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**From Classical Tradition Maintenance to Remix *Traditioning*:
Revisioning Asian American Theologies for the 21st Century**

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***New Overtures: Asian North American Theology in the 21st Century*
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In this chapter, I would like to examine the implications of hybridities, multiple belongings, and multiple border crossings on Asian American theological reflections in twenty-first century United States. First, I would like to argue that early Asian American theologies emphasized the ideals of cohesive group identity and overarching intra-group consensus and harmony, while downplaying the challenges of hybridities and conflicts that are caused by

emerging generational shifts from immigrant to American-born Asian Americans and multiple border crossings that arise from outmarriages and adoptions. Second, I would like to make the case that the essentialized categories of racial-ethnic and cultural identities have to be deconstructed and remixed in new keys and forms to address the implications of hybridities and multiple border crossings among the 1.5 generation and American-born Asians, bi/multiracial Asian Americans, and Asian adoptees. Third, I would like to propose that Asian American theologies move away from classical *tradition maintenance* to the creative remix of *traditioning*, i.e., from theologies that uncritically reinscribe the past to theologies as creative and dynamic endeavors that seek to address the multiplicity of heterogenized, hybridized, and conflicting constructions of faith and identity within a multidimensional daily living in a pluralistic society.

What is “Asian American”?

Before we proceed with our exploration, we need to be aware that the term “Asian American” is often used in contemporary discourse as a generic and convenient shorthand to categorize all Americans of Asian ancestry and heritage, with their diverse languages, cultures, and traditions. In so doing, the term “Asian American” masks distinct racial-ethnic communities under the facade of a homogenous and monolithic pan-Asian American identity that exists more in theory than in reality. In truth, the category of “Asian Americans” encompasses groups of peoples of diverse languages, cultures, spiritual traditions, worldviews, socio-economic classes, and generational levels, such that all attempts at generalizations run the significant risk of error. Instead of viewing the Asian American identity in rigid and normative terms, perhaps this

identity is better understood as diverse and multiple, constantly in flux and being shaped by, as well as shaping, historical, social, cultural, and political contexts. The Asian American scholar Lisa Lowe explains the implications of Asian American heterogeneity as follows:

What is referred to as “Asian American” is clearly a heterogeneous entity. From the perspective of the majority culture, Asian Americans may very well be constructed as different from, and other than, Euro-Americans. But from the perspectives of Asian Americans, we are perhaps even more different, more diverse among ourselves. . . . As with other diasporas in the United States, the Asian immigrant collectivity is unstable and changeable, with its cohesion complicated by intergenerationality, by various degrees of identification and relation to a “homeland,” and by different extent of assimilation to and distinction from “majority culture” in the United States.¹

More significantly, the label “Asian American” is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a useful label to define a panethnic identity that serves to unite disparate ethnic Asian American communities under a common umbrella in contemporary sociopolitical discourse, giving them a united and collective voice vis-à-vis the dominant White mainstream. On the other hand, it is also problematic insofar as its categories break down when confronted with American-born, adoptees, and bi/multiracial Asian Americans who are the products of interracial marriages. Indeed, the presence of adoptees and bi/multiracial Asian Americans challenges the uncritical presumption of a normative, monolithic, and static notion of “Asianness.” The incongruity arising from their presence serves as a reminder that identity is negotiated and constructed, neither given nor born, and neither static nor fixed. Are the American-born, adoptees, and bi/multiracial Asian Americans authentically Asian Americans? Would they be able to do authentic

¹ Lisa Lowe, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences.” *Diaspora* 1 (1991): 27.

Asian American theological reflections? Are they legitimate subjects of Asian American theologizing?

Asian American Theologians and their Theologizing

The initial wave of Asian American theologians who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s were exclusively Japanese American, Korean American, and Chinese American men who carried out their theologizing from within mainline Protestant traditions and who also struggled from outside the mainstream theological establishment to challenge the entrenched racism and discrimination of mainstream U.S. society and Christian institutions. These theologians sought to address issues of race relations, faith and culture, and social justice with which the Japanese American, Korean American, and Chinese American communities were confronted.

In response to the challenges of their social location and the historic racial shifts that were occurring in the 1960s and 1970s, prominent early Asian American theologians such as Japanese American theologians Roy Sano,² Paul Nagano,³ and Jitsuo Morikawa,⁴ Korean

² See Roy I. Sano, "Cultural Genocide and Cultural Liberation Through Amerasian Protestantism," in *The Theologies of Asian Americans and Pacific Peoples: A Reader*, comp. Roy I. Sano (Berkeley, California: Asian Center for Theology and Strategies, Pacific School of Religion, 1976), 28-50; "Ministry for a Liberating Ethnicity," in *Ibid.*, 281-295; "Yes, We'll Have No More Bananas In Church," in *Ibid.*, 51-54; "This Matter of Integration," in *Ibid.*, 262-263; "The Church: One Holy Catholic and Apostolic," in *Ibid.*, 264-280; "The Bible and Pacific Basin Peoples," in *Ibid.*, 296-309; *From Every Nation Without Number: Racial and Ethnic Diversity in United Methodism* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1982); and "Shifts in Reading the Bible: Hermeneutical Moves Among Asian Americans," *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 105-118.

³ See Paul M. Nagano, "The Japanese Americans' Search for Identity, Ethnic Pluralism, and A Christian Basis of Permanent Identity," in Sano, *Theologies of Asian Americans and Pacific Peoples*, 225-253; "Biblical and Theological Statement For The Asian American Baptist Caucus," in *Ibid.*, 450-456; "My Theological and Identity Odyssey," *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 1 (1996): 4-9; and "A Japanese-American Pilgrimage: Theological Reflections," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, eds. Peter C. Phan & Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1999), 63-79.

⁴ See Jitsuo Morikawa, *My Spiritual Pilgrimage* (New York: Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board of the American Baptist Churches, 1973) and "Toward an Asian American Theology," *American Baptist Quarterly* 12 (1993): 179-189.

American theologians Jung Young Lee⁵ and Sang Hyun Lee,⁶ and Chinese American theologians Wesley Woo⁷ and David Ng⁸ were very interested in issues of marginality and liminality that arose as a result of the racism and discrimination within the United States society in general and the United States church in particular. They challenged their White American counterparts about the ethnocentrism of U.S. Christianity and U.S. theologians. In their theological responses to the challenges posed by White American ecclesiastical and theological institutions, idealized and essentialized biological and cultural notions of what constituted “Asian” and “American”

⁵ See Jung Young Lee, *A Theology of Change: A Christian Concept of God in Eastern Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979); “Marginality: A Multi-Ethnic Approach to Theology from an Asian-American Perspective,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 7 (1993): 244-53; *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996); and “A Life In-Between: A Korean-American Journey,” in Phan and Lee, *Journeys at the Margin*, 23-39.

⁶ See Sang Hyun Lee, “Called to be Pilgrims: Toward a Theology Within the Korean American Context,” in *The Korean Immigrant in America*, eds. Byong-suh Kim and Sang Hyun Lee (Montclair, NJ: Association of Korean Christian Scholars in North America, 1980), 37-74; “Called to be Pilgrims: Toward an Asian-American Theology from the Korean Immigrant Perspective,” in *Korean American Ministry: A Resource Book*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1987), 90-120; “Korean American Presbyterians: A Need for Ethnic Particularity and the Challenge of Christian Pilgrimage,” in *The Diversity of Discipleship: Presbyterians and Twentieth Century Christian Witness*, eds. Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 312-330; “How Shall We Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?” *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 1 (1996): 77-81; “Pilgrimage and Home in the Wilderness of Marginality: Symbols and Context in Asian American Theology,” in *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*, eds. Ho-Youn Kwon, Kwang Chung-Kim, and R. Stephen Warner (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 55-69; and “Marginality as Coerced Liminality: Toward an Understanding of the Context of Asian American Theology,” in *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans*, eds. Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2003), 11-28.

⁷ See Wesley S. Woo, *The History of Pacific and Asian American Churches in Their Communities: Study Guide* (Berkeley, CA: Pacific and Asian American Center for Theology and Strategies, 1977) and *Chinese American Christian Identity and Calling* (Berkeley, California: Pacific and Asian American Center for Theology and Strategies, 1979).

⁸ See David Ng, “The Chinaman’s Chances Are Improving,” in Sano, *Theologies of Asian Americans and Pacific Peoples*, 153-155; *Developing Leaders for Youth Ministry* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1984); *Youth in the Community of Disciples* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1984); “Sojourners Bearing Gifts: Pacific Asian American Christian Education,” in *Ethnicity in the Education of the Church*, ed. Charles R. Foster (Nashville, Tennessee: Scarritt Press, 1987), 7-23; “Working with Pacific Asian American families,” in *Faith and Families: A Parish Program for Parenting In Faith Growth*, eds. Thomas Bright and John Roberto (New Rochelle, New York: Catholic Family Series, 1992), ch. 5; “Introduction,” in *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture and Community*, ed. David Ng (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1996), xv-xxix; “Varieties of Congregations or Varieties of People,” in *Ibid.*, 281-300; and “A Path of Concentric Circles: Toward an Autobiographical Theology of Community,” in Phan and Lee, *Journeys at the Margin*, 81-102.

identities were commonly adopted by these early Asian American theologians to undergird their theological reflections. While these constructs proved useful to define and frame the theological issues of assimilation, dislocation, and discrimination vis-à-vis the ethnocentrism of White American ecclesial and theological perspectives, it also unfortunately downplayed differences and particularities within Asian American realities that arise from generational differences between immigrant and American-born, and Asian Americans with hybridized identities.

Since the 1980s, American-born Asian Americans, feminist theologians, biblical scholars, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Catholic thinkers, theologians from other Asian racial-ethnic communities, e.g., Filipino American, Vietnamese American, Thai American, Indian American are chiming in with their contributions, resulting in the emergence of an increasingly diversified and pluralistic range of creative and innovative Asian American theological approaches that seek to engage with church, community, and society at large. This has resulted in a broad range of diverse, complex, and nuanced theological reflections that belie easy categorization. Compared to the early Asian American theologies of the 1960s and 1970s which focused on issues of liberation and equality for Asian American Christians vis-à-vis their White Christian American counterparts, since the 1980s an increasing number of Asian American theologians have demonstrated a willingness to grapple with the ambiguities that emerge when the blurring of the boundaries is giving rise to an increasingly multivalent and complex intertwining of social, cultural, sexual, communal, and religious identities. What follows below is an introduction to a broad cross-section of emerging Asian American theologians whose theological contributions reveal the diversity and plurality of contemporary Asian American theologies.

For example, the Korean American theologian Andrew Sung Park's theological reflection on the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots that pitted Blacks against Korean Americans challenges the Korean American Christian community in Los Angeles to reexamine their own culpability in their attitudes toward Blacks. He goes on to articulate a theology of transmutation, i.e., a mutual cooperation, marked by mutual enrichment and mutual challenge, among the various racial groups in the United States amid much racial diversity. In the process of doing so, the challenges of racism and discrimination are overcome, interracial relations are strengthened, and past hurts and sufferings (i.e., *han*) of victims of racism and discrimination are healed.⁹

Similarly, the Japanese American biblical scholar Frank Yamada questions the uncritical privileging of essentialized notions of what constitutes "Asian American," arguing that identity constructions are shaped by forces of hybridity and heterogeneity. Specifically, he asserts that cultural identity for third and later generations of American-born Asian Americans is messy, complicated, and conflicting. He contends that Asian American theologians "must move beyond idealized and essentialist notions of culture" and a tendency to utilize the immigrant experience of marginality and liminality as normative of all Asian Americans to "emphasize particularity, contradiction, and complexity in order to counter oversimplified personifications of what constitutes Asian American."¹⁰ In particular, Yamada insists that themes of marginality and

⁹ See discussion in Andrew Sung Park, *Racial Conflict and Healing: An Asian-American Theological Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996); "Church and Theology: My Theological Journey," in Phan and Lee, *Journeys at the Margin*, 161-172; "A Theology of Transmutation," in *A Dream Unfinished: Theological Reflections on America from the Margins*, eds. Eleazar S. Fernandez and Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 152-166; "A Theology of *Tao* (Way): *Han, Sin, and Evil*," in Matsuoka and Fernandez, *Realizing the America of Our Hearts*, 41-54; and *From Hurt to Healing: A Theology of the Wounded* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2004).

¹⁰ See Frank M. Yamada, "Constructing Hybridity and Heterogeneity: Asian American Biblical Interpretation from a Third-Generation Perspective," in *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2006), 166.

liminality are based upon stable, essentialized notions of what it means to be Asian and American.¹¹ As a result, he stresses hybridity and heterogeneity over the essentialism, with the later generations breaking down fixed boundaries and “pure” notions of culture that earlier generations have uncritically assumed.¹²

The Asian American biblical scholars Mary Foskett and Henry Morisada Rietz have critiqued the essentialism of the category of “Asian American” in their theological reflections, especially with regard to the life experiences of Asian Americans who fall outside conventionally defined categories, challenging the uncritical privileging of certain biological traits that purport to define Asian American identity. In particular, they highlight the tension between the *biological* reproduction vis-à-vis *cultural* reproduction in the construction of Asian American communities, and challenge all Asian American theologians to confront the invisibility and double marginalization of Asian Americans who are adopted by White Americans (Foskett) and biracial and multiracial Americans with some Asian ancestry or heritage (Rietz).

In her essay entitled “The Accidents of Being and the Politics of Identity: Biblical Images of Adoption and Asian Adoptees in America,”¹³ Foskett, an ethnic Chinese who was adopted by a White American family, explores the question of Asian American adoptees of White American families, an in-between group that has historically been ignored by Asian American community activists and theologians alike. According to Foskett, Asian American adoptees not only have to contend with the ambiguity and confusion of defining their identity, but also their invisibility and

¹¹ Ibid., 169.

¹² Ibid., 172-3.

¹³ *Semeia* 90/91 (2002):135-144, cf. “Obscured Beginnings: Lessons from the Study of Christian Origins,” in Foskett and Kuan, *Ways of Being*, 178-191.

double marginalization to the wider Asian American communities. She rejects the essentialism of the category of “Asian American” that many Asian American theologians and scholars have taken for granted in their theological reflection, confronting headlong the tension between the biological reproduction vis-à-vis cultural reproduction in the construction of Asian American communities. In her rereading of Exodus 2:1-22 (Moses becoming the adopted son of an Egyptian princess), she offers a new vision of Moses’ lost identity being replaced by a newly gained identity through his adoption by the Egyptian princess, as well as the bicultural socialization that resulted in him having to confront painful choices. By interpreting Moses’ story as an adoptee’s struggle to come to terms with his own identity and purpose in life, Foskett challenges Asian Americans to overcome their indifference toward the plight of Asian American adoptees in the United States and discover ways of defining Asian American identity without essentializing cultural and bloodline identities.

Similarly, in his autobiographical essay “My Father Has No Children: Reflections on a *Hapa* Identity Toward a Hermeneutic of Particularity,”¹⁴ Henry Morisada Rietz focuses attention on himself as a biracial *hapa-haole* who claims German and Japanese ancestries. Rietz acknowledges that his mixed heritage precludes him from claiming one specific identity completely, such that he is the “Other” to both Asian Americans and White Americans. He asserts that his *hapa* identity reveals the limitations of essentialism and homogeneity in Asian American identity constructions that are usually based on boundaries defined by the commonalities of the members, while at the same time accentuating their differences from

¹⁴ *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 145-157; cf, “Living Past: A *Hapa* Identifying with the Exodus, the Exile, and the Internment,” in Foskett and Kuan, *Ways of Being*, 192-203.

biracial and multiracial Asian Americans who do not fit neatly into traditional constructions. In doing so, Rietz unmask the painful tension between *inherited* (i.e., biological or “blood”) reproduction and *constructed* reproduction. He challenges the privileged position of the former by articulating the controversial view that the Asian American identities could be *constructed* without reference to inherited biological (“blood”) reproduction. As a solution, he proposes a new model of identity construction that is modeled on *differences* or *particularity* as the basis for community and communication, emphasizing that Asian American identities are not transmitted by inheritance, but shaped by the dynamic process of identity construction politics.

In other words, the increasing hybridity and heterogeneity in Asian America is exemplified not only by the increasing presence of Asians adoptees of White American families (as Foskett points out), but also by Asian Americans who outmarry and end up with bi/multiracial identities (as discussed by Rietz). Foskett and Rietz do not fit neatly into essentialized and clearly demarcated, biologically defined racial ethnic categories of Asian Americans. Indeed, Rietz’s writings reveal that he considers himself both Asian and White American. Would that make him any less Asian or White American?

A handful of Asian American theologians, e.g., Kwok Pui-Lan,¹⁵ Patrick Cheng,¹⁶ You-Leng Leroy Lim,¹⁷ Eric H. F. Law,¹⁸ and Tat-Siong Benny Liew,¹⁹ have begun reflecting theologically on the life experiences of, and challenges faced by, Queer Asian Pacific Americans (QAPAs). As the QAPA theologian Patrick Cheng explains, QAPAs face much pressure to conform to a heterosexual ideal of marriage and family life.²⁰ Another QAPA community activist, Eric Wat, points out that many Asian Americans view “being Asian and being gay as mutually exclusive,” because being gay is “a white disease.”²¹ As a result, the tremendous suffering inflicted upon many QAPA youth by their own families and pastors often leads to

¹⁵ See Kwok Pui-Lan, “Asian and Asian American Churches,” in *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 59-62; “Finding Ruth a Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Otherness,” in Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 100-21; and “Gay Activism in Asian and Asian-American Churches,” *The Witness* 87/20 (May 21, 2004): 28.

¹⁶ See Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury, 2011); “Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People Today,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred*, Second Edition, eds. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); “Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience,” *Spiritus* 6/2 (Fall 2006): 234-40; “Unclean Spirits,” *PersuAsian* 23 (Spring 2006): 27-28, 31; “Jesus Comes Out,” *PersuAsian* 22 (Summer 2005): 23, 26-27; “Response, Roundtable Discussion: Same Sex Marriage,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20/2 (Fall 2004): 103-07; “Multiplicity and Judges 19: Constructing a Queer Asian Pacific American Biblical Hermeneutic,” *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 119-33; and “Jesus, Mary, and the Beloved Disciple: Towards a Queer Asian American Christology” (M.A. thesis, Union Theological Seminary, 2001).

¹⁷ See You-Leng Leroy Lim, “‘The Bible Tells Me to Hate Myself’: The Crisis in Asian American Spiritual Leadership,” *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 315-22; and “Webs of Betrayal, Webs of Blessings,” in *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, eds. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 323-334.

¹⁸ See Eric H.F. Law, “A Spirituality of Creative Marginality,” in *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1997), 343-46.

¹⁹ See Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Queering Closets and Perverting Desires: Cross-Examining John’s Engendering and Transgendering Word across Different Worlds,” in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 251-88.

²⁰ Cheng, “Multiplicity and Judges 19,” *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 126-127.

²¹ “Preserving the Paradox: Stories from a Gay-Loh,” in *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, ed. Russell Leong (New York: Routledge, 1996), 75.

suicidal thoughts, wishes, and acts.²² Not surprisingly, many QAPAs find it difficult, if not impossible, to come out to their parents and families about their sexual orientation, although they may have no problem coming out to their close friends.²³ It is ironic that when Asian American children come out of the closet, their families go into a closet to avoid stigmatization by their ethnic and church communities. Indeed, several Asian American ethnic heritage organizations and churches publicly campaigned in support of Proposition 8, which sought to amend the California State Constitution by adding a new section 7.5: “Only marriage between a man and woman is valid or recognized in California.”

Nonetheless, QAPA community activists and their heterosexual supporters are coming forward to work for change in Asian American communities. For example, the Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM) devoted its 2004 annual meeting to discussing sexual diversity and embodiment, with Asian American women sharing their coming out experiences and their struggles to be accepted by their families, congregations, and seminaries and panelists challenging churches to “rethink the meaning of marriage and to recognize the gifts gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people bring to the church.”²⁴

The QAPA theologian Patrick Cheng has challenged the politics of dominant heterosexual privilege in Asian American communities and churches that seek to control and

²² Lim, “Webs of Betrayal, Webs of Blessings,” 328-31.

²³ See the extended discussion in Connie S. Chan, “Issues of Identity and Development among Asian-American Lesbians and Gay Men,” in *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Male Experiences*, eds. Linda D. Garnets and Douglas C. Kimmel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

²⁴ Kwok, “Gay Activism in Asian and Asian-American Churches.”

even eliminate the problematic Asian American identities of QAPAs. He compares the plight of QAPAs as “radical sexual and geographical outsiders” to the story of the unnamed concubine in Judges 19 who was gang-raped and dismembered, arguing that like the concubine, QAPAs are “radical sexual and geographical outsiders who experience multiplicity in a number of ways, including multiple naming, multiple silencing, multiple oppression, and multiple fragmentation.”²⁵ As Cheng argues, QAPAs not only “remain outsiders, particularly in the theological academy,”²⁶ they also have to contend with the racism of the predominantly white queer community, e.g., the “‘rice queens’ within the white queer community who ‘fetishize Asian men’ and engage in the ‘predatory consumption’ of queer Asians as ‘boy toys’,” as well as the orientalism of many white queers who objectify QAPAs as the exotic “other.”²⁷

The Challenges of Globalization and Transnationalism

Several Asian American theologians have begun to address the implications of globalization, continuing im/migration, the growing presence of undocumented Asians in America, and growing transnational ties among Asian American communities in their theological reflections. For many Asian Americans, immigration is no longer a one-way street that entails an absolute, conclusive break from the old country, uprooting Asian immigrants and transplanting them in the United States. This paradigm shift from the absolute and unidirectional migration patterns of the past to the dynamic and multidirectional transnational movements of the present

²⁵ Cheng, “Multiplicity and Judges 19,” 129.

²⁶ Ibid., 125.

²⁷ Ibid., 126.

marks a momentous Copernican turn for Asian Americans, leading to a multiplicity of heterogenized, hybridized, and conflicting constructions of identity and relations in relation to the dominant White American mainstream.

Since the 1990s, transnationalism has emerged as a social phenomenon that has far-reaching implications for Asian Americans as they discover and define their identities. In an essay entitled “From International Migration to Transnational Diaspora,”²⁸ the Korean American sociologist John Lie asserts that the classic immigration narrative that the “sojourn of immigrants entails a radical, and in many cases a singular, break from the old country to the new nation,” leading to their uprooting and “shorn of premigration networks, cultures, and belongings,” is no longer tenable or viable in view of a world that is becoming increasingly global and transnational.²⁹ As an alternative, he invites his colleagues to focus on transnational movements and networks:

It is no longer assumed that immigrants make a sharp break from their homelands. Rather, pre-immigration networks, cultures and capital remain salient. The sojourn itself is neither unidirectional nor final. Multiple, circular and return migrations, rather than a singular great journey from one sedentary space to another, occur across transnational spaces. People’s movements, in other words, follow multifarious trajectories and sustain diverse networks.³⁰

As he explains, new advances in transportation and communication also subvert the “unidirectionality of migrant passage; circles, returns, and multiple movements follow the

²⁸ John Lie, “From International Migration to Transnational Diaspora.” *Contemporary Sociology* 24/4 (1995): 303-306.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 304.

waxing and waning structures of opportunities and networks.”³¹

More importantly, the rapid convergence of the forces of globalization, affordable international air travel, advanced telecommunications and broadband technology means migration is no longer a one-way departure from birth country to adopted country. Instead of a permanent boundary crossing that ruptures the ties with one’s birth country, many immigrants and their descendants are increasingly engaging in *multiple border crossings* between two or more locations either physically (e.g., by air travel) or virtually (e.g., using cheap international telephone calls, e-mail, instant messaging, or VOIP technology), initiating and nurturing transnational networks with extended families, clans, business partners, and friends.

On the one hand, many people often equate Asian American transnationalism with education, wealth, and privilege. For example, Aihwa Ong’s classic study on the transnationalism of diasporic Chinese communities dealt with middle- and upper-class Chinese who could afford to move back and forth between locations.³² But on the other hand, Kenneth Guest’s ethnographical study of Fuzhounese Chinese in New York’s Chinatown highlights the fact that many *undocumented* Fuzhounese who were smuggled into the United States by “snakeheads,” finding themselves “systematically marginalized in the United States, discriminated against because of their economic skills, legal status, language, and even ethnicity,” turn to transnational activities in order to “build identities that transcend their dead-end jobs, their transient lifestyles,

³¹ Ibid., 305.

³² Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Location of Transnationality* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999).

and their local marginalization.”³³ Guest’s groundbreaking study debunks the commonly held view³⁴ that Chinese transnationalism is characteristic of middle- and upper-class Chinese who possess the economic resources to live, work, and travel in different places. In Guest’s words:

For the majority of the Fuzhounese, their transnationalism is much more nascent, grassroots, and fragile; an ocean-borne transnationalism of the working poor, not the jet-set transnationalism of the elite. Unlike the transnational entities so often discussed that transcend the state, most Fuzhounese immigrants mobilize small-scale transnational networks from a position deep within and vulnerable to state structures. As workers, many of them undocumented, they are disciplined by economy and state alike. ... Through these [transnational] networks, they seek to transcend regulated national boundaries and construct broader notions of citizenship and participation. They utilize their emerging transnational religious networks to articulate an alternative existence and identity in the face of the homogenizing influences of global capitalism and the U.S. labor market. Their participation in the life of their home communities – encouraged, facilitated, and rewarded through religious networks – assists in creating and enhancing a transnational identity which may in fact serve as an alternative to immigrant incorporation in the host society.³⁵

As Asian Americans cross the threshold of the twenty-first century, they are increasingly developing transnational networks beyond the United States to their ancestral countries or elsewhere, constructing new identities and maintaining close ties that transcend national boundaries. They are able to build and nurture familial, socio-cultural, economic, political, and religious bonds with their ancestral lands with relative ease, rather than breaking away and seeking assimilation into an aspirational lifestyle defined by White Americans. This is true not

³³ Kenneth Guest, “Religion and Transnational Migration in the New Chinatown,” in *Immigrant Faiths: Transforming Religious Life in America*, eds. Karen I. Leonard, Alex Stepick, Manuel A. Vasquez, and Jennifer Holdaway (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2005), 159. Cf. Kenneth Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York’s Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

³⁴ See the discussions in Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini, eds., *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*.

³⁵ Guest, “Religion and Transnational Migration in the New Chinatown,” 160, 161.

just of Asian-born Americans, but also second and later generations of American-born Asians who are rejecting uncritical assimilation and searching for identity in the midst of their ancestral roots. As a result, there is a blurring of boundaries between geographic space on the one hand, and social and experiential space on the other. Instead of a linear Asian American identity, we are now confronted with a hybridized, nuanced, and multidimensional transnational Asian American identities that are simultaneously rooted in the United States while reaching out and becoming attached to other social, familial, and religious contexts in Asia.

In turn, these transnational developments mean that Asian Americans are no longer interested or willing to give up their ethnic identity by complete assimilation. Instead, we find Asian Americans becoming creative and adept at negotiating multiple belongings and loyalties, developing a hybridized sense of belonging simultaneously to the United States as well as countries that they or their forebears have left. For example, many Vietnamese Americans display both the Stars and Stripes and the South Vietnamese flags with pride in Little Saigon communities, remit money home to their extended family or clan in Vietnam, and travel back and forth between Vietnam and the United States, forging and renewing deep-rooted familial and kinship ties. In a similar vein, Korean Americans joyously celebrate both Korean and United States holidays, while an increasing number of third-, fourth-, and fifth generation Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans are learning their ancestral languages and cultures.

These transnational developments have significant implications for understanding the present situation and future directions of Asian American Christianity. Indeed, contemporary scholars of religion are increasingly emphasizing the important roles that religion plays in

shaping and maintaining transnational ties and networks. Kenneth Guest's ethnographic study of undocumented Fuzhounese in New York's Chinatown reveals, among other things, the deep involvement of Chinese American Churches in nurturing transnational networks between China and the United States for undocumented Fuzhounese immigrants.³⁶ Fenggang Yang's research on Chinese American Evangelical Churches reveals how they are forging multiple transnational ties with churches and parachurch organizations in Mainland China, Taiwan, and the wider Chinese Diaspora.³⁷ Thao Ha's study on Vietnamese Catholics and Buddhists in Houston focuses attention on the institutional dimensions of the transnational relations that these Vietnamese temples and churches have forged with their counterparts in Vietnam.³⁸

As a result, second generation Asian American theologians are moving beyond idealized and essentialized notions of identity and culture to reflect critically on conflict, particularity, and hybridity, and how these notions affect and shape their theological endeavors. They realize that bipolar dichotomies such as insider-outsider, homeland-host country, center-margin, and so forth are no longer tenable. While it is easy to challenge these uncritical bipolar constructs today, we must realize that these constructs made perfect sense for first generation Asian American theologians who were dealing with issues of assimilation, dislocation, and discrimination. In their minds, they were fighting for Asian Americans to get their rightful positions and entitlements in church and society. With the benefit of hindsight, we now see that this uncritical

³⁶ Guest, *God in Chinatown*, 201-206.

³⁷ Fenggang Yang, "Chinese Christian Transnationalism: Diverse Networks of a Houston Church," in *Religions Across Borders: Transnational Immigrant Networks*, ed. Helen Rose Ebaugh and Jane Saltzman Chafetz (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2002), 129-148.

³⁸ Thao Ha, "The Evolution of Remittances from Family to Faith," in Ebaugh and Chafetz, *Religions Across Borders*, 111-128.

assimilationist perspective presumed not only a stable and normative view of identity construct, but also the presumption that rights and privileges of White Americans were the ideals of the “American Dream” that they should aspire to, without challenging their inequities and other exploitative or questionable aspects.

From Tradition Maintenance to Traditioning

How do Asian American theologians go beyond essentialist and normative views of Asian cultural traditions and heritage to include the concerns, hopes, and dreams of the 1.5 generation and American born Asians, the bi/multiracial Asian Americans, and Asian American adoptees? In response, I would like to propose that contemporary Asian American theologies move away from *tradition-maintenance* in favor of what I would call *traditioning*. By *tradition-maintenance*, I mean clinging on to ethnic-bound traditions and customs from the “Old World” at all costs. I define *traditioning* as the largely unconscious and ongoing process of shaping, constructing, and negotiating new traditions and practices that seek to address the issues and questions confronting all Asian Americans, be they immigrant, American-born, bi/multiracial, or adoptees. On the one hand, *tradition-maintenance* is akin to a classical symphony in that both emphasize the ideals of overarching group harmony and unity subsuming differences. On the other hand, I see *traditioning* as comparable to *remixing* that is transforming the contemporary music scene, i.e., both *traditioning* and *remixing* challenge and deconstruct essentialized categories, theological and musical, yet reshaping them in new keys and forms. As the contemporary musical scene shifts away from the ahistorical essentialism of the classical symphony to embrace the creativity and dynamism of remixing, so too Asian American theologies are shifting away from *tradition-*

maintenance of age-old cultural ideals to creative *traditioning*, giving birth to new theological insights that address contemporary concerns.

The theological process of *traditioning* is not something completely new. Other theologians such as Dale Irvin,³⁹ Simon Chan,⁴⁰ Amos Yong,⁴¹ Orlando Espin,⁴² Nancy Pineda-Madrid,⁴³ Theresa Torres,⁴⁴ and Carmen Nanko-Fernandéz⁴⁵ have reflected about various aspects of *traditioning* in other contexts in their theological writings. For example, the Singaporean Chinese theologian Simon Chan observes that *traditioning* ensures that the Pentecostal faith tradition is handed down to a new generation “in a way that *takes account of the new context of a new generation of faithful*.”⁴⁶ In the context of Latino/a pastoral ministry, Carmen Nanko-Fernandéz observes that *traditioning* is an ongoing process that not only “occurs in the daily and is integral to the process of constructing identity, personally and collectively,”

³⁹ Dale Irvin, *Christian Histories, Christian Traditioning: Rendering Accounts* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998).

⁴⁰ Simon Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

⁴¹ Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in a Trinitarian Perspective* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2002).

⁴² Orlando Espin, “Traditioning: Culture, Daily Life and Popular Religion, and their impact on Christian Tradition,” in *Futuring Our Past: Explorations in the Theology of Tradition*, eds. Orlando O. Espin and Gary Macy (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), 1-22.

⁴³ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, “Traditioning: The Formation of Community, the Transmission of Faith,” in *Futuring Our Past*, 204-226.

⁴⁴ Theresa L. Torres, “La Quinceañera: Traditioning and the Social Construction of the Mexican American Female,” in *Futuring Our Past*, 277-298.

⁴⁵ See Carmen Nanko-Fernandéz, “Traditioning latinamente: A Theological Reflection on la lengua cotidiana,” unpublished paper; “Language, Community and Identity,” in *Handbook of Latino/a Theologies*, eds. Edwin Aponte & Miguel de la Torre (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2006), 265-275; and “Handing on Faith en su propia lengua,” in Carmen Nanko-Fernandéz, *Theologizing en Español: Context, Community, and Ministry* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 61-76.

⁴⁶ Chan, *Pentecostal Theology*, 20, emphasis added.

but also requires “a habit of learning how to read across contexts in order to avoid absolutizing or universalizing the particular.”⁴⁷ Hence, the process of *traditioning* is based upon the premise that tradition is not fixed and static, but rather, it is dynamic, always changing, and deeply contextual.

More importantly, *traditioning* rejects all attempts at fossilizing or archaizing the present in a state of theological *stasis*, as well as challenging any notion that theologizing is ahistorical, atemporal, and independent of sociocultural changes. Instead, *traditioning* entails critical theological reflections about a community’s present and future. By going beyond mere replication of historical theological precedents, *traditioning* seeks to retell, reinterpret, and give nuance to one’s theological reflections with new layers of meaningfulness that address the concerns of the present context. *Traditioning* also pursues strategic, dynamic, creative, and contextualized interpretations of the Christian Gospel, mediating between historical theological precedents and current concerns, thereby endeavoring to create a coherent theology that unites the rich legacy of historical theological precedents with contemporary needs and challenges.

In other words, *traditioning* is dynamic and flexible. It is open to life realities, as well as healthy theological renewal and change that are integral to a community’s social location and context, while remaining “in conversation with the past.” Rather than looking for a single normative and essentialistic meaning in theologizing, *traditioning* seeks hybridized and multiple *meaningfulness*, embodying and integrating differences and consensus, past and present, precedent and innovation, and authority and creativity, thereby facilitating the articulation of new

⁴⁷ Nanko-Fernandéz, “Traditioning latinamente: A Theological Reflection on la lengua cotidiana.”

meanings for the present and future. As a result, the theological tradition is constantly being renegotiated, renewed, and given nuance.

Conclusion: Asian American Theologies as Traditioning Theologies

I see *traditioning* as enabling Asian American theologians to mediate contradictions that arise from multiple subjectivities that Asian Americans constantly negotiate in their daily lives as they grapple with fragmented selves and mixed allegiances to many places, spaces, persons, and groups, all of which generate intersecting subjectivities, hybridities, and heterogeneous identifications. In addition, *traditioning* provides the impetus for Asian American theological reflections to be dynamic, situational, and strategic, differentiating between elements, as well as privileging the faith development of “a new generation of faithful.” Through the process of *traditioning*, Asian American theologians are able to engage in, nuance, and redefine theologies in a creative, strategic, flexible, and innovative manner to empower Asian Americans in their effective engagement with the joys and pathos of the postmodern conditions of their daily living, helping them to engage with the world around them where they are constantly being reminded that they are out of line and not wanted, or at best, tolerated.