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**Asian North American Theology in the 21st Century:
A Personal Reflection**

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My Faith Journey: Grace in an Entangled Story

H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* talks about the shaping power of history and the historical context of human choices. Though we choose our actions in freedom, we are not independent, for we exercise our freedom in the midst of values and powers we have not chosen but by which we are bound. Niebuhr writes:

Before we choose to live we have been chosen into existence . . . have been elected members of humanity. . . . We have not chosen the time and place of our present, but we have been selected to stand at this post at this hour of watch or of battle. We have not chosen our culture . . . there has always been a choice prior to our own, and we live in dependence on it. . . . The history of culture illustrates in myriad ways this dependence of our freedom on consequences we do not choose.¹

As I look back in hindsight at the vocational path I have taken, I am amazed at the truth of Niebuhr's words about the presence of "a choice prior to [my] own, and [my life] dependence on it." Ministry, let alone theological education, was not on the horizon of my vocational choice in my youth. When I finished my college education, my desire was to work in international relations. In fact, at first I took a job in the airline industries. The war in Vietnam led me to a seminary to follow the path of conscientious objection to war. Even then, my purpose in seminary education was to wait for an opening in an alternative service. The language of theology was totally foreign to me when I entered seminary. But something about the inquiry into the meaning of Christian faith and life fascinated me. That was forty some years ago. I ended up devoting these years of my life to ministry and theological education. My vocational life and the freedom of choice I exercised were indeed dependent on "consequences" I did not choose. In his writing, Niebuhr points out that in choosing freedom we attend to our religious situation as well as to the value structures that condition our lives. There are values, beliefs, or dispositions that are woven into the very fabric of our life and thoughts that shape whatever choices we make. There are values or dispositions of mind and modes of response which we hold simply because it has been our common force to come into existence in a particular geocultural and historical context. Perhaps my dependence on consequences I did not choose is the real

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 249-51.

meaning behind Calvin's concept of predestination. Surely I was not predetermined to be a minister or a student of theology. But I was nudged "to stand at this post at this hour of watch or of battle."

Niebuhr's notion of the historical contexts of human choice suggests another mark of my vocational life: being on the boundary. In his autobiography, Paul Tillich characterizes his life as being "on the boundary."² Tillich relates how his life has been straddling the boundaries between theology and philosophy, the church and society, Europe and America, Protestantism and Catholicism, liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, and so on. In a similar fashion I find that my life has been "on the boundary" of one sort or another ever since my birth. I was born in 1943 during the height of World War II in Tokyo. The cultural marks of old Japan were still present in my family life at the time of my birth. The impact of old Japan is evident in my name, Fumitaka, which means "faithful filial piety." In my early years, I lived in the midst of the birth of modern Japan. My personal identity is also on the boundary between my country of birth and my new home where my spouse, Sharon, and my children and grandchildren live. Among other boundaries on which I live perhaps the most acute is the boundary between my Christian faith and Asian faith traditions. I am truly "amphibolous" in faith—a term I will explain later in this essay.

Life on the boundary is nomadic in character. There is no stability and permanency in life on the boundary. It is "not being at home in one's own home," as Theodore Adorno puts it.³ It is an exhausting life. But it is also, strangely, a rich and gratifying life. Such values as trust, interdependence, and honesty are very important for me even in the midst of the temptation for

² Paul Tillich, *On the Boundary* (New York: Scribner, 1966).

³ Theodore Adorno, *The Adorno Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

stability, safety, and predictability that I also crave. Early in my childhood at an annual ritual of *obon* (the return of the dead), I memorized a phrase I heard a priest recite from the Buddhist sutra: “the rosy cheek of today turns to a white skull of tomorrow.” In life on boundary I learned that impermanence is not to be resisted.

As I look back at my life, each turning point speaks of the “Alphabet of Grace.”⁴ If we learn to listen to the message of each turning point in our entangled lives, we hear the holy and elusive word that is spoken out of the depths—the word of grace. God speaks words of grace to me through each turning point. My personal reflection on Asian North American theology is really my attempt to witness to the presence of grace in my entangled life.

Construction of the Asian North American Cultural Capital

To begin, I would like to describe the establishment of Asian North American cultural capital in academy. I believe one of the critical challenges facing Asian American studies today (with its inclusion of Asian North American theology) is the question of how the political nature of a particular discipline becomes institutionalized as an academic field and what the consequences of this transformation might mean to institutions of higher learning in the United States. The issue of cultural capital is always associated with the emergence of a new discipline. Asian North American Studies, including theological studies, is no exception. Any form of cultural or intellectual activity can gain entry into the academic field only if it produces some form of cultural capital, which can be understood on a basic level as any kind of information or knowledge that possesses some value.

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Alphabet of Grace* (New York: Harper One, 1989).

The recent publication of *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* by Mark Chiang treats this subject quite persuasively.⁵ Chiang traces the inception of Asian American Studies to the 1968 student-led strike at San Francisco State University. Although his studies are located within the U.S. context, his insights will probably also apply to the Canadian context to a certain extent. The field of Asian American Studies was founded as a result of student and community protests that sought to make education more accessible and relevant to the American public. Chiang recounts how non-academic members of the Asian American communities initially served on department advisory boards to help plan and develop areas of the curriculum. But university pressures eventually dictated their expulsion. Chiang argues that the program threatened the principles of faculty autonomy and self-governance that were essential to the modern research university. The necessity of institutional survival forced the new program to conform to the rest of the university and therefore to exclude non-faculty members from any participation in program design and execution. Chiang says that at that moment in history, the intellectual work of the field was split off from its relation to the community at large, giving rise to the entire problematic of community representation in the academic sphere.

Needless to say, the original established goals for the field of Asian American Studies have been variously redefined since the time of San Francisco State's protest movement. Asian American Studies now finds itself in a radically altered sociopolitical landscape in universities and seminaries. I believe it is fair to say that Asian American Studies has achieved a certain

⁵ Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* (New York, NYU Press, 2009).

degree of academic legitimacy and respectability. This also means that it has a very different relation to those features of seminaries and universities that many of its founders opposed: faculty autonomy and the primacy of research.

And yet, the issue of representation and accountability of the field still remains. Insofar as seminaries, universities, and colleges are the primary institutions engaged in the determination and reproduction of the value of cultural capital, Asian North American studies necessarily had to convert itself into a form of cultural capital in order to be institutionalized in them. At the same time, such a cultural capital still needs to be accountable to Asian North American communities including the Asian North American faith community. Asian North American studies is an organic discipline that is reflective of what is going on in Asian American communities. I believe the question of how to negotiate between the legitimacy in academy and the accountability in our communities is one of the primary challenges facing Asian North American studies including theological enterprise.

This is to say that every aspect of Asian North American studies has been impacted by the relative position and circumstances of Asian North Americans in the wider North American society. Even as Asian American studies as an overall field remains committed to the political project of ethnic studies, its relation to other fields of minority studies is complicated. Many factors such as the model minority image and the perceived success of Asian North Americans in North American society; the “overrepresentation” of Asian North American students and faculty at colleges, universities, and seminaries in comparison to their percentage of the general population; and the rapid rise of some Asian economies in the global system distinguish Asian

North American studies from other minority fields. Despite being much fewer in number than either Latinos or African Americans, Asian North Americans as a group face greater challenges in forging political unity. Although as ethnically heterogeneous as Latinos, Asians lack a unifying language or colonial history, and are more divided along class lines—not only within particular ethnic communities, but also among them. At many schools, for example, students from poorer Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander communities are grouped together with more affluent East Asian and South Asian students and so are excluded from affirmative action and financial aid programs. Asian North American studies has had to grapple with the consequences of both real and perceived success. Ironically, this has meant in some ways that the field has less political and academic capital because it has seemed not as crucial for many Asian American students, who appear to be doing just fine without it. This may also explain the fragile nature of Asian North American centers in seminaries. With the exception of a few historically strong Asian North American centers, many are marginal in universities and seminaries. On the other hand, it also seems apparent that the tremendous growth of the Chinese and Indian economies has resulted in a resurgence of interest in Asian Studies that is pulling the two fields more closely together and potentially away from the U.S. national context that originally defined Asian North American Studies. The cultivation of Asian American studies' cultural capital in schools of higher learning continues to pose new and renewed challenges.

The Historical Development of Asian North American Theology: Voices and Visions: Sojourners in Asian North American Ministries

Now I would like to turn more explicitly to the development of Asian North American theology. Theology can be said to be an "imaginative construction" of a comprehensive and coherent picture of humanity in the world under God in theistic religious traditions.⁶ Within the Asian North American context, Christian scholars, ministers, and many writers have been engaged in theological construction from the early 1900s. Theology emerged in Asian North American religious communities in order to legitimize them and to assert these communities' hopes and promises for their future. Lately, Asian North American scholars of other religious traditions have begun to join in theological discourse because of an inclusive understanding of "theology" beyond the traditional theistic definition. One of the first issues in Asian North American theology is to note the fluid and sometimes hybrid nature of theistic, non-theistic, and polytheistic readings of faith traditions. Even though the monotheistic faith orientations of the Abrahamic faith traditions still predominate the assumed cosmology of Asian North American theology, the boundary between the theistic and extra-theistic religious traditions is not as clearly defined as for other racial and ethnic theological enterprises.

In the early stage of Asian North American religious tradition building (*actus tradendi*) which spanned the first several decades of the twentieth century, the theological writings of Asian North Americans appeared mainly in community newsletters and sermons collections of the Christian churches. For example, Japanese Christian leaders who were interred in

⁶ Gordon Kauffman, *An Essay on Theological Method*, 3rd edition (American Academy of Religion Book, 1995).

concentration camps during World War II produced numerous reflective writings on the meaning of their faith in that difficult era. The first notable collection of Asian North American theological construction appeared in *The Theologies of Asian Americans and the Pacific Peoples: The Reader*, an unpublished collection of theological reflective essays in 1976 compiled by Bishop Roy Sano, then the director of Center of Pacific and Asian American Center for Theology and Strategies (PACTS) in Berkeley, California.⁷ The contributors of *The Reader* included Christians and Buddhists, both ministers and lay leaders. What is noteworthy about this endeavor is the wide representation of women as contributors. Since the compilation of *The Reader*, there have been numerous books and essays on theology written by contemporary Asian North American theological religious leaders.⁸ We should note that *The Reader* and its companion volume, *Contours and Currents: Theologies of Pacific and Asian Americans* (1976),⁹ have never been published in spite of the important roles they played in the Pacific and Asian American theologies.

The first wave leaders have their own particular ethnic experiences but also share in corporate experiences that can be appropriated into one's own being as "learned memory." Asian North Americans' experiences are part of the "learned memory" of the people of God to be appropriated by the whole church.

⁷ Roy Y. Sano, ed., *The Theologies of Asian Americans and the Pacific Peoples: The Reader* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Pacific and Asian American Theology and Strategies, 1972).

⁸ A recent representative publication is *Asian American Christianity: A Reader*, edited by Viji Nakka-Cammauf and Timothy Tseng, (Pacific and Asian American and Canadian Christian Education Project & The Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity, 2009).

⁹ Roy Y. Sano, ed., *Contours and Currents: Theologies of Pacific and Asian Americans* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Pacific and Asian American Theology and Strategies, 1976).

A few sample representative theological topics that appeared in the first wave of Asian North American theological constructions during the 1960s and 1970s are: “Sojourners: In Asian-American and Biblical History” by Wesley Woo;¹⁰ “Cultural Heritage of Asian Americans” by Joseph Kitagawa;¹¹ “The Role of Religion in Asian American Communities by William Mamoru Shinto;¹² and “Asian Americans: A Forgotten Minority Comes of Age,” prepared by the Joint Strategy and Action Committee Inc.¹³

In these writings the word “sojourners” was prominent. The early theological reflections focused on the meaning of sojourners as: those who value memory as an indispensable key to identity formation; those who shape a particular posture towards relating with others; and those who develop a distinct “angle of vision” toward the future. In the past, Asian North American usage of the term “sojourner” was an epithet. A more positive meaning has evolved in light of Asian North American religious leaders’ sojourn experiences in the changing world, and this new understanding is redefining their beings and behaviors. Feelings of discomfort or uneasiness in North American societies and feelings of not quite fitting in can be channeled towards a new vision of human relatedness rather than a search for personal security and acceptance into society.

¹⁰ Wesley Woo, *Sojourners in Asian-American and Biblical History: Adult*, 2-9 (This article originally appeared in *Asian-American Christian Education Curriculum Project*, 1979: The Office of Ethnic and Urban Church Affairs & the Office of Education, Golden Gate Mission Area, Synod of the Pacific, United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., San Francisco, California).

¹¹ Joseph Kitagawa, *Contours & Currents*, 1-29.

¹² William Mamoru Shinto, *A Reader*, 16-27.

¹³ Joint Strategy and Action Committee, Inc., *The Reader*, 437-439.

It is no surprise that the first wave of Asian North Americans used the term “sojourner” to describe the history of Asian North Americans. The biblical reference of the term is obvious. What is important to note by the choice of the term “sojourner” is the gnawing sense that Asian North Americans live with a different yardstick from what is taken for granted as the common values and life orientations that are all around them. While racial and ethnic experiences were first considered to be the primary source of Asian North American identity, there was also a growing sense that there was something Asian North American about the experience that was shared with other ethnic communities. That “something” is the shared experience of being a sojourner, the experience of being “a stranger within.” This realization led the first wave of Asian and Pacific Americans to embrace a particular kind of life orientation and value system that speaks of what they experience: “Holy Insecurity.” Being a stranger at home means to look for ways of life which help Asian and Pacific Americans to live with basic insecurity and to find, paradoxically, the security of Christian faith in this state of insecurity. That is their interpretation of the biblical meaning of “sojourner.”¹⁴ The following passage appeared in the Centennial Worship Celebration of Japanese Christian Mission in North America (October 9, 1977) reflects the significance of the theological theme of sojourner.

Though arriving at the end of our first century and celebrating it, we still are seekers, looking for whatever it is we are looking for. We will be a pursuing church, or the pilgrim of God in the wilderness, or the dispersed like the first century Christians, or simply call it *search* – we are all on the way, together. But we are not alone, nor helpless. Our fathers crossed over the Pacific for a new life in this land; they were immigrants, away from their homes. They found what the life of sojourners was like, and yet,

¹⁴ Wesley Woo, “Sojourners: In Asian-American and Biblical History” (This article originally appeared in *Asian-American Christian Education Curriculum Project*, 1979: The Office of Ethnic and Urban Church Affairs & the Office of Education, Golden Gate Mission Area, Synod of the Pacific, United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., San Francisco, California).

wherever they were, they were not away from the Lord's field. They met him, and built their churches.¹⁵

Other sample writings of Asian North American theology in its first wave are:

- I. The question of what impelled Asian North American theologians to express their voices and visions.
 - “The Role of Religion in Asian American Communities”—William Mamoru Shinto (*The Reader*, pp.16-27)
 - “Asian Americans: A Forgotten Minority Comes of Age”—Joint Strategy and Action Committee, Inc (*The Reader*, pp.437-439)
 - “Problems and Promise of Filipinos In Hawaii”—Ben Junasa (*A Reader*, pp. 415-423)
 - “Ethnic Liberation Theology: Neo-Orthodoxy Reshaped or Replaced?”—Roy I. Sano (*Mission Trends No. 4: Liberation Theologies in North America and Europe*, eds. Gerald H. Anderson & Thomas F. Stransky, C.S.P. Paulist Press: New York/Ramsey/Toronto & WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1979), 247-258)

- II. The question of how they saw themselves then.
 - “In Remembering”—(*The Reader*, pp. 468-469)
 - “Perspective”—Joann Miyamoto (*The Reader*, p.1)
 - “Amazing Grace”—Violet Masuda (*The Reader*, pp. 2-3)
 - “My Spiritual Pilgrimage”—Jitsuo Morikawa (*The Reader*, pp.4-9)
 - “There Are Giants in the Land”—Teruo Kawata (Harold V. Jensen Lecture, First Baptist Church, Seattle, October 17, 1993)
 - “The Right to Struggle for Ourselves”—Marilyn J. Mar (*The Reader*, pp. 214-219)
 - “Theological Understanding of Women”—Eun Ja Kim Lee (*The Reader*, pp. 361-367)
 - “From Silence to Sounds”—June I. Kimoto (*The Reader*, pp. 368-373)
 - “Between Black and White: The Asian In America”—Lawrence H. Mamiya (*Contours & Currents*, pp. 232-265)
 - Asian American Ethnic Identity--Paul M. Nagano, “Asian American Ethnic Identity for Community” (*Asian American Theology: Multicultural Communities* 1992, pp. 151-188)

¹⁵ From: The Centennial Worship Celebration, Japanese Christian Mission in North America (October 9, 1977).

- III. The voices and visions of these theologians thirty Years later.
- “Resistance, Rebellion, and Defiance: Examples of Christian Activities Against Domination ”—Roy Sano (APARRI, 2006)
 - “Crossing Boundaries: Our Common Journey”—Lloyd Wake, (APARRI 2003 Plenary address)
 - Paul Nagano, "From Authoritative Christianity to Universal Pluralistic "Agape" (love) Faith" (unpublished document)

Representative Themes in Asian North American Theology Today

What is the current state of Asian American theological construction? To respond to this question, we need to articulate a working definition of what it means to be an Asian North American. The term “Asian North American” is relatively young one, just a hair over forty years old, with its first recorded public usage occurring at the University of California Berkeley, the gravitational center of 1960s student activism. As noted earlier in the section on “Asian North American Cultural Capital,” the role played by the student-led demonstrations at San Francisco State University is significant. In those days, being “Asian North American” was an act of passion and a statement of purpose. The lack of a stated history and definition around the term were a source of freedom, not concern, offering a chance to build a brand new way to be American or Canadian. The emergence of Asian North American theology was no doubt influenced by this political climate.

Four decades later, however, I believe the situation is more complicated. I like Jeff Yang’s description:

...bringing together Asian Americans has often seemed like herding cats, if those cats were randomly mixed in with, say, dogs, sheep and giraffes—a metaphor that reflects the staggering diversity of our community, which incorporates dozens of nationalities, each

with multiple linguistic, religious and ethnic subsets, and a varying historical record of immigration to the United States.¹⁶

No community has been more impacted by multiracialism, transnationalism and panculturalism than the Asian North American community. Lisa Lowe talks about Asian North American cultural identity in terms of “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity.”¹⁷ I believe Asian North Americans represent something of a beta test for the future meaning of “peoplehood” in the United States. I believe the definition of peoplehood and the question of what brings people together in an increasingly interrelated and yet fractured nation is the context in which Asian North American theology needs to be placed. Asian American theology needs to contribute to the coherence of people in a world that is becoming simultaneously closer to and more distant from each other.

A number of themes continue to challenge and shape the future of Asian North American theology. These include the theological meaning of “sojourner” (a theme that emerged in an early stage of the development of Asian North American theology); liminality; the politicization and racialization of faith; the intersection of gender and sexuality in this racialized society of ours; and the need for a shift from the monotheism-centered theology to a reflection of Christian faith among pluralistic cosmologies of lived faiths. At the same time, I believe Asian North Americans also participate in the traditioning process of Christian faith, *actus tradendi*, that has been unfolding in history. Our present theological activities are fashioned toward a future that has already been signaled by the decisive event of Christ in history. In theology we explore and

¹⁶ Jeff Yang, “What does it mean to be Asian American?” San Francisco Chronicle, June 4, 2009.

¹⁷ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1996) 60-83.

name the meaning of the promised signals for humanity as revealed in the Christ event. In this sense, I believe we Asian North Americans are co-sojourners with all the other people of faith in the *actus tradendi* that began a long time ago. Ultimately, as H. Richard Niebuhr so aptly describes the purpose of the church and ministry and thus theological enterprise, theology participates in the common journey to “increase the love of God and neighbor.”¹⁸

The Three-fold Epistemological Scaffold of Asian North American Theological Construction

Finally, I would like to summarize my personal theological reflection as a person who has lived in the United States for nearly fifty years and considers both Japan and the United States as my homes. (A more comprehensive version of my theological thoughts is scheduled to be published in early 2011.) I should say my work here is more a prolegomena for a theological construction than theology itself. What I offer is my own reading of the epistemological scaffold that sets the context of an Asian American theological construction; I am limiting my work to a U.S. context. This scaffold is three-fold: (1) the translocal meaning of race; (2) the spirit of dissonance and dissent; and (3) “amphibolous” faith orientation.

Race as Translocal

The first pillar of the epistemological scaffold that I propose is the meaning of race experienced and interpreted by Asian Americans. Historian Gary Okihiro poses the question, “Is Yellow Black or White?”¹⁹ This question reflects the ambiguous role Asian Americans hold in

¹⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1977).

¹⁹ Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).

this racialized society. It is a well-known observation that when race relations are a black and white binary, whites render Asian Americans, American Indians, Latina/os, and Pacific Islanders invisible. At the same time, it is equally true that Asian Americans share with African Americans the status and repression of nonwhites as the “Other.” Therein lies what Okihiro terms the “debilitating aspect of Asian-African antipathy” and, at the same time, the liberating nature of African-Asian unity.²⁰ We also need to note that the ambivalence associated with the position of Asian Americans in the U.S. racial landscape is exacerbated by viewing Asian Americans as a “model minority” on the one hand and “foreigners within” on the other.

This contradiction originates from how Asian Americans have been treated in the history of the United States, a history that has contributed to our unique racial formation in the United States. To complicate this history, Asian Americans have been variously lumped together with whites or blacks, depending on the value for the dominant culture. For example, there were periods in American history when both African and Asian work forces were seen as one in so far as they were essential for the maintenance of white supremacy. Okihiro says “...they were both members of an oppressed class of ‘colored’ laborers, and they were both tied historically to the global network of labor migration as slaves and coolies.”²¹

On the other hand, Asian Americans were sometimes paradoxically classified as whites in order to insulate whites from African Americans. The “model minority” perception of Asian Americans maintains the assumption that Asian Americans are “near whites” or “whiter than

²⁰ Gary Y. Okihiro. “Is Yellow Black or White?” in *Asian Americans: Experiences and Perspectives*, ed. Timothy P. Fong & Larry H. Shinagawa. New York: Prentice Hall, 2000. 63.

²¹ Ibid.

whites,” even though in this minority stereotype we continue to experience racism like African Americans and other racially disfranchised groups of people. This ambiguous state of race classification of Asian Americans has resulted in a confused image of who we are in the racial hierarchy of the United States and, simultaneously, created opportunities for an alliance with other racially oppressed groups of people. Asian American scholar Lisa Lowe points out that Asian Americans live in “the *contradictions* of Asian immigration, which at different moments in the last two centuries of Asian entry into the United States have placed Asians ‘within’ the U.S. nation-state, its workplaces, and its markets, yet linguistically, culturally, and racially marked Asians as ‘foreign’ and ‘outside’ the national polity.”²²

Because of the conflicting perceptions placed upon Asian Americans, we experience race to be *translocal*; there is no fixed locus for our race experiences. This translocal racial identity produces cultural and religious expressions in response to the prevailing desires of America to domesticate and assimilate us into the wider society. Translocality is the cultural and religious context of navigating the conflicting and contradicting treatments of Asian Americans by America. Asian Americans are often *not at home in our own home, displaced in the very society we live*. The translocal race experiences of Asian Americans have produced a particular cultural and religious value orientation, if you will, a nomadic morality. This nomadic value orientation is akin to what Theodor Adorno calls an exilic morality.²³ We are not at home in our own home.

²² Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, 8.

²³ Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: New Left Books, 1951), 38-39. Quoted in Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 564-565. “Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible. The traditional residences we grew up in have grown intolerable: each trait of comfort in them is paid for with a betrayal of knowledge, each vestige of shelter with the musty pact of family interests. . . . The house is past. . . it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home.”

But our translocal racial experiences say to us that race could be a site not only for an alternate value orientation—the morality of “not being at home in one’s own home”—as much as the locus of a particular cultural and religious identity. Race, in other words, is a site to create a new set of conventions, a second tongue, for interpreting “the reality [Asian Americans] share within the majority through the institutions it creates or infiltrates.”²⁴ When life is translocal, what is valued is trust, intimacy, and honesty that arise out of the importance of relationship-building. Stability, security, and insurance, on the other hand, are not as much of a value because they can be taken away at anytime. We realize that our translocal racial identity is fragile and its transmission to subsequent generations is by no means guaranteed. This nomadic orientation helps Asian Americans to recognize other folks and communities that are not at home in our own society.

Sensitivity to Pathos

The second pillar of the threefold epistemological scaffold I propose is the sensitivity to pathos that has grown out of a culture of dissonance and dissent. Asian American culture is dissonant and irresolute within the prevailing dominant societal and cultural milieu. Language as an indispensable means of expressing culture reveals both dissonance and irresolution for Asian Americans. As Frantz Fanon points out, “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.”²⁵

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 17-18.

The language of dissonance and dissent is prevalent in Asian American literature. In Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's book *Dictee*, for example, the language of dissonance and dissent is clearly expressive. The protagonist of the book writes poorly, stutters, stops, and leaves verbs un-conjugated. She adulterates the Catholic catechism by mocking the expression that human beings are created in "God's likeness" as duplication, counterfeiting, carbon copying, and mirroring. She dissents and resists the pressure to mimic the powerful religion that is forced upon her from outside. The language of dissonance and dissent points to yet another and deeper epistemological significance for Asian Americans: the emergence of a distinct angle of vision with sensitivity toward pathos in life arising out of the dissonant culture. Carlos Bulosan in his work, *America Is in the Heart*, captures this sensitivity:

Why was America so kind and yet so cruel? Was there no way to simplify things in this continent so that suffering would be minimized? Was there no common denominator on which we could all meet? I was angry and confused and wondered if I would ever understand this paradox.²⁶

The juxtaposition of the publicly-owned ideal of a democratic nation and Bulosan's experience of suffering, sorrow, and exclusion from the ideal, which is replicated many times over by Asian immigrants, represents the real America. "We are America!"—without any resolution or reconciliation between the ideal and the contradicting reality experienced by Asian immigrants—is the well-spring of the sensitivity to pathos that is deeply ingrained in Asian Americans. The movement of the spirit of dissent out of dissonance is ritualized and traditioned into a reliable cultural referential point within the community. The Asian American language of

²⁶ Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart* (Seattle, Washington: reprint, University of Washington Press, 1943), 147.

dissonance and dissent is located in a “storied place” where lost memories are reinvented and the unlike varieties of silence emerge into spoken words connecting intergenerationally through the past of the living and the dead into the present in community. In other words, storied places such as the immigration station barrack museum of Angel Island and the sites of Japanese American internment camps during World War II (Manzanar, Tule Lake, and other sites) are sacred spaces where “that which is rejected is ploughed back for a renewal of life,”²⁷ as my colleague Joanne Doi tells us. Thus, the spirit of dissonance and dissent in Asian Americans, collectively as well as individually, moves us in much the same way as a ritual pilgrimage to a storied site.

Asian Americans’ translocal identity leads to our conscious positioning in society that is a willful dissent against the officially prescribed history of America. This positioning emerges out of the historical experiences of disruption, pain, and dissonance that await our excavation and retrieval. Ritualized acts of excavation and retrieval of these referential points in our history are indeed the dissenting acts that serve as communal glue to bind Asian Americans together. The historical injuries and our experiences of dissonance carry the memory of a rehabilitative meaning both in regard to Asian Americans ourselves and also to those who have undergone similar experiences. These experiences uncover “hidden histories” that fuel the emergence of important social movements of the time. In this sense, the spirit of dissent born out of our dissonance with the dominant racial and cultural group is both subversive and constructive. The spirit of willful dissent is a powerful driving force to move Asian American communities toward the future as a “people on the way” in the company of other marginalized “people on the way.” It

²⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1966), 162.

acts as the seedbed for an alternate set of sacred conventions—a bond, a second tongue—that brings people together.²⁸

Amphibolous Faith

The third pillar of the epistemological scaffold for Asian Americans as I see it is what I call an “*amphibolous*” faith. For Asian Americans, faith is likely to be expressed within a myriad of conflicting religious traditions that force us to live in a state of dis-identification with any singular religion. Simply put, amphibolous faith is the simultaneous existence of radically different epistemological and cosmological orientations in a person or in a community. These orientations are materially lived as well as spiritually expressed. The contradiction of these diverse orientations does not readily settle for resolution or compromise.

In his D.Min. project at the Pacific School of Religion, Yoshiki Morita talked about the meaning of memorial services among the newly arrived Japanese immigrants who come the Sycamore United Church of Christ in El Cerrito, California, where he is the Japanese language pastor. One of the illustrative images he introduced was a picture of a *butsudan*, a Buddhist altar known as a “Buddha Box.” This is a family altar honoring deceased members. The photograph that pastor Morita exhibited was a *butsudan* with a cross in the middle and a place just under the cross for the picture of the deceased—as is common in the Buddhist practice. This is a graphic image of an amphibolous faith.

²⁸David Ng, ed., *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1996).

An “amphibolous faith” is, to a certain extent, akin to the term *aporia* as defined by Jacques Derrida. For him, the term speaks of “difficulty in choosing,” “doubt,” or, more precisely, a blockage: “no road” in the context of justice.²⁹ Amphibolous faith entails for Asian Americans an interminable experience like the experience of the “undecidable,” a “blind spot” (Derrida) of both in metaphysics and in religion. In other words, amphiboly is an experience of a non-singular vision with an unresolved state of non-complimentary cosmologies and faith traditions existing within a person or in a community. This domain of contradictions becomes particularly acute for Asian American Christians who are assumed to embrace the monotheistic claims of historical Christian faith and, at the same time, are inclined to live with the non-theistic cosmologies embedded in the Asian religious traditions we inherit as our cultural DNAs.

For Asian Americans, epistemology begins with the notion that reality is multiple, and not *e pluribus unum*, (out of many one) or unity in diversity. The Christian use of *butsudan*, the Buddhist family altar, points to this difference. The depth-reality is not one but many. Asian Americans live with *aporia*, “undecidable,” a refusal to be acquiesced into a singular vision precisely because of the contradiction inherent between the “foreigner within” and “model minority.” In other words, we Asian Americans live in an amphibolous state both spiritually and

²⁹Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 24-26. Here Derrida treats the history of justice. He stresses the Greek etymology of the word “horizon”: “As its Greek name suggests, a horizon is both the opening and limit that defines an infinite progress or a period of waiting.” Justice, however, even though it is un-presentable, does not wait. A just decision is always required immediately. It cannot furnish itself with unlimited knowledge. The moment of decision itself remains a finite moment of urgency and precipitation. The instant of decision is then the moment of madness, acting in the night of non-knowledge and non-rule. Applied in the notion of amphibolous spirituality, there is the “ghost of the undecidable” is always present in amphiboly.

materially. The crucial point to understand is that those whose faith is amphibolous understand the pressure to mimic the dominant ideology, and, at the same time, are driven by the desire to reassemble their broken history into a new whole. People for whom faith is amphibolous are aware that such restoration and rehabilitation are likely to be unattainable given the histories of failed attempts to establish restored communities by other groups such as Native Americans, Palestinians, and Asian Americans ourselves. Thus, our expressions of faith exist in a precarious state of being without any assurance of a glorious future. But those who embrace the amphibolous faith still *provisionally* insist and believe in “planting an apple tree even if the world comes to its end tomorrow.” The pathos of amphibolous faith indelibly etches its mark on the life of Asian American Christians.

The amphibolous faith suggests that the alternative to an exclusive belief is not simply unbelief but a different kind of belief, one that embraces irresoluteness, disruption, and even uncertainty and yet enables the believer to respect that which we do not understand. In a complex world, wisdom is knowing that one does not really know for certain so that the believer can keep the future open with a provisional stance of faith as the only guide. The person of amphibolous faith longs, most of all, for bridge-building amidst disrupted and estranged relationships, bridge-building whose real meaning is an “interpretation of the worlds” through the grammar of amphiboly.

The Courage to Imagine Life as Others Live

What is needed today for reclaiming a societal coherence—that is, peoplehood—is the nurturing of another tongue, a second tongue, in order to have the courage to imagine life as

others live it. As George Semaan, editor of the London-based Arabic language newspaper, *Al Hayat*, commented after the horrendous events of 9/11, the need for another tongue is to

change [our] perspective on how [we] build [our] interests and now [we] defend them by building a network of relationships that take into consideration the interests of others who are weak and who have rights but are incapable of imposing these interests or these rights.³⁰

In our increasingly diverse population, not only in terms of race, culture, and religion, but equally in terms of wealth, class, and power, we need a capacity to see life contrapuntally. “With the lives of the diverse characters starkly juxtaposed—in constant counterpoint...[to create] a world that offers both biting criticism and profound sympathy” says Edward Said.³¹ Such a contrapuntal task for the renewal of peoplehood seeks mutual consideration of otherwise incongruent social, economic, and political practices of culture and of history with particular attention given to the practices, cultures, histories and faiths that have been neglected and undervalued. Amphibolous faith with its own epistemological view of the world provides a glimpse of such a counter-perspective of our collective life.

A new peoplehood may have a chance to be born in a world where another tongue is readily spoken, a tongue that welcomes an amphibolous faith in which eluding certainty becomes the value which propels us into action—especially in those contexts where exploitation of those on the underside of life is palpable. From this responsible reaction to the diminishment of fellow human beings, it is not difficult to perceive that amphiboly has its place. What is now needed is

³⁰ George Semaan, editor of the London-based Arabic-language newspaper, *Al Hayat*, appeared in *The Christian Century* (September 26-October 3, 2001), 45.

³¹ Edward Said, *Huxley's Point Counter Point Celebrates 75th Anniversary* (Center for Book Culture.org May 2003).

the commitment to allow our imaginations to transform our minds and hearts, inform our lips and hands, and inspire our thoughts and action so that an amphibolous faith is recognized and valued for what it offers: that *when we think we have grasped reality, whatever our intentions be, the reality passes through our minds, in front of us, eludes us and goes on its way.* The future of peoplehood may well be a gathering of all people who are on the way together.

Conclusion

The future of peoplehood in the United States speaks of what Ronald Takaki calls the creation of a “larger memory.” His thoughts would probably also speak to Canadians to a certain extent:

Our expanding ethnic diversity of this century, a time when we will all be minorities, offers us an invitation to create a larger memory of who we are as Americans and to reaffirm our founding principle of equality. Let’s put aside fears of the “disuniting of America” and warnings of the “clash of civilizations.” As Langston Hughes sang, “Let America be America, where equality is in the air we breathe.”³²

I believe that the creation of what Takaki terms as a “larger memory” in light of the divine presence in the world is a necessary task facing Asian North American theological construction.

Theology is uniquely accountable to the past and to the future, not simply to the present.

Theology encompasses both memory and hope. The creation of a larger memory is at the same time our pursuit of hope, or for Christians, our faith in and living out the signals of the promised humanity that was revealed in the Christ event. Theological construction is about learning that molds a lifetime, learning that transmits the heritage of millennia, learning that shapes the future

³² Ronald Takaki, 2001 WashingtonPost.com interview, quoted by Jeff Yang, “What does it mean to be Asian American?” SFGate, June 2, 2009.

in light of this promise. Asian North American theological communities are stewards of this living tradition where learning and knowledge are pursued because they define what has over centuries made the faithful pursue a larger memory of who we are as human.