The Task of Asian/Asian North American Theologies

—Wonhee Anne Joh

Thank you for inviting me to offer a response to these three presentations. Given that we each have 7-10 minutes I want to simply share some of my own thoughts generated by these three presentations. These are not in any particular order and not directed to a specific paper but rather a response in relation to all three.

1. It is certain that globalization and localization have dramatically intensified in the past several decades. It is also true that this intensification challenges binary ways of understanding our world. While many today inhabit multiple worlds and fluidly live a cosmopolitan life and thus provide a privilege or vantage point in critical-reflexivity, we need to be mindful that not all people, especially women, experience mobility in the same way. Aihwa Ong notes that certain theoretical frameworks valorize the figure of the migrants as cosmopolitan “progressive political figures” who are able to “resist the pillaging of global capitalism.” However, what is not accounted for, as Ong argues, is how migrants forge new ways of living through “flexible citizenship” that embody all the complex constellation of negotiation, resistance and transformation. While binary thinking is questionable given the rapidly hybridized world in which many worlds are coterminous, we still inhabit worlds structured on binary worldviews that contribute to an uneven world. Globalization and localization bring about reterritorialized subjects who are also translocal subjects in the globalized networks of cultures, economies and politics.

2. While the numbers of Asian and Asian North American faculty have increased over the past few decades as noted by both Benny and Mai-Anh, we all know that increase in numbers often does not correlate with change and especially the kinds of change we want to see on meta levels like institutional structure, curriculum, hiring, retention, etc. Additionally many women have learned that just because one is a woman does not make an automatic ally, so too is it the case that we cannot presume any feminist or anti-racist commitments simply because one is a woman or a racial/ethnic person. I say this because not all Asian or Asian North American faculty want to or feel there’s a need for a structural or paradigm shift nor do they feel they need to limit themselves to only ‘Asian” or Asian American ‘stuff.’ This is where we are not simply playing identity politics, identity politics play us in ambiguous yet insidious ways within structures of racism. Whether we want to or not we are often ‘marked’ by racialization. How do we build solidarity across race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class in order to build larger movements that generate collective power that can be leveraged for a paradigm shift in theological education? Might it be possible to look beyond our own navel-gazing and envision solidarity across myriad of differences rather than assuming that our allies are limited only to those who are ‘marked’ like us?

3. We mentioned the master’s house, master’s tools and the need for new architects. While that may be appealing, I wonder if perhaps we just need to get independent and move out of the house. It does not mean we need to destroy or rebuild that house. It means we might leave it and build other places of belonging and find new neighbors. One also does not have to cut ties as one can always visit. Recall Derrida’s observation that “contrary to what one is most often tempted to believe, the master is nothing. And he does not have exclusive possession of anything.” There’s only so much one can do with something whose foundation is already structured in a particular way and in this case what Asian Americans in particular are challenged to interrogate goes beyond our experience of racialization alone but to what extent we leave unattended our own experience of being beneficiaries of settler colonialism. While Asian/Asian North American theological education cannot sever its ties with dominant theological traditions and methods, perhaps we can and have already begun to shift.

Our theological task is simply not only about regenerating and even resuscitating the dominant paradigm by constantly feeding it through our contributions (politics of inclusion/exclusion) but to create other paradigms. In order to do this, I too agree with Benny that we must persistently question the systems of economy, power and history of theological education. We know in our bones that it’s a huge problem when we teach ‘normal’ survey courses and get to teach on elective course on Asian American theology every other year. What will transform and destabilize a Eurocentric presumption of presumed universality? What does it mean, for example, to recognize that theological education so far is also coterminous with colonialism and even with neocolonialism? For Asian/Asian North American theologians who have been trained within the western paradigm when, how and what will it take for us to shift our points of reference away from dominant systems of reference? What does it mean when in the face of economic crunch in the U.S. many theological institutions are turning to Asia (only to particular parts of Asia!) for recruitment and thus refinancialization of theological education/institutions in the U.S.?

We might wonder to what extent we are giving birth to a transnational version of Asians as model-minority? Just as diversity done ‘bad’ only reproduces racism, we need to ask if what we continue to do only reproduces the master’s house and in fact is shoring it up even more?

4. I refer here to Kuan-Hsing Chen’s *Asia As Method: Toward Deimperialization* for assistance in overcoming the present conditions of knowledge production. As theological educators our task is to generate and foster theological knowledge. However, at this time we are bringing up issues that point to the limits of current conditions of possibility for such knowledge production. We acknowledge these structural limitations. Chen offers some insights. He writes, “critical intellectual work on deimperialization first and foremost has to transform these problematic conditions, transcend the structural limitations and uncover alternative possibilities.” *Asia As Method* argues that while transforming existing knowledge structures we also transform ourselves. For Chen, *Asia As Method* uses Asia as an imaginary anchoring point in which all those communities, practices and structures of knowledge become our points of reference. Here it involves our own task of decolonizing much of what we have learned and have learned to even desire. For many of us engaged within the U.S. academy it certainly is not and will not be easy to shift gears as our points of reference for recognition, intelligibility, what counts as intellectual production and even inclusion most often have been through the dominant point of reference or even in forms of “third-world nativism” rather than through a method of ‘inter-referencing’ that ‘respects tradition without essentializing it, and will not mobilize the resources of tradition simply for the sake of opposing the West.”

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3 Ibid., 223.
Conclusion

In her new book, *Not Like A Native Speaker*, Rey Chow observes “acquisition of language becomes the acquisition of whiteness.” Asian North American theology is about translations and being translators. In translation, translators often betray. We betray all sides so that we cannot even really “go native.” The very foundation of translation is that one gives up identity/identification even as one seeks equivalence. But equivalence is not something that can be presupposed or even reached. Chow cites Ricoeur, “a good translation can come only at a supposed equivalence . . . an equivalence without identity.” Equivalence is not acquisition of more discourse, culture, or language but rather something that is produced in and through translation that is rooted in hospitality. Even as we are attentive to structures of difference, unevenness and inequity we hope in a kind of ‘interlinguistic hospitality’ so that while equivalence cannot be assumed, still a production of equivalence is forged between memory and mourning. Searching and opening our reflexivity to a multiplicity of points of references and searching and not giving up on equivalence in theological education seems to be the theological task that we cannot not want.

**Wonhee Anne Joh** is Associate Professor of Theology at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary and affiliate faculty in Asian American Studies at Northwestern University. She is the director of the Center for Asian/Asian American Ministry at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. She is the author of *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

**Works Cited**


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