

# “Learning to Speak a New Tongue: Imagining a Way That Holds People Together”

GTU Distinguished Faculty Lecture

November 11, 2008

## INTRODUCTION

For nearly three decades I have been involved in an emerging field of scholarly inquiry called Asian and Pacific American religions. It is a very diverse field of studies. We might ask; what do Pacific Islander Mormons in Hawaii have to do with Chinese Buddhists in California or with Sikh *Gurdwara* community in the Midwest? It seems difficult to make coherent sense of these diverse and different ways of religious life that—on the surface—seem to have very little in common.

A colleague of mine, Jane Iwamura of USC, says, we scholars in the field of Asian and Pacific American religious studies have been working on “*a hunch, an intuition, that there is something worthwhile in presenting these different ethno-religious communities under the same rubric.*”<sup>1</sup> The so-called API communities, that is, the communities of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, are the locus for this racialized category of people to present previously ignored and dismissed points of view regarding American religious life. We, API scholars of religion, have been acting on our hunch by exploring the ways in which racialization affects and influences the creation of religious community as well as personal faith.

## THE NOTION OF “PEOPLEHOOD”

For some time I have been intrigued with the notion of “Peoplehood” for Americans. By the term “peoplehood” I mean more than “nationhood.” In fact, “peoplehood” implies critiques of the historically defined parochial and jingoistic term “nationhood.” The basic question about “peoplehood” is simply: what brings people together, the question of the consciousness and values that lie at the foundation of people coming together in America, and by implication, what keeps us apart? What values and assumptions are odds with coming together? We know Robert Bellah and his colleagues have asked this question before just as Tocqueville observed America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

But, my curiosity is how these questions can be responded from an Asian American perspective.

Historically speaking, Americans have understood the foundation of our society to be "democracy." It has been our "sacred cow." But, lately, there have been numerous voices both within our society and worldwide that question whether this sacred cow alone can sustain our peoplehood.

What jarred me first was a tiny newspaper clipping I read at the aftermath of 9/11. George Semaan, editor of the London-based Arabic language newspaper, *Al Hayat*, said that America needs to "*change its perspective on how it builds its interests and how it defends 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.*"

My question is whether the conventional notion of democratic freedom as we know it in America, the rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," alone meets Semaan's challenge, that is, to build "*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.*"

Since George Semaan spoke these words, there have been numerous voices questioning America's "first language" of democracy, and its meaning today. Cornel West warned of the "prevailing dogmas" that lead to a deeply troubling deterioration of democratic powers in America today. He named them as "free-market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism." The questions that I have been mauling over for the last few years are these:

- What has happened to our first tongue, the original public language, of democratic freedom? Has democracy, our public values that brought this nation together, become an "entitlement" of a few rather than the right of all to be protected?
- If democratic freedom indeed has become the entitlement, then, is it possible to recover and salvage the foundational values for our whole society? In other words, does the first tongue have to be modified and redefined in order to bring people together?

In my research project within Asian American religious and theological studies, I raise these questions. My thesis in the project is this:

Asian Americans have learned to speak a particular kind of “second tongue” along with the historically constructed “first tongue” of individual freedom. We Asian Americans have learned this “second tongue” out of the threefold epistemological scaffold:

1. A translocal value orientation embedded in our race experiences,
2. A heightened sensitivity to pathos arising out of our dissonant cultural outlook, and
3. What I term “an amphibolous faith.”

*This threefold epistemological scaffold we Asian Americans live by may provide a clue to forming a peoplehood in the increasingly interrelated yet fragmented world in which we Americans all live. There are second tongues that have been spoken in numerous quarters of our society, of which Asian American community is one. Those tongues that have long been long neglected, dismissed and devalued, while they could help redefine our American paradigm of democracy.*

## THE FOUNDATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FREEDOM

Historically, Americans have believed that democratic freedom--the Bill of Rights, a free economic order, and the security of property—is what holds this nation together along with the notion of equality. But, lately this cherished American public religion of democratic freedom and its accompanying civic values are coming under a close scrutiny. As Robert Bellah pointed out sometime ago in *Habits of the Heart* that American individualism is what undergirded democratic freedom. At the same time, he said that there is a set of alternate languages, “*second languages*” spoken in what he calls “communities of memory.” Bellah maintains that this alternate language existed along side the first language, utilitarian and expressive individualism. The second language are “primarily biblical and republican, that provide at least part of the moral discourse of most Americans.”<sup>ii</sup>

But today America’s public religion of democracy is seen closely associated with the wielding of its political powers both at home and

abroad. We are once again reminded that civic values and power are inseparable. This means religion, even a public religion, is politicized, racialized, and closely associated with power distributions.

This has specific implications for the state of American democracy with its distinct Christian origin. Bellah and his colleagues argue that one of the keys to the survival of democratic free institutions is the "relationship between private and public life, the way in which citizens do, or do not, participate in the public sphere."<sup>iii</sup> But the question still persists: What motivates American people to participate in the public sphere? In our increasingly plural society these traditions and other tongues are not limited to be based on the republican and biblical traditions.

In recent years Americans are being accused of an "imperialism" and "positional superiority" in our political, economic, cultural, and religious orientations as we relate with our world neighbors.<sup>iv</sup> More than ever before America needs other in order to participate in the wider public sphere. George Semaan has said America needs to

*"change its perspective on how it builds its interests and how it defends them by building a network of relationships that takes into consideration the interests of others who are weak and who have rights but are incapable of imposing these interests or these rights."*<sup>v</sup>

But, we have a problem here. A recent event in our nation's capital illustrates the question of what holds people together both at home and abroad. President Bush in the early summer of 2005 appointed his longtime confidant Karen Hughes as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs. During her Senate confirmation hearings, she told the Foreign Relations Committee *"We are involved in a generational and global struggle of ideas. I recognize the job ahead [to spread democracy and freedom throughout the world] will be difficult. Perceptions do not change easily or quickly."*<sup>vi</sup>

Political analysis David Rieff questioned Hughes' reading of the current hostility directed toward the U.S. in the international scene: "Refreshing though it was for its candor, Hughes' statement neglected the larger question: Is hostility toward the United States based largely on misperceptions of America's actions and intentions or on a genuine dislike

of the power America wields around the world?"<sup>vii</sup> To believe that the traditional American ideals should prevail if only these ideals are communicated well enough, Rieff went on to say: "...you must believe that there is an inevitable progress in history—a progress toward freedom."<sup>viii</sup> This basic assumption that is behind the current U.S. foreign policies is becoming increasingly questionable in today's world both within the U.S. and abroad.

The view that the role of the U.S. in the world is to spread its understanding of democratic freedom and the belief in the global application of the progress toward freedom is indeed deeply ingrained in the American psyche from the foundation of this nation. This belief has been reinforced particularly in the time of wars.

Democratic freedom is the foundation of our society, rooted in our collective history and continues to be affirmed and reaffirmed in every critical turn of events in our nation. It is what gives rise to the questions that frame my current work:

- Is it democratic freedom that is still the source today for the cultivating of societal coherence for Americans and for our relationship with our world neighbors?
- Will our current understanding of democratic freedom contribute to global peace and justice in a world suspicious and hostile toward U.S. and the way it wields its power?
- Or, can America reexamine its own democratic principles and values in order to temper these principles and values in such a way that takes into consideration the well-being of our neighbors at home and abroad?

## ASIAN AMERICAN RESPONSE

I believe a clue to answering these questions lies not only in the second language to which Bellah refers, but in other second tongues that have long existed in America, including the second tongue that can be heard in various Asian American communities.

This second tongue is hybrid and nuanced, being unfaithful to the official language of the land in which we Asian Americans live.<sup>ix</sup> Our second tongue is at its best a language of empathy and of compassion, a

language learned out of the matrix of “contradicting” experiences of being an American of Asian descent in a nation of officially claimed democratic freedom.

This particular “second tongue” speaks of America from the vantage point of an alternate “storied site” where, contrary to the officially prescribed story of America, lost histories and memories are retrieved, and broken relationships with other disfranchised neighbors are recovered. I believe this “second tongue” spoken by Asian Americans also speaks of our common destiny as Americans and as world citizens, our common destiny that is being pronounced and imperiled at the same time precisely when our divisions are deepest.

To begin this exploration into an alternate vision of peoplehood through the lens shaped by the “second tongue” of Asian Americans, an analysis of its threefold epistemological scaffold is needed. The scaffold consists of: translocal character of race, sensitivity to pathos born out of dissonance with the dominant cultural norm, and what I would like to name, amphibilous faith. These three epistemological pillars shape the contour of our “theological” reading of what constitutes peoplehood.

#### RACE AS TRANSLOCAL IN VALUE ORIENTATION

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

It is a well-known observation that by looking only black and white binary in race relations while ignoring all other races, 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.

We need also to note that the ambivalence associated with the positioning of Asian Americans in the U.S. landscape of race 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 U.S., the history that has contributed to our unique racial formation in the U.S. 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.

On the other hand, Asian Americans were sometimes paradoxically classified as whites in order to insulate whites from African Americans. The notion of the “model minority” perception of Asian Americans maintains its assumption that Asian Americans are “near whites” or “whiter than 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 U.S. 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.”<sup>x</sup>

Because of these 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 a 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*. This 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.<sup>xi</sup> We are not at home in our own 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.”<sup>xii</sup>

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 is a 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 that “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.”<sup>xiii</sup>

The language of dissonance and dissent is prevalent in Asian



American literature. In Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's book *Dictee*, for example, this language of dissonance and dissent is clearly expressive. The subject 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 copy, 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. That is an 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 simplifying 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.<sup>xiv</sup>

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 other Asian immigrants, is what America really is. "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 Asia America.

The movement of the spirit of dissent out of dissonance is ritualized and is traditioned into a reliable cultural referential point within the community. The Asian American language of dissonance and dissent is located in a "storied place," where lost memories are reinvented, 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, a storied place 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,"<sup>xv</sup> my colleague Joanne Doi tells us. Thus, the spirit of dissonance and dissent of Asian Americans, collectively as well as individually, moves in such ritual as a 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 our experiences of historical disruptions, pain, and dissonance that await excavation and retrieval. Ritualized acts of excavation and retrieval of these referential points in our history are indeed our dissenting acts that also serve as glue that binds Asian Americans together as a community.

The historical injuries and our experiences of dissonance carry the memory of a rehabilitative meaning both in regard to Asian Americans ourselves and also in regard to those who have undergone a 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," and acts as the seedbed for an alternate set of sacred conventions, a bond, a second tongue, that brings people together.<sup>xvi</sup>

## AMPHIBOLOUS FAITH

The third pillar of the epistemological scaffold for Asian Americans is what I would like to call an "amphibolous" faith. For Asian Americans, faith is likely to be expressed in a domain of a myriad of conflicting religious traditions coming together that force us to live in a state of dis-identification with any existing religious tradition in which we find ourselves.

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 a resolution of compromise.

A few weeks ago a D.Min. student at PSR defended his D.Min. project before his committee chaired by Bill McKinny. Yoshiki Morita is the Japanese language pastor of Sycamore UCC Church in El Cerrito. His project theme is the meaning of the practice of memorial services among the newly arrived Japanese immigrants who come to his church. One of the illustrative images he introduced in his project is a picture of *butsudan*, Buddhist Altar, commonly called a "Buddha Box." It is a family altar honoring the deceased members. The photograph that pastor Morita exhibited in his project was a *butsudan* with a cross in the middle and there is a place to put the picture of the deceased just under the cross as the Buddhist practice calls for. This is a graphic image of an amphibolous faith.

An "amphibolous faith" is, to a certain extent, akin to the term *aporia* as it is defined by Jacques Derrida. For him, it is the term that speaks of a "difficulty in choosing," "doubt," or, more precisely a blockage, "no road" in the context of the meaning of justice.<sup>xvii</sup> 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 simply assumed to embrace the monotheistic claims of the historical Christian faith and, at the same time, are inclined to live with non-theistic cosmologies embedded in the Asian religious traditions we inherit as our cultural DNAs.

For Asian Americans, our epistemology begins with the notion that reality is multiple, and not *e pribus unum*, "out of many comes one," or unity in diversity. The Christian use of *butsudan*, 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 our experiences of

the contradiction inherent in the “foreigner within” and “model minority.” In other words, we Asian American live in an amphibolous state both spiritually and materially.

The crucial point to understand is that those whose faith is amphibolous are accepting the necessity to live with 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 a restoration and rehabilitation are likely to be unattainable given the histories of failed attempts to establish a restored community by groups as Native Americans, Palestinians, as well as Asian Americans ourselves. Thus the 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 a bridge-building amidst disrupted and estranged relationships, a bridge-building whose real meaning is an “interpretation of the worlds” through the grammar of amphiboly.

CONCLUSION: The Courage to Imagine Life As Others Live It

What is needed today for reclaiming a societal coherence, that is, peoplehood, is nurturing of another tongue, a second tongue, in order to have the courage to imagine life as others live it. 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.*”

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*" at the same time, says Edward Said<sup>xviii</sup> Such a contrapuntal task for the renewal of peoplehood seeks mutual consideration of otherwise incongruent social, economic, and political practices, of culture, of history with particular attention given to the practices, cultures, histories and faiths that have been neglected and undervalued. The 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 the world where another tongue is readily spoken, a tongue that welcome an amphibolous faith where eluding certainty has its value, as that which propels us into action, especially in those contexts where exploitation of those who are at 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 the commitment to allow our imaginations to work on transforming our minds and hearts, informing our lips and hands, inspiring 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.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> Jane Naomi Iwamura, "Envisioning Asian and Pacific American Religions," in *Revealing the Sacred: In Asian & Pacific America* (ed. Jane Naomi Iwamura & Paul Spickard, New York & London: Routledge, 2003), 1.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Op.cit.*, 334.
- <sup>iii</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, wiii.
- <sup>iv</sup> Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, moderator of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, in "Seeing Iraq's Future By Looking at Its Past," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2003.
- <sup>v</sup> George Semaan, editor of the London-based Arabic-language newspaper, *Al Hayat*, appeared in *The Christian Century* (September 26-October 3, 2001) 45.
- <sup>vi</sup> David Rieff, "Their Hearts And Minds? Why the ideological battle against Islamists is nothing like the struggle against communism." *The New York Times Magazine*, September 4, 2004, p. 11.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*,
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*,
- <sup>ix</sup> A representative articulation of a "second tongue" is Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (New York: Tanam, 1982)
- <sup>x</sup> Lisa Lowe, *op.cit.*, 8.
- <sup>xi</sup> Theodo 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."
- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*,
- <sup>xiii</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 17-18.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart*, (Seattle, Wa.: reprint, University of Washington Press, 1943)147.
- <sup>xv</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (London & New York: Toutledge, 1966), 162.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community*, ed. David Ng (Valley Forge, Pa., Judson Press, 1996)
- <sup>xvii</sup> Jacques Derrida in ed. Drucilla Cornell, et. als, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (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.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Edward Said., Huxley's Point Counter Point Celebrates 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (Center for Book Culture.org May 2003