is truly the *form* in which JHWH makes

³⁸Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 25 (italics original).

³⁹Gerhard von Rad, quoted in Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 138 (italics added).

⁴⁰Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 114.

⁴¹She is all-pervasive, enlivening, and all-powerful (Wis. 7:22, 27; 8:1).

⁴²She is an “associate in his works” (Wis. 8:4). “She is a breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the Almighty” (Wis. 7:25).

himself present and in which *he* wished to be sought by man.”⁴³ She is “He”—*present*? “He” wishes to be sought as a female? He wants to be seen as what “He” is not—a female? It seems that God is slipping through the forms, moving between the names.

In fact, the neat distinction between the male God’s presence and the female “form” in the proposal just cited cannot withstand intrusion by Sophia herself. Her own self-descriptive oration destabilizes this implicit dualism from within, from inside the womb, and “from the beginning.” The many difficulties with the interpretation of Proverbs 8:22–31 are noted and strongly debated among biblical scholars. But then again, it is precisely from the reverberations of the effects of Sophia that the present postcolonial reading draws its energy.

The Lord *begot me*⁴⁴ at [as] the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was *poured out* [as from the waters of the womb],⁴⁵
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was *brought forth*,⁴⁶
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was *brought forth*.⁴⁷ (vv.22–25)

In this account of the beginning, God is not only expecting to be *sought* in the form of a woman; God is *delivering*. If God gives birth, pours out from God’s womb, and brings forth, how can we discriminate God from Goddess? Where can we draw the line? Is *She* God? Is *He* Goddess? As Sophia emerges from the depths of God’s womb, from God’s own maternal waters, she reveals fluid communion—rather than absolute opposition—as the difference between God and creation. In this scene of God’s maternal fecundity, divinity comes forth from God, revealing a Creator that defies characterization as merely over and against creation.

In Proverbs’ account, creation generates intervals between the Creator and Sophia and between Sophia and creation, not as empty gaps, but as openings for the flux of divine delight:

⁴³von Rad, quoted in Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 138. (italics added).

⁴⁴The translation “begot me” is well supported among biblical scholars. See, for example, Carole R. Fontaine, “The Social Role of Women in the World of Wisdom,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 136; William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970); and Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000). NRSV translation: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his works.”

⁴⁵As translated by Perdue, *Proverbs*, 144. Another possible translation is “I was hidden in the womb in antiquity,” McKane, *Proverbs*, 352.

⁴⁶“Literally, ‘was given birth,’” Perdue, *Proverbs*, 143. See also McKane, *Proverbs*, 352.

⁴⁷See note 46.

and I was daily his delight,
 rejoicing before him always,
 rejoicing in his inhabited world
 and delighting in the human race. (vv. 30b–31)

This clear parallelism between God's delight in Sophia and Sophia's delight in the created world links God and creation in a relational joy.

If Proverbs' writers were anxious about a Strange Woman who could incite the desire of the young men of Israel, imagine how disturbing would have been a hybrid Sophia, who could excite not only Israel's men but also Israel's God! The erotic undertones of these passages provoke disturbed scholarly looks: "in vv. 30f. the Egyptian idea of a deity caressing personified truth (ma-at) has *somehow*...found its way into our didactic poem."⁴⁸ In this desire of God for Sophia, it is the deity who seems out of God's "proper" place.

Proverbs' Readers

Readers of Proverbs, ancient and contemporary, Jewish and Christian, have felt the lure of Sophia. "All that you may desire cannot compare with her" (Prov. 8:11). Their reactions have been diverse. Solomon, for instance, shamelessly hymned his erotic desire "to take [Sophia] for...bride and become enamored of her beauty" (Wis. 8:2). For the rabbis, Solomon's desire for Sophia spoke to *their* yearning for the Torah, the reservoir of God's Wisdom. "Learn where is wisdom," Baruch exhorted his readers, "so that you may at the same time discern where there is length of days, and life" (Bar. 3:14). "She is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures forever. All who hold her fast will live" (Bar. 4:1). It was thus to the Torah that some dedicated their passion. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" (Song 1:2) inspired a rabbi to imagine the encounter with God's speech in startling terms: "The *dibbur* [i.e., commandment or utterance] itself went in turn to each of the Israelites and said to him, 'Do you undertake to keep me?'...He would reply, 'Yes, yes,' and straightway the commandment kissed him on the mouth and taught him the Torah."⁴⁹ A lovingly incarnate word indeed. But patriarchy recognizes the dangers of desire and the risks of the "Yes, Yes." Such unconditional openness to the other may undermine the supposed autonomy of the patriarchal subjects. A felt desire may elicit fear. Patriarchy responds by asserting its control over her. For instance, instead of boasting, like Solomon did, about his

⁴⁸von Rad, quoted in Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 138, italics added. Camp points out that the word used in this passage for "delight" is "used to describe Samson's play before the Philistines, as well as Isaac's intimate activity with Rebekah (Gen 26.8)" Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy*, 109.

⁴⁹David Winston, *Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1985), 16.

yearning for Sophia, Sirach imagines himself “pursuing her like a hunter and lying in wait on her paths” (Sir. 14:22). The contrast between a hunter-like pursuit—seeking to grasp and possess a desired/feared other—and Proverbs’ image of God’s delight—rejoicing in Sophia’s joy in creation—is striking. Already desire morphs into domination.

Nationalism is also haunted by the ghosts of its desires repressed at the boundaries between its “we” and the others. Quite frequently these ghosts have the shape of a woman. Indeed, nationalism often blames its own vulnerability on *her*: on her who lures men of the nation to transgress its borders or on her who falls prey to—or says “yes” to—an invading other, on her who conceives a hybrid.⁵⁰ Strange Women of ancient or modern worlds. But as the hybrids populate the *in-between* spaces—the regions of forbidden and forgotten encounters between the national “we” and its others—they stand as disturbing reminders of the vitality of these denied spaces. These hybrids, *mestizos*, literally born from colonizer and colonized, are joined by other hybrids—by choice or chance—*atravesados*, who also resist dominant classifications. They do not suit nationalist projects. It is not the fact that they are different from the dominant subject that makes them strange, but that their difference cannot be classified. When not dismissed as aberrant, their hybridity is simply disavowed by forcing the hybrid into recognizable categories of “outsiders” or “insiders.”⁵¹ That seems to have been the reaction of many of Sophia’s readers: They repeatedly attempted to fix her within established boundaries. Sirach was emphatic in securing Sophia’s location *within* Israel’s borders, calling the Creator “himself” to utter the decree: “Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance” (Sir. 24:8)—as if to reassert the stability of the boundaries between the inside/outside, national/foreign. For others, the important boundary was that between heaven and earth. First Enoch had Sophia “settled permanently among the angels” (Enoch 42:1–2). Even Philo anxiously tried to confine Sophia to a heavenly house.⁵² But soon many claimed to have heard her voice, crying out loud again, walking the streets again, from Galilee to Jerusalem and beyond.

⁵⁰Her own vulnerability is overlooked—even when miscegenation, a colonial strategy for the assimilation of the “native” other into the colonizer’s “race,” involves the possession of the native woman, her rape. Colonialism and patriarchy intermix.

⁵¹An example of this strategy can be seen in the nationalist discourse of Mexico, where *mestizaje* is the authorized image for the “we” of the nation, leading to the exclusion of the native population from that “we.” For a discussion of these dynamics and its challenges for postcolonial thinkers, see Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, “Who’s the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón,” in *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, ed. Ileana Rodríguez (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁵²Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet, Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 138.

Just as the rabbis encountered Sophia in divine commandments and thus in the Torah, early followers of Jesus felt they were in Sophia's presence. New Testament texts show traces of early christological interpretations inspired by the traditions of Sophia. In these christologies, Jesus is depicted either as Sophia's prophet or as Sophia herself. Luke's saying "Sophia is justified by all her children" (Lk. 7:35), the portrayal of the Spirit descending upon Jesus in the form of a dove (a symbol related to the Near Eastern love goddess), and the "I am" orations are all viewed as remnants of Sophia christologies. Like Sophia, Jesus himself has been recognized as a border crosser,⁵³ a *Mestizo*,⁵⁴ "the hybrid being par excellence in John's Gospel"⁵⁵—as one who transgresses the accepted boundaries of class, gender, religious purity, and, above all, the human-divine divide.

When we come to an explicit description of Christ in cosmological terms in the Fourth Gospel, however, it is not Sophia we find, but Logos. We see *He*, the Logos, not *She*, standing in the beginning with God and as God. What has happened? After reading Sophia declare, "The Lord begot me as the beginning of his work, the first of his acts long ago,"⁵⁶ the prologue's proclamation of a *male* figure as *the beginning* triggers feminist concerns. Not only does the feminine get excluded from this influential beginning, but this male figure has apparently mirrored and mimicked the role of Sophia. "John transfers the powers and attributes of Sophia to the Logos and then identifies Christ as incarnate Logos..."⁵⁷ Thus, "the male Logos absorbed the female Sophia (for clearly patriarchal reasons) and so brought about her disappearance."⁵⁸

Patriarchy turns gender into a trap. But should we concede Sophia's disappearance? Might Sophia be mocking the gender rules of recognition? For Daniel Boyarin, the presence of the Logos in John's prologue represents not the patriarchal erasure of Sophia, but her dynamic presence in Jewish thought. I noted that strands of the Jewish tradition associated Sophia with the Torah. Aramaic Targums also witness a tacit association between Wisdom and the Word of God, *Memra* (another feminine term). The usage of the term *Memra* in Palestinian Aramaic translations of the Bible parallels the functions of Logos in

⁵³Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz, "Border-Crossing and Its Redemptive Power in John 7:53–8:11: A Cultural Reading of Jesus and the *Accused*," in *John and Postcolonialism*, ed. Jeffrey L. Staley, *The Bible and Postcolonialism*, vol. 7 (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

⁵⁴Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁵⁵Guardiola-Sáenz, "Border-Crossing," 151.

⁵⁶Prov. 8:22.

⁵⁷Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 114.

⁵⁸Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia and the Bible* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 120.

Logos theologies; *Memra* was used of God as creating, speaking to humans, self-revealing, punishing the wicked, saving, and redeeming.⁵⁹ As evidence of the connection between the targumic *Memra* and the Logos of John, Boyarin refers to the midrash of the “four nights,” thought to be part of a paschal liturgy. It begins with the night of creation and culminates in the night of the Messiah. This midrash reads Genesis 1:3 as “Through his *Memra* there was light.” This interpretation of Genesis 1 through the hypostasized *Memra* is consonant with John’s account of the beginning through the hypostasized Logos. Boyarin concludes that the prologue of John was a midrash on the opening verses of Genesis, implicitly invoking Proverbs 8 as its hermeneutical intertext. “The primacy of Genesis as exegeted text explains why we have here ‘Logos’ and not ‘Sophia,’ without necessitating the assumption of a ‘Word’ tradition of Genesis in alleged conflict with a ‘Wisdom’ tradition...The preacher of the Prologue of John had to speak of Logos here, because his homiletical effort is directed at the opening verses of Genesis, with their majestic: ‘And God said: Let there be light, and there was light.’”⁶⁰ Therefore, he argues that the prologue should be read as “a recognizable and coherent instance of traditional midrash on Genesis 1 interpreted via *Proverbs* in such a way as to produce a hypostasized *Memra/Logos*.”⁶¹ Thus, the gender shift is explained as a by-product of the hermeneutical process.

Uncovering this apparent accident of translation—from a feminine Sophia/*Memra* to a masculine Logos—can hardly, however, erase the history of appropriation of a male Logos as the bestower of patriarchal power.⁶² We had best pay heed to Derrida’s warning: “Never treat as an accident *the force of the name* in what happens, occurs or is said in the name of religion.”⁶³ But the boundary between Sophia and Logos may nonetheless prove fruitful for feminist postcolonial re/namings.

Ancient readers of Logos did not construe the gender difference between Sophia and Logos as an insurmountable boundary. No friend of female images, Philo nonetheless admitted the fluidity of Sophia’s identity. Moses, he observed, “has disclosed that the lofty and heavenly Sophia is many-named; for he calls it ‘beginning’ and ‘image’ and ‘vision of God’.”⁶⁴ Likewise, Justin, for whom Christ was the Logos who

⁵⁹Daniel Boyarin, “The Gospel of the *Memra*: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (July 2001): 257.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 14.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 7.

⁶²The maleness of the Logos becomes especially pernicious when, in later two-natured christology, Logos becomes Son and doubles the maleness of the historical Jesus. Virginia Burrus, “Radical Sex and the Hybrid Christ: Unorthodox Reflections on Patristic Theology,” unpublished manuscript.

⁶³Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” in *Religion*, ed. Gianni Vattimo, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 6 (italics added).

⁶⁴David Winston, *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selections* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 92.

personified the Torah,⁶⁵ acknowledged that she/he whom “God has begotten as a Beginning...is called by the Holy Spirit the Glory of the Lord, sometimes Son, and sometimes Sophia, and sometimes Angel, and sometimes God, and sometimes Lord and Word.”⁶⁶ Sometimes Sophia, sometimes Logos, and sometimes God—this is a “begetting” that differentiates without cutting off.

The boundary between a feminine Sophia and a masculine Logos was not an obstacle for Origen either. In Origen’s systematic treatise *De Principis*, Sophiology is clearly assumed as the foundation for christology. “We have first to ascertain what the only-begotten Son of God is, seeing He is called by many different names, according to the circumstances and views of individuals. *For he is termed Sophia*, according to the expression of Solomon: ‘The Lord begot me—the beginning of His ways and among His works, before He made any other thing...In the beginning...He brought me forth...’” (1.2.1). Thus Origen opens his section “On Christ.” For this third-century father, the gospels witnessed to Sophia as Son, the first-born who “is not by nature a different person from Sophia, but one and the same” (1.2.1). Begotten as beginning, Origen explains, Sophia is generated eternally “as the brilliancy which is produced from the sun” (1.2.2). Indeed, the Father never existed “even for a single moment, without begetting his Sophia” (1.2.2). Because Sophia contains “the beginnings and causes and species of the whole creation” (1.2.2). God is always already differing from and in relation to creation, desiring to create (4.1.35), and rejoicing in the creation (1.4.4). “That Sophia in whom God delighted when the world was finished” reveals “that God ever rejoices”(1.4.4). It is indeed Sophia’s desire to reveal God. This revelation, however, is not external to her, for “she *outlines first in herself* the things which she wishes to reveal to others” (1.2.8). Sometimes Sophia, sometimes Logos, sometimes God.

The image outlined in John’s prologue, however, is seldom encountered as she who is called by many names, whose identity resists dominant categories, whose presence shocks. Instead, Logos became the alibi for our disavowal of Sophia—as much Jewish as Christian. Whereas Christians moved to name Logos as a purely Platonic concept, Rabbinic Judaism, in an “attempt to separate itself from its own history of now ‘Christian’ Logos theology,” “suppressed all talk of the Memra or Logos.”⁶⁷ Another attempt to secure her within established boundaries: “Make your dwelling...”—this time among Christians? Not only have we denied the “other” gender its divinity in the reification of Logos’ maleness, we have also contained the challenges of her/his ontological

⁶⁵M. J. Edwards, “Justin’s Logos and the Word of God,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3, no. 3 (1995).

⁶⁶Justine Dialogue 61.1, quoted by Boyarin, “Gospel of Memra,” 282.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 246, 254.

undecidability in neat demarcations between human and divine. As historian of early Christianity Rebecca Lyman observes, after Nicaea the Logos was absorbed into a separate divine realm, and it “could no longer belong to both sides of the divide and provide a link between Creator and Creature.”⁶⁸ Is this another command to Sophia to “settle permanently among the angels”? Has Sophia’s power to disrupt, her capacity to call into question, to open new spaces, become neutralized by endless attempts to locate and fix her?

Concluding Remarks

God begot Sophia as the beginning...Ages ago, Sophia was poured out at first, before the beginning of the earth. As the beginning, Sophia emerges as the site of God’s self-differentiation from creation. Beginning, interval, difference, and at the same time the opening of a space for relation. Not severance, but eternal begetting and continuous divine delight, and thus also the opening of a possibility for human delight. As God rejoices in Sophia and Sophia takes pleasure in the human race, would humans not partake in their joy, mirroring their passion, delighting in her who cries out at the crossroads, but who is also met in the intimacy of a kiss? This invitation to participate in God’s joy is also a challenge: to open ourselves to the other. Can we find joy in her who is simultaneously as close as a caress and irreducibly different? For despite persistent attempts to locate, to define, to fix, and to grasp Sophia’s identity—her location at the crossroads, her puzzling foreign accent, her undecidable ontological position,⁶⁹ will not be resolved. Her identity remains indefinable and, for that matter, open.⁷⁰ Her presence is perplexing; her spirit shocks. Indeed, Sophia’s distinctive mark is to remain inappropriable in predetermined categories, but existing between them as their constant challenge. What Bhabha says of the hybrid is also true of Sophia: Her hybridity is “not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures [or two religions or two ontological poles]...[It] creates a crisis” for “authority based on a system of recognition.”⁷¹ *Wisdom* overflows knowledge. Do we glimpse in this resistance to closure what Christian tradition has called divine *transcendence*?

God’s transcendence, God’s unassimilable otherness, is sensed in the excess that haunts all theological assertions, in the instability of the

⁶⁸J. Rebecca Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology: Models of Divine Activity in Origen, Eusebius, and Athanasius* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1993), 179. See also Virginia Burrus, “Creatio Ex-Libidine: Reading Ancient Logos Differently” in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2004)

⁶⁹T. Minh-Ha Trinh, *Woman Native Other* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 104.

⁷⁰Both Schroer and Murphy insist on the irreducible undecidability of the text’s ontological claim. Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 28; Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 136.

⁷¹Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 114.

names, in the “impossibility of identity...the unpredictability of presence.”⁷² Unlike traditional models that imagine God’s transcendence as over and against creation, the transcendence that Sophia represents is neither absent nor untouchable, but a challenging closeness that is always beyond grasp: “Divinity drawing near and passing by.”⁷³ She transcends our “world” not by being detached from it, but by opening the world to what it has not received, to what has been pushed outside—by crossing its borders. While exceeding theological constructions, her unforeseeable presence haunts theological certainties; it lurks as a “strange guardian in the margin,”⁷⁴ as though to keep us from idolatry. Constantly calling into question the certainty of the system, transcendence, as Kathryn Tanner argues, “becomes the model for the resistance to the Same, which all those who resist the status quo might follow in a solidarity that involves no ordinary identification according to general categories.”⁷⁵

A postcolonial optic helps us recognize just such modes of resistance and the solidarities of unexpected identifications; this reading of Sophia finds these modes of resistance intrinsically linked with divine transcendence. We have seen Proverbs’ community struggling to assert its identity by repressing its complex and messy relationships with others, only to be haunted by their return in the face of none other than divinity itself. Sophia embodies the very complexities that authoritative discourse could not control. In the midst of a text marked by projections of otherness designed to consolidate the authority of a group, Sophia takes her stand at the crossroads. It is from there—from the forbidden or forgotten spaces between the self-asserting “we” and the repulsed Other—that Sophia cries out.

Sophia outlines in herself what she wishes to reveal: She traces herself as a hybrid. Almost a foreign woman, but not quite. It is perhaps not strange to have found ancient and contemporary reactions to Sophia that resemble our own reactions to *los atravesados*: endless demands that they yield their secrets, that they perform recognizable roles, that they identify unambiguously with the insiders or just accept to belonging *elsewhere*. Some have even pursued them like hunters and laid wait in their paths. Spirits and hounds are baying behind them. Puzzlement, fascination, fear, denial, and even violence. Crying out from the crossroads, *los atravesados* may also be strange guardians at the margins. Facing their undefinable specificity may save us from idolatries of national identity, of established categories of sexual difference, of the assumed inevitability of

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Johnson, *She Who Is*, 124.

⁷⁴Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 176.

⁷⁵Kathryn Tanner, “Creation as a Mixed Metaphor” (paper presented at “Interstitial Initiations: Counterdiscourses of Creation,” First Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium, Drew University, September 30- October 1, 2001), 2.

our economic system. Sophia in her transcendence thus serves as a figure of the multiple others that haunt not only theological systems, but social ones as well.⁷⁶ In that challenge there is also an opportunity, an opening of a new space of relations. Perhaps even of new beginnings.

⁷⁶Denouncing the idolatry of the Western economic system by calling attention to its others (not an Other defined by the system but those others disavowed by it) has been a distinctive element of liberation theology. Latin American liberation philosopher Enrique Dussel explains: "The 'other' (the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, in the prophets' formulation, or under the universal name of 'the poor person') confronting the system is the metaphysical reality beyond the ontological being of the system. As a result he or she is 'exteriority,' what is most alien to the system as a totality, 'internal transcendence'...he or she is the 'locus' of God's epiphany in those who are non-system..." Enrique Dussel, "An Ethics of Liberation: Fundamental Hypotheses," in *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Lanham, Md.: Rowan & Littlefield, 2003), 139.