

## Hybridity and the Decolonization of Asian American and Queer Theologies by Patrick S. Cheng\*

As a gay Asian American theologian, I often relate to Jesus' statement that the Child of Humanity "has nowhere to lay his head" (Matt 8:20; Luke 9:58 NRSV). Like Jesus, many of us who are Asian American as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender ("LGBT" or "queer") experience a profound sense of metaphorical homelessness -- that is, a state of permanent exile or diaspora -- with respect to both the Asian American and the LGBT communities.

For example, LGBT Asian Americans are often treated as outcasts and deviants by the straight Asian American community. We often face unique issues with respect to coming out to our families and faith communities (for example, issues relating to language barriers, family immigration status, and cultural attitudes towards sexuality and shame) that are alien to our counterparts in the white LGBT community.[1]

Similarly, LGBT Asian Americans are often treated as outcasts by the white LGBT community. On the one hand, we are often fetishized or stereotyped as exoticized objects of consumption (for example, by "rice queens" in the white gay male community). On the other hand, we are often ignored and overlooked by the larger white LGBT movement in terms of visibility and leadership. This dual dynamic of fetishization and marginalization often leads to self-hatred on the part of many LGBT Asian Americans.[2]

Not surprisingly, this experience of profound exile or diaspora is also reflected in the theological realm. In general, Asian American straight theologians rarely talk about issues relating to sexuality and theology, let alone the suffering and marginalization experienced by their LGBT Asian American sisters and brothers with respect to heterosexism and transphobia. Similarly, LGBT white theologians rarely talk about the encounters of their LGBT Asian American sisters and brothers with racism and xenophobia. Ironically, each theological movement is the colonizer -- and the colonized! -- with respect to the other.

For me, the postcolonial concept of hybridity is a way to decolonize Asian American theologies with respect to LGBT issues on the one hand, and to decolonize queer theologies with respect to Asian American issues on the other. Hybridity, which arises out of the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized, describes a "third space" of resistance in which a new reality is created and in which both parties are irrevocably transformed. Homi Bhaba has likened hybridity to an encounter within the liminal and interstitial space of a stairwell that is located in between two floors, which "prevents identities as either end of it from settling into primordial polarities." [3] Hybridity both empowers the subaltern and challenges the power of the colonizer (cf. Isa 40:4; Luke 1:52).

The emergence of LGBT Asian American theological writings in recent years by individuals such as Michael Kim, Eric Law, Jeannette Lee, Leng Lim, and myself can be understood as the creation of a hybrid "third space" that challenges the assumptions of

both Asian American and queer theologies.[4] This is part of a larger movement of writings by queer theologians of color such as elias farajajé-jones, Renee L. Hill, and Irene Monroe[5] -- as well as our straight allies such as Kwok Pui-lan[6] and our white allies such as Robert Goss[7] -- that can be understood in postcolonial terms as a critique of the troubling absence of dialogue between racial and sexual theologies.

So where is the good news in all this? For me, Jesus Christ can be understood in postcolonial terms as the ultimate hybrid being. That is, as the Word “made flesh” (John 1:14 KJV), Jesus Christ is a hybrid being who is both divine and human. He has “nowhere to lay his head” because he is in both worlds, and yet he belongs to neither world alone.

As understood by the Christian theological tradition starting with the Athanasian and Chalcedonian creeds, the dual nature of Jesus Christ is what bridges the chasm between the divine and the human. In other words, God irrevocably transforms both the divine and the human through Jesus Christ by bringing down divinity in the incarnation and crucifixion and by lifting up humanity in the resurrection.

Like Jesus Christ, we LGBT Asian Americans embody the grace of hybridity in our daily lives. As such, we are uniquely able to bridge the chasm between the Asian American and LGBT communities, which are often depicted as being at odds with one another (for example, in contemporary debates over marriage equality).[8] Similarly, in the theological realm, it is the gift of hybridity that allows those of us who are LGBT Asian Americans to decolonize both Asian American as well as queer theologies.

Notes:

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[1] For writings about the LGBT Asian American experience, see Quang Bao and Hanya Yanagihara, eds., *Take Out: Queer Writing from Asian Pacific America* (New York: Asian American Writers' Workshop, 2000); Song Cho, ed., *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture and Politics* (Toronto: Queer Press, 1998); David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, eds., *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Russell Leong, ed., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Sharon Lim-Hing, ed., *The Very Inside: An Anthology of Writing by Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1994).

[2] See sources cited in note 1 above.

[3] See Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 5. For helpful introductions to the concept of hybridity, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 118-

21; and Ania Loomba, *Colonialism / Postcolonialism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 145-53. See also Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes, eds., *Hybridity and Its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000); Virinder S. Kalra, Raminder Kaur, and John Hutnyk, *Diaspora and Hybridity* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005); Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007); Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[4] See Patrick S. Cheng, "Multiplicity and Judges 19: Constructing a Queer Asian Pacific American Biblical Hermeneutic," *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 119-33; Patrick S. Cheng, "Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience," *Spiritus* 6, no. 2 (2006): 234-40; Patrick S. Cheng, "Roundtable Discussion: Same-Sex Marriage," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 2 (2004): 103-07; Michael Kim, "Out and About: Coming of Age in a Straight White World," in *Asian American X: An Intersection of 21st Century Asian American Voices*, ed. Arar Han and John Hsu (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 139-48; Eric H.F. Law, "A Spirituality of Creative Marginality," in *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1997), 343-36; Jeanette Mei Gim Lee, "Queerly a Good Friday," in *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian / Pacific American Activists*, ed. Kevin K. Kumashiro (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 81-86; Leng Leroy Lim, "'The Bible Tells Me to Hate Myself': The Crisis in Asian American Spiritual Leadership," *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 315-22; Leng Leroy Lim, "Webs of Betrayal, Webs of Blessings," in *Eng and Hom, Q&A*, 323-34.

[5] See Elias Farajaje-Jones, "Breaking Silence: Toward an in-the-Life Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume II, 1980-1992*, ed. James H. Cone, and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 139-59; elias farajajé-jones, "Holy Fuck," in *Male Lust: Pleasure, Power, and Transformation*, ed. Kerwin Kay et al. (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, 2000), 327-35; Renee L. Hill, "Who Are We for Each Other?: Sexism, Sexuality and Womanist Theology," in *Cone and Wilmore, Black Theology II*, 345-51; Renée Leslie Hill, "Disrupted / Disruptive Movements: Black Theology and Black Power 1969 / 1999," in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 138-49; "Rev. Dr. Renee L. Hill," in *A Whosoever Church*, ed. Gary David Comstock (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Irene Monroe, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," in *Out of the Shadows into the Light: Christianity and Homosexuality*, Miguel A. de la Torre, ed. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2009), 39-58; "Rev. Irene Monroe," in *Comstock, A Whosoever Church*, 59-71.

[6] See Kwok Pui-lan, "Asian and Asian American Churches," in *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 59-62; Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 100-21.

[7] See Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 232-37, 253.

[8] For writings on the tension between the LGBT and Asian American communities, see Eunai Shrake, "Homosexuality and Korean Immigrant Protestant Churches," in *Embodying Asian / American Sexualities*, ed. Gina Masequesmay and Sean Metzger (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 145-56; and Amy Sueyoshi and Russell Leong, eds., *Asian Americans in the Marriage Equality Debate*, *Amerasia Journal* 32, no. 1 (2006): iii-122.