

## Rearticulating an Asian American Theology of Liberation

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Is there a revolutionary Asian American theology today? I ask this question in the midst of the ongoing protests in Hong Kong, the occupation of Palestine, the mass incarceration in Xinjiang, the annexation of Jammu and Kashmir, the student protests in Indonesia, the continuing Muslim ban, and the ICE deportations of Southeast Asians in the US.

Who is Asian American theology by, and whom is it for?

According to the 2019 AAPI California Workers Survey, one in five or more working Cambodians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Indian Californians struggling with poverty. With Hmong, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Californians, it is one in three or more.<sup>1</sup>

According to 2015 Pew Research data, Asians were the fastest growing population in the US, and one in seven Asian immigrants were estimated to be undocumented, making up an estimated 13% of undocumented people in the US.<sup>2</sup>

Over Thanksgiving weekend in 2017, 38-year-old Yang Song jumped from the third floor of a massage parlour in Flushing, New York during a police raid, and died in the hospital soon after. Song, who had come from Shenyang, China, had been working in illegal massage parlours for several years and had been arrested four times in the past. Song's death led to the creation of Red Canary Song,<sup>3</sup> an organisation supporting the grassroots organising of migrant sex workers, focusing on Chinese massage parlor workers in New York City.

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Liberation theology is a theology from below, and for Asians in the US, this is the view from below.

You probably associate to liberation theology names like James Cone, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Marcela Althaus-Reid, maybe even Aloysius Pieris and Chung Hyun Kyung. These theologians gave us theologies of Black liberation, Latin American liberation, Asian liberation, queer and feminist liberation. Less well known are the Asian American — or Amerasian — theologies of liberation in the 1960s and 70s, largely pioneered by Japanese Christians such as Roy Sano, Paul Nagano, June Kimoto, and Fumitaka Matsuoka, who were shaped by the Japanese incarceration, and other Asians experiencing immigration and white racist domination.

It has been a little over fifty years since the Third World Liberation Front strikes in 1968 and 1969, inspired by the Black Panthers, in solidarity with anticolonial and anti-imperial movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It was around this time that Asian American identity was claimed as an oppositional, activist, and political identity, in sharp contrast to the demographic category that has become today.

These movements produced vigorous theological reflection. Methodist bishop Roy Sano founded the Pacific and Asian American Center for Theology and Strategies in 1972, whose purpose, in the words of Sano, was “to re-think faith and reorient ministries in the light of the emergence of ethnic consciousness in the late 1960s.”<sup>4</sup> Its theological output was never published, and instead is contained in an archive of twenty boxes at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley.

Among these works are a 1973 reader on *Amerasian Theology of Liberation*, a 1973 compilation of *Autobiographical Reflections for Amerasian Theology of Liberation*, 1975 proceedings of a conference titled *East Asian and Amerasian Liberation*, and a 1976 reader on *The Theologies of Asian Americans and Pacific Peoples*. These were all compiled by Roy Sano. The long lists of contributors reveal a broad commitment to Asian liberation, even as they reflect

the demographics of the time: primarily Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean; immigrant and working-class. Even then, they already saw themselves as middle minorities, and wrestled with their place in a black and white society, and the inheritance of the white man's religion. I have digitized these readers, and have made them freely available online.<sup>5</sup>

One may speculate as to why this movement is largely lost to history, to our collective memory. One could point to the broader defeat of the left, or to post-1965 Asian demographics, or the shift towards identity politics, or the transition from Third World decolonization to statehood. But the point that I wish to make here is simply this: an Asian Amerikan theology of liberation exists. It is our inheritance. It is a solid foundation on which we can build for the 2020s.

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Is there a revolutionary Asian Amerikan theology today? Implicitly, I am arguing that no such theology exists today. Though there have been contributions by Asian Amerikan theologians to volumes such as *Ethics: A Liberative Approach* and *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*, the Asian authors do not claim to be working within the framework of liberation theologies. To be sure, the fundamental contributions of Asian feminist theologians in the US have given us some of the most critical and intersectional theological reflections ever to emerge from the Asian Amerikan perspective, drawing from postcolonial and feminist theory.

Is there a revolutionary Asian Amerikan theology today? I want to suggest that Asian Amerikan theologies that focus on notions of marginality, liminality, and hybridity are identity-building projects which, while valuable in their own right, are not specifically about liberation. They are theologies of inculturation, and are contextual theologies just like liberation theologies, but the two are *not* the same thing.

I take liberation to be the condition of freedom, or rather, as it is used both in Hebrew and Greek: freedom *from*. Freedom from every weight, and the sin that so easily besets us.<sup>6</sup> Freedom from hegemony, from systems of domination, from white supremacy, from racial capitalism, from patriarchal heteronormativity, from imperialism, from neo- and settler colonialism.

A theology of liberation theologises from the viewpoint of the oppressed. It takes sides. For Asians in the US, this means turning the focus away from East Asians, from Ivy Leagues, from model minorities, from aspirations to whiteness and embourgeoisement.

More than 50% of AAPI students in California's higher education are in community colleges. The six-year completion rate is 73% for Chinese students, and 37% for Laotian students.<sup>7</sup>

Since 1998, over 16,000 Southeast Asian Americans have received final deportation orders, more than three quarters of which are based on old criminal records. The current expansion of ICE only facilitates this prison-to-deportation pipeline.

One in three Hmong, Bhutanese and Burmese live in poverty, compared to one in twelve Filipinos, Indians, and Japanese. Yet, Asians overall had lower poverty rates compared to the general US population.<sup>8</sup>

Is a revolutionary Asian Amerikan theology needed today? It is perhaps not outrageous to claim that a growing number of Asian Christians in the US today are looking for a theology that is antiracist, antisexist, anti-capitalist, and antifascist. A theology that is not only deimperial and decolonial but resolutely anti-imperial, anti-colonial, anti-settler colonial, and "anti-antiblack." A theology that is liberationist, internationalist, coalitional, intersectional, and perhaps most importantly, accessible outside the academy.

We need a theological framework that has the firepower to engage the events of today, to enter into the fray. A theology that can answer to white supremacy, racial capitalism,

ethnonationalism, and climate change. I draw on *Asian Amerikan* as a social location and coalitional politics that coheres a critical discourse and deconstructive analysis, and on *liberation theology* as the structure that grounds our struggle and constructive praxis.

I want to offer Asian Amerikan liberation theology as a new-old way of doing theology as Asians in the US. There is much history that has gone before us that is ready to be used, to be weaponized. In fact, according to declassified documents, even the CIA knew in 1986 that “liberation theology can pose a serious threat to US interests when its critique of capitalism and US development policy find a receptive audience.”<sup>9</sup>

I want to offer Asian Amerikan liberation theology as a way of grounding our activism as we enter the 2020s, a theology from the viewpoint of migrant, undocumented, trafficked, homeless, refugee, queer, dark-skinned, and working-class Asians.

I want to offer Asian Amerikan liberation theology as a radical, viable alternative to Asians protesting the conviction of Peter Liang,<sup>10</sup> protesting proposals for homeless shelters,<sup>11</sup> protesting affirmative action policies,<sup>12</sup> protesting school integration saying “Blacks destroy school systems and schools.”<sup>13</sup>

Today, theologians debate the usefulness of liberation theology. But theologians of liberation have always known the chasm between vision and reality, the already and not yet. As Gayraud Wilmore’s paper *A revolution unfulfilled, but not invalidated* and Eleazar Fernandez and Fernando Segovia’s volume *A Dream Unfinished* insist, the fundamental claims of theologies of liberation have not been falsified.<sup>14</sup> If anything, the events of the last decade only show their continuing relevance, and the work that remains to be done. Drawing from this historical Asian Amerikan liberation theology connects us to our elders, to a history we never knew was ours, to a revolution that still awaits.

So, to answer the question: is there a revolutionary Asian Amerikan theology today? I propose to you Asian Amerikan liberation theology as an idea whose time had come, and has come again. But it is up to us to build it, or rather, to build upon the foundation already laid for us, and future generations fifty years from now will judge if we were faithful to the cause.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> The Working Lives and Struggles of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in California: Findings from the 2019 AAPI California Workers Survey. API Data and PRRI. <https://www.prrri.org/research/the-working-lives-and-struggles-of-asian-americans-and-pacific-islanders-in-california/>

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center analysis of 2013–2015 American Community Survey (IPUMS) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/08/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.redcanarysong.org/>

<sup>4</sup> PACTS information article, 1985; Box 6 ff 9.

<sup>5</sup> <https://tiwong.github.io/theory/2019/03/21/to-the-archives.html>

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 12:1

<sup>7</sup> <http://aapidata.com/blog/education-nonelite/>

<sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center analysis of 2013–2015 American Community Survey (IPUMS) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/08/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>

<sup>9</sup> Liberation Theology: Religion, Revolution, Reform, April 1986 <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP97R00694R000600050001-9.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> How Should Asian-Americans Feel About the Peter Liang Protests? <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/23/magazine/how-should-asian-americans-feel-about-the-peter-liang-protests.html>

<sup>11</sup> In fighting homeless camp, Irvine’s Asians win, but at a cost <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-homeless-asians-20180401-story.html>

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<sup>12</sup> Harvard Does Not Discriminate Against Asian-Americans in Admissions, Judge Rules

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/us/harvard-admissions-lawsuit.html>

<sup>13</sup> Where Civility Is a Motto, a School Integration Fight Turns Bitter

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/12/us/howard-county-school-redistricting.html>

<sup>14</sup> Wilmore, Gayraud. "A revolution unfulfilled, but not invalidated" in *A Black Theology of Liberation*: (1990): 145-163; Fernandez, Eleazar S., and Fernando F. Segovia, eds. *A Dream Unfinished: Theological Reflections on America from the Margins*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007.