

Judith Berling

Response to Distinguished Faculty Lecture

November 11, 2008

It is an honor and a privilege to be the respondent to Professor Fumitaka Matsuoka's distinguished faculty lecture, not only because it is an occasion to honor a long treasured colleague publicly before his retirement at the end of this year, but also because his lecture raises significant issues that we in this community need to ponder.

At one level, the lecture helps all of us to understand more deeply the complex and contradictory position of being Asian American (or Asian Pacific Islander) in American society. The Asian American, we have learned from Fumitaka's prior work, inhabits a complex "in betweenness": neither fully Asian nor fully American, both Asian and American. This complex "in between" space is both a position of discomfort and contradiction (on the one hand) and distinctive position and voice (on the other).

His lecture tonight adds to, deepens, and nuances his earlier work. Asian Americans have a "translocal" position arising from their race experience: they are not at home in their own home, they are displaced, there is no "place" for them, but there is a nomadic community of those who share this translocal displacement, and from this community with no place comes a set of values and a distinctive angle of vision on American history and society, that privileges the voices of those who have been marginalized and forgotten, made invisible by the contradictory racializations of American society. Second, the nomadic values of privileging voices of those "displaced" and "erased" creates a heightened sensitivity to the pathos of all those who have been silenced, marginalized, or made invisible. This sensitivity to dissonance and dissent is located in a "storied place" that recovers memories and voices of those silenced, marginalized, or made invisible to the larger society (and sometimes to each other). This community of the displaced is committed to the excavation and retrieval of those lost voices, stories, and memories to create a "second tongue" of the American community. Third, Asian Americans have what Fumitaka has named an "amphibolous faith." This faith juxtaposes images and practices from irreconcilable traditions of their Asian cultural heritages alongside the American religious heritage (the Buddhist altar adapted for a Christian memorial). It affirms the "manyness" (multiplicity) of reality, rather than the too easy notion of "one out of many." It refuses the singular vision that dominant American society and Christianity would impose, claiming a "different sort of belief" in a reality that is never final: he says

that when reality passes through our minds, in front of us, it eludes us and goes on its way. As a student of East Asian cultures, I find Fumitaka's phrase a profoundly apt characterization of an East Asian sense that the "Way" is always a journey, that one never gets to the final end point, because the horizon keeps receding before us as we journey. So the "people on the Way" ARE on the Way, but that Way cannot be captured in a single characterization or understanding, but continues to evolve as we experience more and more of reality and truth.

At a second level, Fumitaka's lecture is not just about or for Asian Americans, but for all of us in American society, for he raises important issues about our values and our role in the world. He is probing the foundation of American "peoplehood": what brings us together and what keeps us at odds with one another. He is reminding us of the increasing critique across the globe (and, yes, within America itself) of the way that we wield our power and also wield our talk about democratic freedom and values, and is inviting us to establish a more inclusive sense of ourselves by including all of the "second tongues, esp. of" others who are weak and who have rights but are incapable of imposing these interests or rights.

He notes that much of our discourse about democratic freedom (and, one might add) Christian values as well, is articulated in terms that do not take those other voices and interests into consideration. One problem with democracy is (or can be) the tyranny of the majority or of the dominant voice: the majority (a bare 51%) can claim to be the "voice of the people" while ignoring the 49% whose views are silenced. Inclusive democracy would have to take those voices more clearly into consideration. What is at play here is not simply democracy, but hegemony or dominance: there is a dominant voice of the "American story" that unconsciously (and sometimes willfully) ignores, silences, and erases the multiplicity of voices, stories, memories, and experiences that comprise the actual America. This voice is a voice of privilege and dominance, and - as many have shown - feminists, African Americans, Asian Americans, gays and lesbians, and others --- the voice is the voice of the white male elite.

However, I fear that there is more to it than that. It is also the voice of unexamined habit, of unexamined traditions, of "neat" and "conventional" ways of thinking, and I fear that we in education are often guilty of perpetuating this voice when we don't consciously and intentionally attend to other voices. When we teach the history of America, the history of our religious traditions, the history of our theologies and liturgies, the history of interpretations, it is all too easy to fall back

into a clear and simple narrative that excludes so many voices and memories, that has no room for the “second tongues” that Fumitaka is articulating in his wonderful lecture.

What is ironic is, that when we think about it deeply, a vast number of Americans (or those present in America at any given time) have complex experiences that the “dominant” first tongue erases or makes invisible. If you listen to the voices and rhetoric of contemporary American society, many of us feel left out, shut out, forgotten, or made invisible for any number of reasons. The “first tongue” of American rhetoric is not working well in America, much less in the world.

For that reason, I think that Fumitaka’s articulation of “second tongues” arising from the triple epistemology is worthy of consideration not just to understand Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, but so many groups that feel dislocated, left out, and erased in the society. Is there a sense that many of us are “translocal” for one reason or another? If so, where do we find communities of identity? Does our sense of dislocation give rise to a sense of pathos for others who are marginalized? It should, and we should be finding ways to help us all develop this sensitivity to pathos, so that we can once again learn to find common cause with one another in regard to injustice, and recover memories and stories of those who have been dispossessed or erased. And do we need an amphibolous faith?

For me, this was the most profound suggestion in Fumitaka’s lecture. It gave rise to so many thoughts. First, it seemed to me a profound articulation of complicated “mainline” faith (as opposed to the clearer black-and-white faith of more fundamentalist groups). Many Americans turn to fundamentalism to find a “sure” or “certain” faith in the face of so many other uncertainties. But Fumitaka articulates the notion of a faith that has the courage to juxtapose the unreconcilable, to live with multiplicity of truths, and with the humility to know that Truth with a capital T is ungraspable. I would like him to say more about whether he thinks amphibolous faith is a theological position that might be suitable to a broader group of Christians (and perhaps others as well) beyond the API community.

Thank you, Fumitaka, for a provocative and rich lecture.