

## P888 Intensive Seminar

# Building an Altar: Teaching as Mutual Veneration

**Christine J. Hong,**  
*Columbia Theological Seminary*

### Course Information

Spring 2026  
February 3, 2026 – Whenever and wherever  
9:00 am - 12:00 pm – In person and in Spirit  
Portal Hall 777

### Instructor Information

- **Dr. Christine Hong**, Associate Professor of Magical Ministry
- Office: Over the river and through the woods
- Email: [catchmeifyoucan@uninstitutionalized.edu](mailto:catchmeifyoucan@uninstitutionalized.edu)
- Office Hours: By appointment via telepathy. Please recite Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice to set up a mutual time.

### Prerequisites:

- Curiosity
- Self-engaged compassion
- Release of right to comfort



*Photo by Christine Hong*

### Course Description:

This intensive seminar engages the teacher as learner and the learner as teacher. Participants are expected to engage with an expanded understanding of teaching as veneration through practices of mutuality with one another and ancestors. This course begins as an intensive course but has no ending period as it futures the participant into a lifelong practice and journey. Welcome.

| 3 Credit Hours

### Course Requirements:

Participants in this course are required to Attend and attend. Please leave

imposter syndrome at home, preferably stowed under a forgotten floorboard or in the back of a linen closet. You may retrieve said imposter syndrome once more at your convenience or in absolute demonstrated need, which hopefully will never actually present itself.

### Course Objectives:

1. To introduce and reintroduce teaching as veneration.
2. To build and examine altars as portals.
3. To create connections and dimensions of mutuality bound and grounded to Land, place and being.
4. To conjure and sustain resources for existence beyond realms of survival.

**Learning Outcomes:**

1. Student/teachers will demonstrate understanding of the creation of curriculum and teaching as mutual veneration through discussion and embodied assignments.
2. Student/teachers will develop and demonstrate a praxis of teaching as mutual veneration through the building of altars as portals.
3. Student/teachers will integrate learning as they co-develop resources for mutual veneration with other student/teachers and with assistance from willing ancestors.

**Required Texts:**

1. The true stories written in your bones.
2. Your personal and collective imagination.
3. Your third eye.

**Policies:**

Accountabilities are paramount in this course and the course of life. Participants should make room for personal and communal growth towards current and future accountabilities. Participants are expected to include names and descriptions of communities with whom their accountabilities are anchored. In other words, participants should constantly interrogate the question: Which communities do I claim and which communities claim me in return?

**Assignment:**

The overall assignment for this course is the co-construction of a pedagogical altar with other student/teachers in this course, ancestors, extended communities, imaginations, Land, and futures.

*Due Date:* The assignment does not have a due date as it is never fully complete and extends beyond the walls of the “classroom.”

**Assessment:**

Assessment for the assignment and the course is through communal assessment. Communal assessment occurs through practices of mutuality and accountability with the living and the dead, ongoing

self-reflexivity and dialogue, dreaming alone and in cohorts, generative engagement with imaginary friends, and time in and with Land.

**Course Schedule:****Day 1 Summary – Veneration:**

Veneration is not worship. That’s the colonizer’s messy interpretation. The cruel, intentional scarring of a beautiful face. A petulant reordering of an act those who would call themselves masters could not steal or understand. Veneration is not vertical. There is no hierarchy. Veneration is mutual. It is eye to eye, forehead to forehead, nose to nose. A gesture of care and love between equals in different forms. When we venerate our ancestors across an altar on holy days, on any day – for there aren’t such things as regular days; aren’t all days sacred? – we start by setting an altar. Elaborate or bare. Does it matter? We adorn it with a candle, incense, a bowl of water, an image or name of the Spirit we are calling to us, and an offering or a gift, something simple is fine if given freely, with love. We set the table and a door opens.

Teaching is not worship of a teacher or the king-making of ideas. That is the colonizer’s messy interpretation. The cruel, intentional scarring of a beautiful face. A petulant reordering of an act colonizers could not steal or understand. Teaching and knowledge are not a vertical wall to climb and conquer with bloodied fingers. There is no hierarchy. Teaching and learning are mutual veneration. It is eye to eye, forehead to forehead, nose to nose. A gesture of care and love between equals in different forms. When we venerate one another through teaching and learning, Monday through Friday, on any day – there aren’t such things as regular days; aren’t all days sacred? – we start by writing a syllabus, building a road map toward what we might learn together. Elaborate or bare. Does it matter?

**We adorn a course with:**

- Outcomes and goals. Our hopes and dreams for what we might achieve.

- Texts, readings, art, music, and other materials that make up the depth and breadth of a subject.
- Assignments and opportunities for students to reveal their innermost questions, thoughts, and stories.
- An invitation for students to attend not only to themselves but to their wider communities of belonging, bringing their ancestors and Spirits along.

Something simple is fine if given freely with love. We set the table and a door opens.

#### Day 2 Summary – Altar:

Altars are portals. Busy two-way streets where Spirits converge. On purpose. On accident. Meet cute. On birthdays and death days. Lunar New Year. Full and new moons. Always movement. Back and forth. Here and there. Living and not quite. Time is not linear at the altar. Time is spiral and cyclical, moving around and around, circling beings and Spirits that tend to altars/portals on either side.

A course is a portal. Busy two-way streets where Spirits of teachers and learners converge. On purpose. On accident. Meet cute. On Mondays through Fridays. Face to face and online. Asynchronous and synchronous. Always movement. Back and forth. Here and there. Lived experience. Embodied. Decolonial time is not linear at the altar of teaching, at the table where we gather. Time is spiral and cyclical, moving around and around and through us too. We are the beings and Spirits who tend to the course, the syllabus, the contract, and road map. An altar/portal of teaching and learning on either side.

#### Day 3 Summary – Candle:

Candles are beacons for Spirits, a lighthouse's beam crossing them through the portal. "Come home!" the flame calls. In sunset colors the flickering luminescence dances. Gray smoke ascends

lazily into the air with spindly fingered tendrils. Sometimes we even shout out our addresses, in case Spirits come from far away or forget themselves to space and time. No one should lose their way home. Candles also cleanse the humans who set the altars. Mugwort and lavender, a clash of spicy sleepy scents, drive away negative energy and offer a shell of protection, reminding us of the altar's liminal place, open and not always safe. Free and wild. The candles call all Spirits to a common place for work and connection.

Outcomes and goals are beacons for teachers and learners, a lighthouse's beam crossing us through the portal of a course from beginning to end. For the decolonial teacher, an outcome and goal are our hopes and dreams for what we might collectively grasp and let go as we teach and learn together. "Come home!" our dreams call to us. Sometimes we even shout out our addresses, our social locations – "Here I am!" – in case our hopes and dreams come from far away, reaching out to us from generations ago. Maybe they've forgotten themselves to space and time. No hope, no dream should ever lose its way home. Outcomes and goals, or hopes and dreams, remind the humans who set the terms of teaching and learning that classrooms are liminal spaces, open but not always safe. Free and wild. Hopes, dreams, and desire for growth call us to the common place of teaching and learning for work and connection.

#### Day 4 Summary – Incense:

Incense is the binding element on the table. It comes in many fragrances but works best if it comes from the motherland, because Land remembers us. An aroma from the mountain or fields of home, familiar to a Spirit seeking grounding. Incense is always lit with intention because it attracts Spirits. The fragrance promises nourishment and provision or at the very least the connection of Spirit to Spirit and if a Spirit arrives to find no connection is offered, one might encounter consequences. Only light incense with good intention. When incense is lit, the smoke is used to encircle the

offerings on the altar, the water, the beer or rice wine, sweets, rice cake, or fruit. The smoke wraps tenderly around each offering three times, embracing each gift lovingly, drawing the Spiritual energy of the offering out from each seemingly ordinary thing, transforming it into the extraordinary.

Books, articles, music, art, the world of “text” bind our syllabi and courses together. Texts can come in many forms and frames, but work best when they come from the places both teachers and learners call home, from familiar people and collective wisdoms. From histories and stories told in recognizable voices, pulses, and rhythms. “Texts” call loudly because they re-member us. Texts should always be assigned with intention, because they attract Spirits. The stories and voices in the texts should offer nourishment and provision or at the very least the connection of Spirit to Spirit, and if a learner arrives to find no connection is offered, one may encounter consequences. Only offer texts with intention. When texts are offered and opened, something sacred is lit up inside each learner. Words, images, and songs wrap tenderly around the Spirit of each learner, embracing them lovingly, drawing the Spiritual energy of the gift each person offers, even the seemingly ordinary, transforming it into the extraordinary.

#### Day 5 Summary – Water:

A bowl of water is the simplest everyday offering for an altar. Offerings placed on altars don't need flamboyancy, they require meaning. Water symbolizes the body and Spirit of the person who sets the altar. The fullness of the meeting of flesh and soul, enmeshed, temporarily in this one form, offered up as a bowl of water, deceptively unadorned, but at the root of all life. In elemental terms, the water is a conduit for the Spiritual energy humming and thriving through the portal.

Assignments are co-designed offerings between teachers and

learners of a course. A teacher might initiate an assignment's design, creating the bowl or container, but a learner or student brings it to life, pouring water into the bowl, completing its design. Assignments don't need flamboyancy, they require meaning. The most meaningful assignments symbolize the embodied beliefs and lives of the teacher and learner. The fullness of the meeting of flesh and soul, enmeshed, offered up in an essay, a piece of art, score of music, draft of a short story, sometimes deceptively unadorned, but soulful, Spiritual, at the root of all life. In elemental terms, an assignment is a conduit for the Spiritual energy humming and thriving through the course.

#### Day 6 Summary – Names and Images:

At the center of the altar are ancestor tablets with names of loved ones or if possible, photographs. We pick photographs an ancestor would have selected for themselves. On my altar my maternal grandmother and grandfather sit side by side in front of their first home in Seoul after the Korean War ceasefire. They are dressed to the nines, posing for a rare color photograph. Halmoni, is wearing a soft pink hanbok or Korean dress, a brooch my grandfather made for her out of a shard of Joseon Dynasty green porcelain pinned to her chest. She has a light white shawl around her shoulders reflecting spring. Her dark brown hair is done up in a popular late 60's style, swooped, pinned, and curled



*The author's grandparents. (Photo by Christine Hong)*

in the right places. One corner of her mouth is barely tilted in a Mona Lisa-esque way as she gazes back at me. Harabuji, wears a dark gray suit with faded pinstripes. An old suit, second or third hand. If I peer up close through my glasses, I can see the small stitches grandmother made in not-quite-matching thread where she lovingly tailored the sleeves to fit. He cuts a fine figure with his hair slicked back, gentle glimmering eyes, and large strong hand braced firmly on his knee. War could not separate them though it tried. Only death succeeded. My grandmother joined the ancestors at eighty-six and my grandfather followed later after his hundredth birthday. Photographs and name tablets remind us of the once-flesh-and-blood of our ancestors, memorializing the stories they left in our keeping, inlaid on hearts and bones. Ancestral love and care nestled, seeded, expanding in our chests. Photographs connect our ancestors back to the life they lived with us. Back to feeling, Land's forever memory and particularity in time and space, small moments and intimacies shared between bodies and souls.

At the center of decolonial courses are our communities of belonging, teachers and learners alike. We bring our communities of belonging as they would bring themselves, authentic, raw, just as they are without apology. We bring them in their many languages, rolling r's and soft xie's. We usher them through in their many colors adorning *chimah*, ribbon skirts, *agbada*, *hijabs*, and *qipao*. We bring our families, our mothers and fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, our neighbors, our Spiritual and chosen families, our dearest friends, even those for whom we have enmity. They are present with us when we gather to teach. They are *all* present with us, *especially* when we gather to teach and learn. We bring our ancestors and guides with us. We call them by name. Gathering around fires kindled by memory, we tell our ancestors' stories and re-member them into our bodies, our Spirits. We nurture what they nestled, seeded, and still expand in

our chests. Our ancestors watch through our eyes, and when they can resist no longer, they reach back through the portal of the classroom and willingly bind themselves, just for a moment, for now, to feeling, Land's forever memory and particularity in time and space, to the precarity of small moments once more, to the intimacies of memory shared between bodies and souls, to teach and learn something new with us.

#### **Day 7 Summary – Offering:**

While we are busy setting the altar, our ancestors are also busy, gathering on the other side. They watch us with sharp eyes, preparing our table full of candles, incense, bowls of water, photographs and names, and our simple and intricate offerings. They are excited and call to one another, "Hurry, hurry!" Arms and hands flying, hair whipping, pants and skirts swishing as anticipation coils, a thread of energy glows and swirls as ancestors arrive one by one at the widening door of the portal. They too bring offerings, cradled in arms, carried on shoulders, balanced expertly on top of head held high. One by one, they tenderly place their offerings down on the twin side of the worn and knobby altar table. A boost of health for the little one. Focus and a necessary financial windfall for the frazzled parent with two and a half jobs in the doctoral program. Extra hours of sleep for the adolescent who stays awake at night worried about the future. Don't forget, peace, peace, peace for the household. A nudge for the spring and summer garden to bear fruit and flowers at just the necessary time. Lastly, ease, a good bit of ease. Most of all, they offer love, abundant love, timeless without boundary or condition. The Spirits on either side of the table, ones bound in human form and ones unbound, offer their hearts through conversation. A cacophony of excitement at a family reunion.

"How are you?"

"Have you eaten?"

"What's the news?"

"Things are not easy, but I'm grateful."

"You look tired."

"Get more exercise."

"We know things have been hard."

"I ask for help with my children."

"We will help!"

"I miss you."

"We miss you too."

"Take what you need from this table."

"Take all you need from this table."

Words wind down and candles and incense are lit. Smoke and scent ascend. Together Spirit to Spirit, we bow across the portal, knee to knee, foreheads brushing the ground. A gesture of mutual veneration, respect, and love. Honoring the Spirits, the souls across the portal. Take what you need from the altar.

While we are busy opening the portal for teaching and learning, our ancestors are also busy, gathering on the other side. They watch us, preparing our hopes and dreams, our texts, assignments, they wait until we invoke them into the space. Freire, hooks, Morrison, Boggs, X, Cone, Mandela, Gutierrez, Deloria Jr., Kochiyama. Mom, Dad, *Umma, Appa, Ammi, Abbu, Mama, Baba, Abuela, Abuelo, Halmoni, Harabuji*. They are excited and call to one another, "Hurry, hurry!" A thread of energy glows and swirls as ancestors arrive one by one at the widening door, the portal. They too bring offerings, cradled in arms, carried on shoulders, balanced expertly on top of heads held high. One by one, they tenderly place their offerings down on the twin side of the widening classroom door. New understanding for that student over there. Inspiration for this student over here.

Challenge and healthy debate for the sparring partners in this corner. A boost of energy for a weary professor after a night of writing. Curiosity and deeper questions for this one over here. Most of all, they offer love, abundant love, timeless without boundary or condition. A cacophony of conversation ensues as the decolonial classroom softens borders between teacher and learner, body and Spirits. The ancestors are also learning, transforming as we are still transformed by their words, alive in us. The term winds down, hopes and dreams are met, texts read, pulled apart and pieced back together, assignments co-created, and names invoked. Together, Spirit to Spirit we meet across the portal of the classroom, eye to eye, forehead to forehead, nose to nose, ancestors and living beings together, a mutual veneration. Take what you need from the classroom.

#### **Day 8 Summary – Blessing:**

Celebration is part of building an altar. After offerings are made by the Spiritual beings on both sides, everyone receives the blessings meant for them. Ancestors receive and consume the blessings left for them at the altar. The well wishes and memories. The gratitude and requests from children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and neighbors. They are strengthened in Spirit by the blessings and connection left there, the fond remembrance bound up in morsels of favorite foods and beverages, even the occasional vice like a cigarette or shot of whiskey. On my grandmother's altar, I sometimes place her handwritten Bible or a cross her great-granddaughter made, bedazzled in plastic pink beads. Both items are filled to the brim with feelings words cannot convey laying heavy underneath the surface of our skin, on our tongues, in the tears rimming our eyes. After the ancestors consume our offerings and receive our blessings, they refill the offerings with their blessings for us. Descendants consume each item knowing they are physically and Spiritually nourished by blessings from the Spiritual realm.

As each bite is taken, connection between the ancestors and descendants grows, tightening like a strong and healthy vine, a tether between Spirits, tuggable at both ends.

Celebration is part of building a course. As teaching happens for all beings in the decolonial classroom, everyone receives the learning meant for them. Ancestors also receive and consume new learnings meant for them, even as we engage their Spirits and words in the classroom. Why do we assume ancestors and Spirits cannot and do not evolve? Transform? Cycle through once more? Is it not the immense joy of the Spiritual realm to grow, change, and celebrate? Why do we believe perfection is attained on the other side? Perfection is the colonizer's word and world. It is too absolute, too finite. Perfection severs rather than connects. We strengthen our ancestors when we wrestle with their failings, learnings, teachings, their lives and example and when we allow room for them to wrestle with us. When we push back and challenge what they know and reframe their ideas and dreams in new expansive ways. When we grow, they grow. When they grow, we grow. As we strengthen, teach, and learn together, the connection between the ancestors and descendants, teachers and learners, grows, tightening like a strong and healthy vine, a tether between Spirits, tuggable at both ends.

#### Day 9 and beyond Summary – Portal:

**An altar is a portal. We are altered there, ushering in mutual veneration and blessing.**

A classroom is a portal. We are altered there, ushering in mutual veneration and blessing.



**Christine J. Hong** is Associate Professor of Educational Ministry at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA. Her research includes anti-colonial and decolonial approaches to religious and interreligious education, Asian Diasporic spiritualities, reindigenizing Christian spirituality and practices, and the spiritual and theological formation of BIPOC youth. She is the author of four books, *Youth, Identity, and Gender in the Korean American Church*, *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education*, *Waking Up Ghosts: Making Peace with Ancestors* - out in 2026, and a co-authored book with Dr. Anne Walker called, *Candidly Speaking: Dialogues for the End of Empire* - also out in 2026. She is a frequent conference speaker and workshop leader on decolonizing religion and spirituality.



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