The “Living Human Web” Revisited: An Asian American Pastoral Care and Counseling Perspective

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Abstract

There has been a lack of representations of the heterogeneities of Asian Americans, thereby enabling the continuous reproduction of essentialized stereotypes that are reified in film, media, and in mainstream society in every generation since early immigration experiences of Asians to the U.S. My goal in writing this article is to underscore the importance of recognizing Asian American heterogeneity in pastoral care and counseling so as not to further homogenize and colonize Asian Americans in U.S. society. I want to help foster a more nuanced understanding of Asian American clients among pastoral care practitioners. In that regard, this article serves as a state-of-the-field essay of Asian American studies for pastoral care and counseling practitioners. The first part of my article engages in a discursive inquiry of Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s “living human web” metaphor. I argue that we need to re-imagine the metaphor to include more voices from Asian Americans who have notably been silent in the discourse of the web. In the second half of my article, I trace the genealogy of the term, “Asian American,” and how our subjectivity has been understood and defined in the U.S. By doing so, I hope that we Asian Americans may better contribute to the pastoral theological discourse on identity, subjectivity and agency.

Key words Asian American, pastoral theology, pastoral care and counseling, subjectivity, agency

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Introduction

How have pastoral care and counseling practitioners addressed issues of Asian American agency and identity? How have Asian Americans been defined and seen in the field of pastoral care and counseling? How have we defined ourselves? There has been a lack of representations of the heterogeneities of Asian Americans, thereby enabling the continuous reproduction of essentialized stereotypes that are reified in film, media, and in mainstream society in every generation since early immigration experiences of Asians to the U.S. This misleading historiographic representational framework of Asian Americans firmly entrenches the power to control past, present, and future Asian American discursive representations in the hands of mainstream European American culture, ignoring the variegated communities of Asians here in the U.S. When Asian Americans are not homogenized or essentialized as a single group, we are assimilated into the dominant culture, thereby eliding our differences altogether. Asian Americans, therefore, are either Orientalized as the “perpetual foreigner” or assimilated as “honorary whites.” My goal in writing this article is to underscore the importance of recognizing Asian American heterogeneity in pastoral care and counseling so as not to further homogenize and colonize Asian Americans in U.S. society. In that regard, this article serves as a state-of-the-field essay of Asian American studies for pastoral care and counseling practitioners.

I first want to engage in a discursive inquiry of Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s understanding that we need to have a more complex analysis of structures and systems that undergird society – i.e., the living human web— and that contribute to our vulnerability as human beings. In the second half of my article, I trace the genealogy of the term, “Asian American” and how our identity has been understood and defined. I describe the paradigm shifts in the field of Asian American studies and the impact that the various shifts have had for
understanding issues of Asian American identity. To understand the psyche of our clients, pastoral care and counseling practitioners need to understand the struggles and immigration histories of the past.

While I am aware that there have been large strides in the past decade to incorporate and understand the importance of intercultural pastoral/spiritual care, I write this article in the hopes that pastoral care and counseling practitioners will gain a better understanding of the historiography of issues affecting Asian American identity. Some of my interpersonal encounters during my units of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) mirrored the prejudice, stereotyping, and essentializing that exist in the society at large. To give an example of stereotyping or type-casting me as a certain type of Asian woman, one visiting CPE supervisor made a comment to me that I needed to stop being subservient and docile to my patients! This comment was based on one line of a verbatim where I gave a patient in the emergency room (ER) a blanket because she was cold and had asked for one. The incident was taken out of context in which I took care of the patient’s physical needs: she had schizophrenia, terminal cancer and was being brought to the ER because she had a blood clot and had passed out in her home. When I pointed out to the supervisor the context in which I brought her the blanket (and that most ER patients cannot get up to get their own blankets), he had a blank look on his face and said it did not matter. I, in his interpretation, was being subservient. Another example of a racialized interpersonal relationship I had in CPE was with a European American male student who was Roman Catholic. I confronted him with the suspicion that I did not think he respected me, to which he admitted that indeed, this was the case. He admitted to the fact that he did not respect me because he was older than I, and also because I was an Asian woman. He said he was quite aware of Asian culture and how I was supposed to listen to him (and not talk back to him). He did not like the fact that I
contradicted things he said or that I spoke up after he said something. He said that I should be submissive and respectful to him because I was younger and also because I was Asian. He was expecting me to be like his girlfriend, Michiko, and he was surprised because I had not fit the mold of who he thought I was.\(^2\) Because I was Catholic, he expected me to be submissive to patriarchal culture. When I challenged his understanding of Catholicism by providing feminist perspectives, he immediately got angry and said I was not a real Catholic. He said that, first of all, the Catholicism that I knew was that which was imported into Asia, and therefore, was not the “true” understanding of Catholicism. All in all, my feminist beliefs were completely outlandish to him.

The above stories are just examples of two interpersonal experiences I have had in CPE and do not speak for CPE programs as a whole, nor supervisors. I share these stories merely to highlight how widespread the stereotype of the meek and submissive Asian woman is in our culture, and how it has been ingrained into the mindset of those whom I encounter. The “Asian” woman is a monolithic category in which we are lumped together and seen as undifferentiated from the variegated communities and heterogeneous cultures from which we come. In the first example, I apparently needed to break free from the reins of patriarchy because I was assumed to be that Asian woman; and in the second, I was assumed to be that woman and in turn, I was chastised for not being her! Rarely in pastoral care and counseling do we hear stories that highlight the numerous narratives of Asian Americans who have demonstrated the variegated forms of agency and subjectivity they have embodied and traversed in order to survive and flourish here in the U.S. It underscores to me, the significance of Emmanuel Lartey’s intercultural paradigm for pastoral care, which critiques and problematizes Eurocentric cultural,

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\(^2\) Due to issues of confidentiality, her real name has been changed.

political and economic hegemony, as well as stereotyping in forms of counseling (2003, p.32). Lartey rightly points out that

Some well-meaning attempts to inform counselors and other carers about ‘ethnic minority clients’ adopted in many forms of ‘multicultural training,’ fall into this trap by perpetuating the myths, for example, about the angry underachieving Caribbean male; the Asian young woman’s oppressive cultural role; the African student’s problem with communication; the problems of the Asian extended family or the single-parent Caribbean family. As such, far from enabling attention to the particular client in question, these forms fuel stereotyping of the most heinous kind (pp. 32-33).

Intercultural care values and recognizes diversity, hybridity, and the complexity of interacting cultures (Lartey, 2003). The fluidity and hybridity of Asian Americans are often overlooked due to perpetuated Orientalist stereotypes of Asian Americans.

Outsiders are not the only ones responsible for the on-going stereotypes about Asian Americans. We have contributed to essentialized views of ourselves. Stories of han-filled Korean and Korean American women oppressed by their culture, colonialism, and American imperialism abound in the work of fiction writers and academics (Chu, 2008). For example, the discursive history of Korean feminist theology has portrayed the Korean woman as a unitary subject, one who is poor and a victim of colonialism and superpower politics (Chung, 1990). Asian feminist theologian Angela Wai Ching Wong (2000) has been one of the first to point out this problem of on-going theological discourse that reifies and essentializes the notion of the “poor and suffering woman in Asia,” and calls for a renegotiated postcolonial identity. She argues that the “discourse of ‘the poor woman,’ although it reflects a genuine attention paid to women in the lower strata of Asian societies, dominates the literature of Asian theology, including Asian feminist theology,
and has become the most powerful postcolonial strategy to fight Western imperialism” (p. 7). She correctly problematizes this discursive construct which has somehow constrained the further development of Asian feminist theology (p. 7). Edward Said (1979) and other postcolonial scholars have argued that internalization of colonialist powers’ assumptions about their colonized subjects is part of the problem of Orientalism. Asian Americans’ own essentialist views and theologies, therefore, reinforces the Orientalist gaze. Theologian Namsoon Kang (2011) implores us, Asian and Asian American scholars, to construct a more mature theology that employs a “transethnic” approach.

If we, Asian Americans, are not type-cast into stereotypes, we are then made to believe that being Asian in the U.S. is not a concern, that we are very much a part of the American cultural fabric. We are elided in the discussion of difference all together and discursively assimilated into the dominant European American culture. Derald Wing Sue (1998) argues that “ethnocentric monoculturalism” has been an “extremely powerful, insidious, and pervasive force that [has been] institutionalized in all aspects of society” (p. 46). This has resulted in counseling through an ethnocentric and biased lens, doing great harm to a large number of people who need care. Although there are universal understandings and concerns among human beings, psychotherapist Farhad Dalal (2002) cautions us in essentializing and globalizing cultures (p. 202). What does it mean to portray the Asian American community as part of a “homogenous” U.S., when in reality, we have experienced systematic racial exclusion, been denied citizenship, as well as marginalized in racial discourse? This seems to be part of the on-going complacency in Western liberalism that omits or ignores race and racism. There are those who tend to believe that to ignore or overlook difference shows that people of color are the same as everyone else, when it actually maintains and manipulates the very structures of oppression. Feminist historian
Louise Newman (1999) states that “the national romance with colorblindness ... is a fundamentally misguided strategy—an ineffective way to address the real discursive effects of social hierarchies intricately structured along the multiple axes of race, class, gender” (p. 20). English professor Anne Cheng (2000) warns that “assimilation is never a possibility; it is only an illusion upon which racial melancholia plays and which habitually reinvents itself” (p. 22). She writes, “‘shuttling’ between ‘black’ and ‘white’—the Scylla and Charybdis between which all American immigrants have had to ‘pass’—Asian Americans occupy a truly ghostly position in the story of American racialization” (p. 23).

The boundaries, cultural practices and the processes of creating identity are constantly shifting and being produced in the context of our environment and our histories (Lowe, 1991, p. 64). Who we are as Asian Americans depends as much on the past and future, as well as the present moment in society. Lisa Lowe states that “cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (p. 64). To be cognizant of our histories and our past, then, is crucial in understanding our identity and the context in which we inter-relate within our community. So in that regard, I argue that Asian American pastoral theologians and practitioners need to further critique the “living human web” through methods such as sharing our past histories and unearthing stories of resistance.

The “living human web” revisited

In examining the discursive history of the “web” in pastoral care, Edward Wimberly’s (1979) work has been pioneering in examining the inter-related nature of self and society. His work was the first to lift up the importance of context and community in relation to the self, as well as Sacred Spaces: The e-Journal of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (2010), vol.3.
introduce the issue of racism and oppression into the pastoral theological dialogue. Archie Smith (1982) also saw the importance of humans, living in a “web of social relations” (p. 138). “From a relational perspective,” he argues, “psychic liberation and social transformation are dialectically related and interwoven” (p. 228). He effectively has demonstrated “that emancipatory struggle must seek to strengthen awareness of the interrelatedness and interdependence of human life; this includes the life of the psyche as well as social life” (p. 228). In her metaphor of the “living human web,” Bonnie Miller-McLemore has rightly pointed out the confines of relying solely on a therapeutic model of care. She argues for the need, not only to contribute more actively to theological discourse but also to be better versed in the study of public policy, ethics, and other disciplines as it relates to the emotional well-being of an individual (Miller-McLemore, 2005, p. 40). She points out that confronting structural and societal injustices has been pivotal in transforming the traditionally understood work of pastoral care as simply counseling to a broader, more complex awareness of care as including the social, cultural, religious, politico-economic context (p. 41). She further contends that “to be taken seriously by people of color and by white women, it [pastoral psychotherapy] will have to include … a social analysis of oppression, alienation, exploitation, diversity, and justice in its clinical assessment of individual pathology” (p.41). She correctly emphasizes the inter-related nature of human beings, thereby placing importance on “public policy issues that determine the health of the human web” to be fundamentally linked to that of the “individual emotional well-being” (p.43). “In a word,” she claims, “never again will a clinical moment, whether of caring for a woman recovering from hysterectomy or attending to a women’s spiritual life, be understood on intrapsychic grounds alone …. Psychology alone cannot understand this web” (p.43).
I see Miller-McLemore’s metaphor of the “living human web” as a tremendous shift and growth within the field of pastoral theology, as well as a useful heuristic device in further engaging in dialogue as a community. At the same time, I also see the need for a more critical examination of the ways in which the “living human web” embodies patri-kyriarchal and imperialistic structures that have created and sustained multiple levels of exploitation and domination that perpetuate societal, structural, as well as psychic injustices. I see the need to re-imagine the metaphor of the “living human document in the web” in a way that highlights the variegated ways in which we operate as subjects (with multiple subjectivities) in the greater community of intercultural global citizens (Moore, 1994). We are living human subjects in a kaleidoscope of narrative subjectivities (Benhabib, 2002).

I agree with Miller-McLemore that we need to confront the systems of domination and power that our society continues to uphold. I, therefore, want to elaborate on and complicate her understanding of the web metaphor. I argue that the metaphor of a living human web, while an accurate depiction of our culture here in U.S. society, can also be a precarious metaphor for those who have historically been marginalized by the dominant society. Some webs act as barriers or impediments that serve to confound and knock down flying insects, making them more vulnerable to being trapped in the web below. They may also help to protect the spider from predators such as birds and other insects. As a metaphor, this speaks realistically of our society and the institutions that create and cause inequality. To continue the metaphor, the spider is the

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3 Patri-kyriarchy is Professor Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s (2000) intellectual framework and category of analysis that addresses the dualistic conceptualization of gender oppression, patriarchy and kyriarchy. “Kyriarchy” is derived from the Greek words for “lord” or “master” (kyrios) and “to rule or dominate” (archein), in order to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative overlapping structures of domination. “Kyriarchy means the domination of the lord, slave master, husband, the elite freeborn educated and propertied man over all women and subaltern men” (p.95).
privileged individual in society whose status or social power, i.e., race, age, gender, and so on, provides protection from institutional and societal inequalities.

The living web, then, is an apt metaphor for our global community—with its obstacle courses and pitfalls specifically designed to marginalize certain people and communities, as well as to create and maintain inequalities in society. While the metaphor of the web was meant to help us imagine our inter-connected nature as persons and as a community; it also evokes images of solitude, individualism and autonomy as a web is typically woven and occupied by only one spider, i.e., one individual. Catherine Keller (1986) used the image of the web to signify the spider’s creative potential to spin and weave from her own body. At the same time, the web metaphor calls to mind how the web was built to protect only certain individuals and groups, similarly as capitalist U.S. society values individualism and autonomy. The web was meant to house and protect only the spider that built it, and it was meant as a pitfall for others. In that regard, it is a very self-centered, ego-centric model—as is appropriate for our society here in the U.S. based, as it is, on an autonomous, liberal self. Spider webs create vulnerability, just as capitalist society creates situations of vulnerability. Although not meant to be interpreted as such, the web becomes a metaphor for predatory behavior and survival-of-the fittest, individualistic society which well-represents U.S. society.

Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (2005, p. 3) refer to empire as a web of “trade, knowledge, migration, military power, and political intervention that allowed certain communities to assert their influence and sovereignty over other groups”. They argue that these ‘imperial webs’ functioned as systems of exchange, mobility, appropriation, and extraction, fashioned to enable the empire-building power to exploit the natural resources, manufactured goods, or valued skills of the subordinated group. In offering the
image of the web, we want to emphasize the interconnected networks of contact and exchange without downplaying the very real systems of power and domination such networks had the power to transport. The web’s intricate strands carried with them and helped to create hierarchies of race, class, religion, and gender, among others, thereby casting the conquerors as superior and the conquered as subordinate, with important and lingering consequences for the communities they touched. The image of the web also conveys something of the double nature of the imperial system. Empires, like webs, were fragile and prone to crises where important threads were broken or structural nodes destroyed, yet also dynamic, being constantly remade and reconfigured through concerted thought and effort (p. 3).

The web metaphor in pastoral care and theology has acknowledged these systems of exploitation and domination and has engaged in work to address the pitfalls in the web, as well as care for those who are vulnerable to inequalities in society. Yet, we still need to hear from the voices of those on the margins. We need to recognize the living human document as a subject and the web as a potential structural power to oppress and control. We need to see that the “living human document” has subjectivity, agency, as well as the ability to navigate through the obstacles of oppression in society. In our pastoral care and counseling work, we have to create space for subjects’ agency within postcolonial structures and ongoing U.S. imperialism, militarism as well as anti-colonialist measures of nationalism.

Currently, none of the metaphors in pastoral care adequately addresses the experiences and realities of the “Unitedstatesean” of Asian descent. We should, therefore, re-envision the metaphor of the web to reflect the lived realities of the kaleidoscope of differences that characterize U.S. society. The web metaphor brings with it notions of victimization, and many

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women or people of color may not be comfortable with a metaphor that places their life experiences in a hegemonic web of oppression and domination and depicts them as victims of a capitalist society. While not intended, the web metaphor also stirs up images of the spider who represents the ideologies of colonialism, imperialism, militarism and nationalism that sustain the patri-kyriarchal structures that our society maintains—whose threads hold together such structures that create vulnerability. In this regard, pastoral care and counseling practitioners need to engage in on-going critical conversation about the colonizing and racializing legacies of its past history—and the ways in which counseling can be a colonizing practice if not attuned to the intercultural pastoral care needs of an individual and her/his community.

In the communal-contextual paradigm as well as the intercultural paradigm, pastoral counselors and theologians have begun to acknowledge the subjectivity and agency of subjects—that they provide the knowledge of how we should care without othering in the process. Archie Smith (1982) saw the importance of how “the black church can effectively address these themes [of the problem of false consciousness] by becoming aware of its own historical context and the forces that gave it rise” (p. 228). In the tradition of Smith, then, I see the importance of knowing the history of Asian American subjectivity. I provide a brief genealogical overview below in the hopes that it will kindle our imaginations to construct more refined Asian American pastoral theologies and theories that underscore our hybridity, fluidity, and heterogeneity. In engaging in such creative work, I think it is crucial that we unearth histories and stories of Asian Americans’ subjectivity and agency.

**Historiography of Asian Americans in U.S. history**

**First two periods of Asian American historiography**
Sucheng Chan (1996) argues that Asian American historiography can be broken down into four periods. The first period (1870s-1920s) looks at the early wave of immigration by the Chinese and Japanese. Christina Klein (2003, p. 224) notes how “the racialization of Asian Americans … was achieved through a series of laws restricting immigration and naturalization. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prevented the entry of laborers for ten years, and ultimately led to the severe imbalance of Chinese men versus the number of Chinese women in this country. The Exclusion Act was then extended in 1904, which was followed by the 1917 Gentleman’s Agreement (Klein, 2003). This created the Asiatic Barred Zone, prohibiting immigration from any person whose ancestry could be traced to the Asian Continent or the Pacific Islands (Klein, 2003). This was followed by the Immigration Act of 1924, which was also known as the National Origins Act, prohibiting entry into the U.S. for permanent residence to all persons whose national origin was within the Asia-Pacific Triangle (Klein, 2003). Klein (2003) notes how this was the first and only act of legalized immigration discrimination based on race in the U.S.

The second period of Asian American historiography extends from the 1920s-1960s (Chan, 1996). The Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 prevented any further immigration from the Philippines, which was still a U.S. colony at the time (Klein, 2003). Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 allowed for the immigration and naturalization of Filipinos and Indians in 1946, followed by an amendment to the War Brides Act in 1947 (Klein, 2003). Klein (2003) notes how under the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, all Asians in the U.S. were eligible to become naturalized citizens. By the 1950’s, Klein (2003, p. 226) states that “Asians could begin to claim the status of ‘immigrant’ at the very moment that it was being held up as a privileged category of American national identity”. Robert E. Park of the University of Chicago School of Sociology is
the leading figure during this second period of Asian American historiography. This period is characterized by its focus on the “Oriental Problem”—that is, how Asians did not assimilate into U.S. culture (Chan, 1996). Henry Yu’s (2001), *Thinking Orientals*, examines in-depth the debate of the “Oriental Problem” during this era that Asian Americans posed by not assimilating. Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) argue that the Chicago School, led by Park, was the first to advance a new approach to race using social scientific methodologies, as opposed to biological categories. Omi and Winant argue that the category of ethnicity emerged during this period to understand racial formation. This approach theorizes that other immigrants to the U.S. could and should assimilate into American life just as other white ethnic groups did when they came to the U.S. The problem that sociologists examined is that Asians did not assimilate; hence, the “Oriental Problem.” The first two periods of Asian American historiography, therefore, framed the question of Asian presence in the U.S. as a problem—how we failed to assimilate and were seen as deviant from other immigrants who came to the U.S. We were the “perpetual foreigners” of the “living human web.”

**Third period of Asian American historiography**

In the third period (1960s-1980s) of Asian American historiography, we see the resistance of Asian Americans to negative portrayals of our presence here in the U.S. with stereotypes like “yellow peril,” “coolie,” “gook,” which persist today. Sucheng Chan (1996) and other scholars note this period as the beginning of Asian American Studies as a discipline, resisting the dominant assimilationist paradigm. While the publication of textbooks in this period are crucial, Chan argues that voices from the community in the form of magazines, newspapers and other popular writing were more important from a historiographical perspective. It underscored the political consciousness of Asian Americans. The origins of Asian American
Studies can be traced to the student strikes in the 1960s (Chan, 1996). These strikes were pervasive and were the dominant narrative of Asian American studies, foregrounding political activism that sought social transformation. The 1968 student strikes at San Francisco State University and University of California, Berkeley culminated in the academic institutionalization of Asian American Studies.

So the emergence of the term, Asian American, came to existence in the late 1960s. During this period, the tone of voice among Asian American activists and intellectuals was angry and the emphasis was on the systemic victimization of Asian Americans. Michael Omi (1994) notes that prior to this period, there were no people who referred to themselves as such, using the term, “Oriental,” which refers to objects, not people. Until this period, therefore, Asian Americans were objectified in every sense of the term. Yuji Ichioka coined the term, “Asian American” which emphasized the collective pride of being Asian, at the same time claiming the right to be American (Kang, 2002a). Yen-le Espiritu (1992) idealistically notes how the pan-Asian concept has allowed us to be free from the constraints of nationalism. In historicizing the usage of the strategic term of Asian American, it was also a reference to our solidarity with other Asians abroad who were reviled by the U.S. due to wars with Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

Asian American Studies grew out of progressive pan-racial and pan-ethnic movements for civil rights, social change, as well as a desire for strength as a political community (Ono, 2005). The field emerged due to Asian American student protests and desires to be included in academic curricula. Perceived as the “perpetual foreigner,” they felt that their histories were always left out of the U.S. mainstream historiographical landscape. In many universities across the country, the field continues to be developed through methods of activist struggles and protests for inclusion in academic curricula. Asian American Studies has, therefore, emerged as
more of an activist, praxis-oriented field as opposed to the more theoretical discipline of Asian Studies (Area/Regional Studies). The umbrella term, Asian American, serves to denote common experiences as racial minorities in the U.S. While there are significant differences and divisions among the many ethnicities that constitute the umbrella term, it is a strategic political term of unity and solidarity to resist dominant structures of anti-Asian and Orientalist sentiments here in the U.S. It is a political category of distinction—yes, we are marginalized yet resistant to forms of discrimination and erasure as a community. Asian American activists and intellectuals have actively sought inclusion as an academic discipline that seeks to create epistemologies and unearth histories and individual stories of Asians in America. At the same time, the movement’s goal is recognition for inclusion in the racialized U.S. environment—that we are, indeed, part of the fabric and kaleidoscope of “Unitedstateseans” (Halley, 2006). The field of Asian American Studies seeks to integrate the experiences and histories of Asian Americans as being vitally important to U.S. history. Gary Okihiro (1994) has argued that the dominant values of U.S. society such as democracy, civil rights, and human rights emerge from the epistemologies and histories of those on the margins of society. We test the validity of American values and principles of democracy through the struggles of marginalized subjects.

The 1970s is characterized by a more moderate tone of voice in the writings, as opposed to the militant tone in the 1960s. A well-known book in the field that was edited by Frank Chin (1974), et al.: Aiiieee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers, promoted pan-Asian identity as an empowerment strategy. The writers of this anthology located their political subjectivity here in the U.S., promoting the cultural nationalist paradigm characteristic of this time period. Chin rejects any connection to his Asian identity as a way of rejecting the “perpetual foreigner” image of Asian Americans at this time. When Asian American Studies programs were established, most
of the students and those writing in the field were Asian Americans born in the U.S. Many were third and fourth generation Americans with virtually no emotional connection to their Asian ancestral homelands. Scholars have pointed out this emphasis of disclaiming their ancestral homeland ties in order to emphasize their “Americanness.” In retrospect, however, this cultural nationalist claim is criticized for promoting an anti-immigrant stance, an aspect which I will discuss this aspect later in my article. So this period saw a shift from an assimilationist approach to one emphasizing oppression and victimization. I underscore that the origins of the term, Asian American, was also a way of showing resistance to racism, discrimination, and non-recognition of Asian Americans as being part of the fabric of U.S. cultural identity.

Sucheng Chan (1996) argues that the historiography of Asian American studies has only recently come of age since the early 1980s, and prior to that period, Asian Americans were objects of writings by missionaries, politicians, journalists, etc., during which time, almost all of the writings about Asian Americans was Orientalist and biased. Chan (1996) states that the period of the 1980s and early 1990s focused on questions of agency. The writers have become more nuanced in their analysis of Asian American subjectivity in understanding the diverse forces at work in racial understandings of Asian Americans—that both structural forces and human agency contribute to the construction of Asian American subjectivity. This period of Asian American historiography saw the creation of an Association of Asian American Studies, an important structural body that has helped to generate theories, ideas, and have lively debates on issues important to the field (Chan, 1996). It was also an important organization for students and faculty (whose institutions did not have any Asian American Studies programs) to receive feedback on their work. In this period, we also see a shift in the demographics of the students in the field—as opposed to the earlier periods where most of the students and faculty are several
generations away from their ancestral Asian heritage, this period sees a greater increase in the number of students who are of foreign-born immigrants. So, while pan-Asian American identity has been crucial for cultivating the political consciousness necessary to fight against the tides of racism in the earlier decades, the concept of such a non-existent homogeneity among the incredibly diverse and variegated Asian populations is increasingly being critiqued and underscored in the period as problematic.

“Transnational turn” of the 1990s

Since the field’s beginning, Asian American studies has taken a “transnational turn” in the early 1990s, with a greater focus on the transnationalism and diaspora of Asians in the global community (Okamura, 2003). A point of tension for the field is in the usage and interrogation of the terms, “Asian,” “American,” and “Asian American.” The phenomenon of diaspora and issues of transnationalism have resulted in a critical interrogation of the meaning of “Asian American,” as well as a self-reflection of the field itself. “Asian America,” critics argue, is not a place existing solely in the U.S.—it is a discursive site made up of diasporic Asian and Asian American communities and individuals. Earlier divisions and boundaries of those who are “Asian” and those who are “Asian American” are becoming more murky, porous, fluid, transnational and intercultural. While Asian Americanists previously disdained the field of Asian studies as being a by-product of post-Cold War culture, there is growing interest by Asian Americanists in this more recent period to have conversations and engage in overlapping work with those in Asian Studies.

Lisa Lowe’s (1991) article, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian Differences,” has become a classic in the field, paradigmatic of the period of the “transnational turn” for later works to come. Lowe argues that rather than seeing “Asian American identity,” as
being fixed and established, we should see ‘Asian American cultural practices’ which produce identity that are never complete. The practices constitute on-going changes in understanding our identity; it is a matter of becoming, constantly in formation and in transformation. While she emphasizes the importance for seeing Asian American identity as a political organizing tool for solidarity and for asserting our agency in the upstream battle for recognition to various injustices we have encountered; at the same time, she sees the importance of signifying our differences and heterogeneity as a way of disrupting Orientalist constructions and representations of Asian Americans. Differences such as ethnicity, generations removed from one’s ancestral home place, refugee versus non-refugee, Asian Americans of mixed race, gender difference, as well as class differences all need to be taken into consideration.

At the same time, Lowe (1996) argues that the issue of immigration is the most important discursive element for Asian American subjectivity and in that regard, she argues for non-differentiation between Asian Americans who are American and those who are of immigrant status. At the same time, she argues for recognizing differences within the Asian American community. The issue of immigration has been one which thoroughly divides us as a community, not only because of the questions of citizenship and the rights that Asian American citizens hold, but also because of variegated experiences that result from whether one is of the immigrant generation, children of immigrants, or generations removed from the actual embodied experience. I understand to a certain degree, Lowe’s logic in this because she sees that despite differences, we need to maintain political solidarity. To that extent, she emphasizes the importance of a “collective agency” of Asian Americans, a group that would otherwise not adhere to one another as many groups historically have not gotten along outside the realm of a political strategy of American resistance.
As an example, there has been historical animosity among East Asian groups (China, Korea, Japan) towards South Asians; and among East Asian groups, Koreans have held hostile feelings towards Chinese and Japanese. Yet, here in the U.S., the racism that all Asian Americans have experienced has compelled a united voice for solidarity among very different ethnic groups. So while it is crucial to construct an Asian American cultural identity that takes into account our intra-Asian differences, we need to politically maintain its positioning as a unified, albeit heterogeneous, group that does not forget the earlier progressive solidarity work that has held us together as a marginalized group—and in Lowe’s eyes, therefore, it is important to see Asian immigrants and Asian Americans as a collective body. Lowe’s (1991) classic article argues for interdisciplinarity in the fields of Asian, American, and Asian American studies which would help us rethink our understanding of Asian American identity.

In an important article, Sau-ling Wong (1995) uses the concept of a “denationalization,” which includes an increasingly blurred boundary of who is considered to be Asian American and who is “Asian,” as well as between the academic fields of Asian American Studies and Asian Studies. She notes the shift from the domestic American perspective to a diasporic one. All of these changes occurring in Asian American Studies as well as the debate in what and who constitutes Asian America/n is impacted by changes abroad as well, such as influences of Western imperialism in the cultural, economic, social, and political production on Asian countries and its people (Wong, 1995). She argues that it is more helpful to see modalities of Asian American subjectivity than to speak of it in phases. That is, unpacking the meaning of Asian American subjectivity needs to be examined from multiple lenses of the local, domestic, diasporic, transnational, and so on—as not happening in various phases but as occurring in complex ways simultaneously (Wong, 1995).
Numerous other scholars have advocated for a ‘transnational turn’ in the field of Asian American Studies and argued for greater interrogation of the discursive historiography of “Asian” and “American.” David Palumbo-Liu (1999) uses the term, Asian/American, to denote that the slash signifies the distinction between “Asian” and “American,” at the same time that it can also constitute a fluid movement between the two. Both “Asian” and “American” are unsettled meanings in Asian American discursive historiography. Like Lowe, he argues that the boundaries that have been constructed between the two terms are not as solid as once assumed (Palumbo-Liu, 1999). Immigration, border crossings and diasporic communities are part of the American landscape, that is, U.S. culture is significantly shaped by its counters with Asian peoples and countries.

Laura Hyun Yi Kang’s (2002) work also contributes to the ‘transnational turn’ in Asian American Studies that critically investigates “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” in identity formation. Like Palumbo-Liu, she also uses the slash in writing Asian/American to underscore the role of immigrant subjectivity. She wants us to challenge the problems of a disciplinary approach in critically examining the heterogeneity of Asian/American women. She argues that the discursive significance of “Asian American women” arose in dispersed, fragmented moments—not in a coherent, homogeneous way that describes the historiography of pan-Asian ethnic identity. “Asian American women” as a political category became fixed once government organizations adopted the term as a category of existence. Asian/American women were/are doubly oppressed as being women and Asian American and have had to navigate the essentialism and stereotypes that both oppressions have thrown upon us. She argues that we do not fit into the dominant feminism of a white women’s liberation movement, nor do we share the dominant Asian American movement of liberation that has been constructed from a masculinist
norm. She argues that we need to challenge dominant paradigms of knowledge and subject formation in the academy which mainly relies on disciplinarity. Such scholarship is problematic in reifying representations of Asian/American women and limits our possibilities of how we come to know and be Asian/American women. My critique of Kang’s work is that she has not escaped the bounds of her own critique—namely, she reifies existing discursive structures of Asian/American women by the very categorization itself. How is her work a part of a different type of representation of Asian/American women?

Kandice Chuh’s (2003) work serves as a novel approach to the question of “Asian America” on which the field should reflect. She argues for a ‘subjectless analysis’ that deconstructs representations of Asian America as monolithic. She contends that we need to go beyond an identity politics on which the field is currently based. She argues that rather than foreground the problem of race as the primary category of analysis, the field needs to rethink possibilities for organizing itself. She displaces the identity-based model that dominates the field, as well as the nation-state. She argues that Asian Americanists need to disclaim America and imagine another ‘home’ beyond geographic borders. While she argues for a more praxis-oriented, liberative approach to the problem of Asian American issues, her work is more theoretical and utopia-focused. Her approach is rather elitist in that it does not address concrete problems that exist for Asian Americans living in the U.S. While she argues for a ‘subjectless discourse,’ she does not provide an adequate alternative to a rights-endowed subject. I think she is conflating legal discourse that essentializes an abstract “rights-endowed subject” that does not take into account variegated differences between peoples in a particular identity group because of the very structures of the law, with that of how subjectivity in a rights discourse can foreground agency and political voice for an individual.
In discussing the paradigm shifts of the term, “Asian American,” Jonathan Okamura (2003) has rightly noted how the early Asian American studies movement was both international and nationalist in its origin. The student strikes at San Francisco State University and University of California, Berkeley were partly resistance struggles to U.S. foreign policy in the Third World. The strikes were protests of liberation of Third World people at home, as well as abroad—that is, a concern for the domestic as well as international community of marginalized subjects. Okamura has interpreted this as seeing the seeds of transnationalism in the early Asian American movement. His approach is helpful because he sees the two ‘phases’ as being coexistent and interdependent, rather than separate ‘time and space’ occurrences. Like Sau-ling Wong, he argues for the importance of both perspectives: we need to focus on the community and concerns of Asian Americans living in the U.S. as primary for the field, at the same time addressing and examining the larger transnational context of global economic and political forces. He gives the example of female Asian migrant workers as being the focal point of transnational and local concerns for the Asian American community.

The term, “transnational racism” has entered the vocabulary of Asian American Studies, as those in the field argue that whether Asians are here in the U.S. or abroad, the racializing process is in effect. Gary Okihiro (1994) also addresses a similar concern in his work, “When and Where I Enter.” He argues that immigrant subjectivity is a process that occurs prior to an Asian even entering the U.S. since as early as the 5th century B.C.E, Europeans were observing Asians and Orientalism has informed the colonization and domination of Asians in Asia and in the U.S. Therefore, Asian Americanists need to see race as the critical category of analysis and continue in the work of coalition-building and community organizing. Pastoral theologian K.

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5 Okihiro borrows the title from Paula Giddings’s (1994) work on the history of African American women, “When and where I enter: The impact of black women on race and sex in America.”

Samuel Lee promotes the importance of partnering and creating alliances among peoples of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientation, and so on (2009, p.4). He emphasizes that all identity groups “promote its stance in alliance, not in competition, with other identity groups if we want to build an inclusive moral, political, cultural, and economic democracy” (p. 9). Americanist George Lipsitz (2000) sees the importance of ongoing transnational work and analysis while adhering to the earlier progressive political vision of the field of Asian American studies. He is one who sees the strategic importance of the political term, “Asian American,” and its necessary existence for offering a prescriptive to ongoing racial injustices in the U.S. Despite its critique of homogenization and glossing over of differences, he argues that it is an important framework for Asian Americans and for the field of Asian American Studies itself.

**Asian American women**

In historicizing the gendered history of Asian Americans during the time of civil rights activism, many Asian American feminists highlight their “invisibility” and “marginality” within the larger Asian American movement (Kim & Zia, 1997). Even though many Asian American women were at the center of the activist endeavors, their work was not recognized as part of a larger struggle of the second wave feminist movement (1960s-1980s) in working towards eradicating sexism and oppression of women. Asian American feminist consciousness benefited and collaborated with this dual academic/activist endeavor as part of the second wave feminist movement as well. Asian American feminists utilized the intellectual feminist theoretical framework that was being produced by the Euro-American women’s movement, and they were able to build networks with them. Kim and Zia (1997) note that Asian American feminists need to continue challenging Euro-American women in a way that unites, not divides, the U.S.
feminist movement. They recognize the tendency for Euro-American feminists to put forth an agenda, expecting that all women will support this as their community’s agenda (p.60). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999), in her work, has challenged how power is utilized in dominant groups and how these groups impose and assert their perspectives, their beliefs and practices as that which should be embraced by all of humankind. She carefully nuances the importance of feminism’s awareness of its responsibilities towards emancipatory struggles of other women without homogenizing the variegated contexts of women. Helen Zia asserts that the basis for collaboration is that “even though we can’t assume unity with white feminists, we can hope that because of their experience with gender oppression we may be able to reach a common understanding” (Kim & Zia, 1997, p. 61).

Conclusion

Stereotypes of Asian Americans are still so pervasive that we are still regarded as foreigners here in the U.S. after more than two hundred years of the first Asian immigrants’ arrival. Playwright David Henry Hwang (2003) laments that stereotypes of Asian Americans continue unabated, even when the particulars change. He states that he has become

Less interested in seeking the Holy Grail of authenticity and more convinced of the need to create characters who burst from the page or stage with richness, complexity and contradictions of real people. At its core, a stereotype is bad writing: a one- or two-dimensional cutout devoid of humanity, and therefore prone to demonization (pp. xiii-xiv).
Robert Lee (1999) notes how Orientalism, like other theories of domination and difference, relies heavily on establishing authority over the Other through knowledge of and access to the Other’s language, history, and culture as a privilege of the colonial agent.

Edward Said (1993) stated that narrative is crucial to hegemonic discursive power, and that “stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (p. xii). Miller-McLemore (2005) insists that those within the web who have not yet spoken must speak for themselves. She contends that “if knowledge depends on power, then power must be given to the silenced” (p. 46). She states that “we must hear the voices of the marginalized from within their own context” (p. 46). The power to narrate is significant, especially in the web where the dominant voice is the European American voice. The current web metaphor, then, is limited in stimulating our imaginations to construct theologies that do not victimize or stereotype Asian American communities or other persons of color, mainly because our voices have largely been absent.

In order to locate us in the pastoral theological discursive web, I have examined the trajectory of Asian American subjectivity by providing a brief genealogical context of the term, “Asian” and “Asian American” within U.S. society. In this article, I have highlighted scholars’ works that successfully piece together a representation of Asian immigrant subjectivity. I have written this article in order for pastoral care and counseling practitioners to be better versed in understanding the genealogy of Asian American struggles for establishing our subjectivity here in the U.S. I anticipate that this state-of-the-field essay on Asian American subjectivity will stimulate our imaginations to construct more sophisticated Asian American theologies that underscore our subjectivity and agency. This, I hope, will then strengthen our work with Asian
Americans in pastoral care. Through variegated forms of agency, I hope we, Asian Americans, can metaphorically participate in weaving threads of justice on the “web” where all communities of color can flourish with equal dignity.

References


