

Systemic Racism and the Global Pandemic

Negotiating Race and Ethnicity in Asian American Biblical Criticism

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Abstract

The global pandemic has underscored the persistence of systemic racism as a structural, institutional, and multidimensional problem. There have been a number of flagrant acts of anti-Black and anti-Asian racism since March 2020, when the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The goal of this special issue is to utilize the disciplinary tools of biblical studies, critical race theory, and Asian American biblical interpretation to examine the historical, cultural, and biblical roots of the problem. Our collective work highlights the need for building coalitions among minoritized scholars and communities to combat the deleterious effects of systemic racism and White supremacy.

Keywords

Racism, critical race theory, #BlackLivesMatter, COVID-19, Asian American biblical interpretation, minoritized biblical criticism

Introduction

The primary aim of this special issue is to consider the ways that biblical interpretation, particularly Asian American biblical criticism, might be developed to name, identify, and address systemic racism.¹ Our motivation for undertaking this project is the recent increase in racially motivated violence against African Americans, as well as a shared sense of dissatisfaction with the ways that Asian Americans figure into the dominant discourse around race and ethnicity. The need for further work has only heightened and intensified during the global pandemic of COVID-19 where racial disparities have been exacerbated. These disparities are present, not only in US society and culture, but are also reproduced in our academic field of biblical studies. Moreover, they are tied to systemic forms of racism that have historically impacted minoritized communities. The challenge before us, then, is to use the tools of our discipline as New Testament scholars to address the structural problem of systemic racism.

¹ We would like to thank the editors of the *Bible and Critical Theory* journal for their generous and timely help in preparing this special issue.

Anti-Black Racism and the Pandemic

The United States of America has a race problem. If the year 2020 has revealed anything, it is the persistence and durability of systemic racism. Even in the midst of a global pandemic that has claimed the lives of over 266,000 people in the United States alone (the country with the highest recorded death toll from COVID-19 globally),² the problem of systemic racism persists. Even in the midst of economic devastation and record high unemployment due to COVID-related shutdowns and closures (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020), the problem of systemic racism persists. Even in the midst of a global death toll that has surpassed the one million mark and continues to rise with more than sixty million people infected worldwide, the problem of systemic racism persists.

Recent studies have shown that the pandemic disproportionately affects racial/ethnic minorities and immigrant communities (Tai et al. 2020; also see APM Research Lab 2020). Some groups with higher rates of comorbidities and underlying conditions—such as hypertension among African Americans and diabetes among South Asians—are at greater risk. Moreover, the psychological impact of COVID-19 on mental health is costly, as many minoritized communities, particularly African Americans and Latina/o/x Americans, lack access to healthcare and resources (Misra et al. 2020). The higher rate of infections in minoritized communities is directly tied to unequal access to affordable healthcare, housing, education, and employment opportunities.

The coronavirus has permanently changed the world as we know it, and yet some things have not changed. Against all odds, systemic racism has flourished in the midst of and in spite of the pandemic. The singular event that catalysed a national outcry and global movement was the unjust killing of George Floyd. In May 2020, Floyd was brutally murdered by police after an officer pinned him to the ground and knelt on him for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. This racist act of police brutality led to a firestorm of protests for #BlackLivesMatter—a social and political movement that began in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin. The #BlackLivesMatter movement has emerged as an urgent response to systemic state violence against Black and Brown communities. Approximately 10,600 nationwide demonstrations took place during a four-month period from May 24 and August 22, while the number of deaths of African American men and women at the hands of the police continued to soar (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project 2020).³ A number of counter-protests emerged from White supremacist right-

² See the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center for further details of both US and global COVID-19 statistics. By the time this article goes to press, these figures will no doubt have risen. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data>.

³ The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project works with the Bridging Divides Initiative at Princeton University to create the US Crisis Monitor, which gathers and analyses real-time data to support to track, prevent, and mitigate the risks of political

wing groups, such as the Proud Boys, the Boogaloo Bois, and the Ku Klux Klan.

The killing of Floyd in police custody was not an isolated incident. It is connected to a long line of police killings, including Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Breonna Taylor, and many others. On average, police have killed at least one African American man or woman every week in 2020 (“Police in the US Killed 164 Black People in the First 8 Months of 2020” 2020). But an official count does not exist due to the long-standing resistance by police departments to release this data to the public. Some have argued that law-enforcement-related deaths are a public health concern and therefore details should be made available to the public (Krieger et al. 2015). A *Washington Post* database on police shootings estimates that over a thousand people have been killed by the police in the past year alone (“Fatal Force” 2020). A database maintained by *The Guardian* puts this number well over a thousand (“The Counted” 2020). Contrary to expectation, the problem of systemic racism has not diminished but has actually worsened during the pandemic.

Anti-Asian Racism and the Pandemic

Anti-Black racism is not the only form of systemic racism that has been amplified since March 2020, when the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. There has also been a surge in anti-Asian racism (Gover et al. 2020). Over 1,135 incidents of verbal harassment, shunning, and physical assault were reported during a two-week period in April 2020 (Stop AAPI Hate 2020).⁴ Between March 19 to August 5, there were 2,583 reported incidents of discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs).⁵ In numerous other cases, Asian Americans reported being coughed on, called racial slurs, and told to “go back to China.”⁶ Anti-Chinese sentiments in the United States and globally are at an all-time high (Rich 2020). The fact that hate incidents were reported by various sub-groups—including Burmese, Korean, Japanese, Laotian, and Thai, among

violence in the United States. For more information, see <https://acleddata.com/special-projects/us-crisis-monitor/>.

⁴ *Stop AAPI Hate* is a national coalition organized by Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council (A3PCON), Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) and the Asian American Studies Department of San Francisco State University. For the Stop AAPI Hate’s April press release, follow the link [here](#).

⁵ For Stop AAPI Hate’s August press release, follow the link [here](#).

⁶ The most egregious hate crime was the attempted murder of a Burmese American family at Sam’s Club in Texas. An assailant stabbed two adults and two children because he “thought the family was Chinese, and infecting people with coronavirus” (Choi et al. 2020, 639). The suspect was later charged with three counts of attempted capital murder and one count of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. There are numerous other accounts of racism experienced by Asian Americans during the pandemic (see Hong 2020).

others—underscores how Asian Americans of all backgrounds, not merely Chinese Americans, have been targeted (Choi et al. 2020, 639).

These incidents of racism are fuelled by a rhetoric that equates infectious disease with people of Asian descent. The Trump administration set the tone for this inflammatory rhetoric through repeated reference to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus,” “Wuhan virus,” and “kung flu” (Nakamura 2020). Anti-Asian stigma has spread through social media in the form of derogatory jokes and memes of Asian people eating bats, dogs, and pangolins. Anti-Asian rhetoric has contributed to widespread misinformation and paranoia: as Delan Devakumar et al. note, “Outbreaks create fear, and fear is a key ingredient for racism and xenophobia to thrive” (2020). The problem with ascribing the virus to an ethnicity is that it stigmatizes people of Asian descent, leading to further acts of symbolic and structural violence being perpetrated against them (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020).

Anti-Asian discrimination in the time of COVID-19 is nothing new; rather, it signals a re-emergence of centuries-long stereotypes mobilized against Asian Americans as “Yellow Peril.” This rhetoric dates back to nineteenth-century epidemics and the management of infectious diseases to protect North American and European interests. Commenting on nineteenth-century epidemics (e.g. plague, cholera, and yellow fever), Alexandre White argues that “the importance of colonial trade from Asia led to the rise of a particular scrutiny and bias against people of Asian descent—especially Chinese migrants and Indian Muslims travelling around the world” (2020, 1250). There are innumerable examples of institutionalized racism against Asian Americans, as documented by the history of US jurisprudence.

From 1850 to the civil rights era in the 1950s and 1960s, Asian Americans were racialized in explicit ways. In 1882, President Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act barring the immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States. This was the first law of its kind, targeting members of a specific ethnic group. In 1913, the California Alien Land Law was passed, which prohibited Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian immigrants from owning agricultural land. In 1923, the Supreme Court upheld the law, arguing that it did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment (which grants citizenship to everyone born or naturalized in the United States and guarantees all citizens “equal protection of the laws”). In 1924, a national origins quota was established by the Immigration Act (also known as the Asian Exclusion Act or the Johnson-Reed Act), excluding immigration by “aliens” who were ineligible for citizenship by virtue of their race and ethnicity. This law banned all immigration from Asia and established a national origins quota for immigrants from the Eastern hemisphere. During the 1960s to the present, the racialization of Asian Americans has been more implicit and disguised by the rhetoric of inclusion and multiculturalism, yet it still remains prevalent (Kim 1999, 116-129). Both periods of history thus

underscore the precarious position that Asian Americans inhabit. They also highlight the minoritized position of Asians in the American hierarchy of racism.

The current pandemic has revived two racist stereotypes that have entangled Asian Americans since the first arrival of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino immigrants (Takaki 1998). The first stereotype is mostly positive in its depiction: Asian Americans are the model minority. According to this understanding, Asians are a hard-working group of immigrants who have overcome many obstacles in their pursuit of the American Dream. They are smart and industrious. They do not complain. They are good at math. Most importantly, they set a good example for other minority groups. The origins of the phrase “model minority” stems from a 1966 *New York Times* article by William Petersen. In a piece entitled “Success Story: Japanese American Style,” Petersen argued that the mistreatment of Japanese Americans during World War II might lead one to think they are “problem minorities.” In point of fact, Petersen argued that their example calls into question generalizations about minorities (Petersen 1966).

The second stereotype, by contrast, is negative: Asian Americans are depicted as perpetual foreigners. Regardless of national origin, citizenship status, linguistic ability, or cultural fluency, Asian Americans are viewed as ethnic foreigners. Their food, language, customs, cultures, and histories are strange. They are sneaky and suspicious. They cannot be trusted. They pose a threat to the American way of life. They are second-class citizens. This way of thinking has deep historical roots in twentieth-century fears of Yellow Peril (Hsu 2015). Both theories have been instrumental in shaping mainstream cultural depictions and public perceptions of Asian Americans.

Juxtaposed together, both stereotypes point to the complicated racial positionality of Asian Americans. On the one hand, Asians are a symbol of hard work and success; on the other hand, they are perceived as foreigners in spite of their hard work and success. Both theories are inseparable. As Yuko Kawai explains, “People of Asian descent become the model minority when they are depicted to do better than other racial minority groups, whereas they become the yellow peril when they are described to outdo White Americans” (Kawai 2005, 115). The model minority myth might contend that Asian Americans are better off than other minorities, but they will always be foreign in relation to the normative standard of whiteness. Claire Jean Kim refers to this process as a form of racial triangulation: “Asian Americans have been racialized relative to and through interaction with Whites and Black” (1999, 106).⁷ Viewing the problem of anti-Asian

⁷ It is important to note that these theories have been attributed to Asian Americans by the dominant culture. They do not represent self-understandings of racial/ethnic identity by people of Asian descent. This underscores the need for alternative understandings of race/ethnicity that stem from and reflect the concerns of Asian American communities. Part of what this special issue aims to do is to push the conversation beyond stereotypical ways

racism in this way underscores how the process of racialization is contextual and mutually constitutive.

With this in mind, anti-Asian racism must be contextualized in relation to all other forms of racism, especially White supremacy. For example, anti-Black racism is rooted in the White supremacist legacies of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, lynching, and Jim Crow segregation (Alcoff 2013, 122). In the post-civil rights era, the forms of state violence were restructured through anti-Black criminalization (Chen 2017, 267). The “law and order” social programming, employed in the late 1960s to suppress radicalized social movements, resulted in the mass incarceration of Black people and anti-Black policing.⁸ At the same time, the exclusion and criminalization of Asian Americans (e.g. the 1924 Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese internment during World War II) transformed into the discourse of multiculturalism and American exceptionalism (Liu 2018, 421). Yet it should be noted that the inclusion of Asian immigrants following the 1965 Immigration Act is related to the “expulsion of America’s imperial Cold War” in the Asia-Pacific region (Chen 2017, 269).⁹ Military technologies deployed during World War II and the Cold War were used to expand US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as to control and confine Black people in this restructured post-racial society.

Although Asian Americans are rarely the subjects of police brutality, it is necessary to consider anti-Asian racism against the backdrop of White supremacist liberalism and imperial exceptionalism. Asian American discourse must demonstrate its commitment to intersectional analysis, coalitional practice, and multiracial solidarity (Hong 2017, 275; Chen 2017, 269). Such tasks include overcoming the model minority myth that often denies institutional access to other minoritized communities. The assimilationist position of some Asian Americans can perpetuate anti-Black racism, given its proximity to whiteness (Liu 2018, 437-439). Furthermore, there is a need for further discussion of and reflection on anti-Black racism

of thinking and introduce alternative ways that race/ethnicity is understood, experienced, negotiated, and performed.

⁸ The Nixon administration’s “law and order” policy has continued through Reagan, Clinton, and Trump administrations. Parts of their “law and order” speeches are found on the *Brut* website, which can be accessed [here](#).

⁹ The majority of Asian immigrants from the Korean War (1950-1953) and Vietnam War (1955-1975) were orphans, refugees, and brides of American servicemen. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which repealed the earlier quota system based on national origin, brought urban, middle-class families to the United States. Nevertheless, Asian immigrants continued to suffer racialized state violence. The 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man, in Detroit points to a common experience of anti-Asian racism directed against Asian Americans who are positioned as being neither White nor Black. In 1992, a week-long period of unchecked violence, looting, battery, and arson ensued following the acquittal of four White LAPD officers who had been charged with the beating of Rodney King. The media coverage of the events was depicted exclusively as a Black and White conflict. But there was an excess of \$400 million worth of damages caused by the riots in Koreatown alone. Some argue that the LA Riots exemplified the Black/White binary and ushered in a new era of multiracial politics (Kim 1999, 2385).

in Asian American communities, as well as anti-Asian racism in African American communities. We shall address these issues by discussing the current state and future directions in Asian American biblical criticism.

The State of Asian American Biblical Criticism

The earliest work on Asian American biblical interpretation was published in the mid-1990s under the influence of 1960s contextual theology and African American biblical interpretation during the 1970s (Kim 1995; Liew 2013). The late emergence of Asian American biblical interpretation as a discipline should be understood alongside the dominance of White biblical scholarship, disguised as the historical critical method. Within the past two decades, however, Asian American biblical scholars have produced critical work to counteract these racialized patterns in the field of biblical studies.

Tat-siong Benny Liew divides the development of Asian American biblical interpretation into three stages. The first stage involves identifying Asian presence in the Bible. Asian American interpreters primarily relate biblical characters to Asian American experiences regarding racial dynamics and power differentials. The second stage highlights Asian American contexts, emphasizes heterogeneity among interpreters, and foregrounds multiplicity in interpretation.¹⁰ The last stage focuses on circular relations between “reading the Bible to understand race and reading the Bible through the lenses of race or racialization,” in addition to intercommunal readings across minoritized groups (Liew 2013). Each stage demonstrates how Asian American biblical criticism negotiates race/ethnicity in terms of the text, interpretation, and the interpreter. Building on these three stages, we highlight the transgressive nature of Asian American interpretation and discuss the construction of Asian American identity in biblical interpretation.

Asian Americans are border-crossers in US history and culture, and their readings traverse textual, methodological, and disciplinary boundaries. For example, they read the Bible with Asian traditions and stories.¹¹ Asian American interpreters are often pressed to show something genuinely “Asian” and read biblical narratives with popular and sacred traditions (e.g. scriptural traditions, myths, and folktales). Such cross-scriptural or cross-cultural readings are viewed with varying degrees of authenticity and scepticism. Both race/ethnicity and religion are interlaced in racialization and ethnicization of Asian America (Liew 2008, 18-33). Still, they challenge the ideology of purity by decentring the canonical authority of the Bible and its interpretation. Others interpret the Bible alongside Asian American

¹⁰ For Asian American differences and heterogeneity in Asian American studies, see Lowe (1991).

¹¹ Jin Young Choi classifies four types of interpretation, mainly focusing on literary criticism: (1) reading with Asian traditions and stories; (2) reading with the Asian American identity; (3) reading the Bible in Asian American literature; and (4) reading with/as theory (2019a, 135-138).

literature and analyse biblical references, themes, images, or allusions (Liew and Yee 2002, 161-314). The Bible is often perceived as a subversive text that resists the racialization of Asian Americans while simultaneously decentring the Bible's own authority.

Asian American interpretation is not the sole prerogative of biblical scholars, but also includes those reading the biblical text outside the discipline. Out of the eighteen contributors to *The Bible in Asian America* (Liew and Yee 2002), only four are biblical scholars. Rather than addressing what the Bible says about Asian Americans, scholars in Asian American studies and literature demonstrate that Asian Americans speak about the Bible as “a weapon *for* and *against* ‘us’” (Liew and Yee 2002, 12, 15; emphasis original). Similarly, theologians have expanded Asian American biblical hermeneutics by intersecting diverse identities of Asian Americans. Rita Nakashima Brock's (1997) intersectional feminist hermeneutics and Patrick S. Cheng's (2002) queer interpretation are notable examples. Whereas cross-cultural and interdisciplinary readings challenge the authority and use of the Bible as the “White man's book,” Asian American biblical scholars also intervene in the discipline of biblical criticism itself. They re-examine and re-appropriate traditional methods (such as historical, social scientific, literary, and theological criticisms), considering these methods from Asian American perspectives (Kim and Yang 2019, 105-219; Wan 2018). In short, Asian American biblical interpretation is cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, intersectional, and interventionist, and its enduring question revolves around what constitutes “Asian American.”

In an effort to define what is “Asian American” about Asian American biblical interpretation, questions regarding essentialism, assimilation, and nationalism must be addressed (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 56-62). Dominant biblical scholarship does not identify itself as Anglo-European or White, so why should Asian American biblical scholars, despite their internal diversity and heterogeneity, label their interpretation as “Asian American”? One may ask why we should put ourselves in “Asian” America, which the dominant society lumps into a group, rather than specifying our particular ethnic identities, such as Chinese or Korean.¹² Just as minoritized people often adopt an essentialist position for political goals in response to social exclusion and marginalization, Asian American biblical interpreters attempt to construct their collective identities in a variety of ways: marginal liminality (Lee 2010), in-betweenness (Wan 2006), heterogeneity, and hybridity (Yamada 2006; Yee 2009; Kato 2016). These notions exhibit the scholars' struggle to identify themselves in the White dominant discipline; they function to disrupt the idea of homogeneous identity which forces a

¹² These dynamics exist within the Society of Biblical Literature. The programme units, such as the Ethnic Chinese Biblical Colloquium and the Korean Biblical Colloquium, represent ethnic particularity. On the other hand, the Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics group forges a collective identity in biblical studies, pursuing coalitions with the Minoritized Criticism and Biblical Interpretation programme units and other racial minority groups at SBL.

person to choose *either* Asian *or* American. Many biblical critics therefore read biblical texts to counter stereotypes of the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner” that are imposed upon Asian Americans by the dominant culture (Kim 2008; Yee 2009; Wan 2012; Ok 2019).¹³

Whereas Asian American interpreters strategically construct the collective identity of “Asian American,” they also recognize their particularities and start from their concrete social locations and experiences.¹⁴ Asian American identity is constructed by multiple vectors of identity beyond race and ethnicity, such as nation (Lee 2011), generation (Yamada 2006), interracial family formation through marriage and adoption (Rietz 2002; Foskett 2002), socioeconomic status (Nadella 2019), language (Tupamahu 2018), and gender and sexuality (Liew 2009; Choi 2014; 2015). The question of what constitutes “Asian American” presupposes the concept of authenticity. Liew instead proposes to develop Asian American biblical criticism by creating a body of scholarship through repeated citations (2008, 152). Developing a discursive practice of Asian American biblical criticism is a way to negotiate race/ethnicity, especially in relation to the discipline. This shift highlights the process of constructing knowledge, performing power, and putting critical theory to use (Choi 2019a, 137).

Given this special issue’s focus on critical race theory in biblical studies, we mention works by Asian American scholars who engage with critical race theory and whiteness studies.¹⁵ Yii-Jan Lin’s work (2016) shows that the racializing logic embedded in the biological sciences is replicated in New Testament textual criticism and manifests itself as a pseudo-science. Wongi Park (2017) problematizes assumptions and methods of dominant biblical criticism in which whiteness is invisibly inscribed and thereby normalized. White normativity is perpetuated through racialized biology and deracialized whiteness, which reinforce the racial hierarchies of the Black/

¹³ While Gale Yee’s (2009) reading identifies Ruth the Moabite with Asian Americans who are the “perpetual foreigner” and “model minority,” Uriah Kim (2008) re-reads the narrative of King David, labelling Uriah the Hittite as a disposable foreigner despite his loyalty to the nation. For Sze-kar Wan (2012), the two myths lead Asian Americans to have ambivalence—both attraction and repulsion—toward the dominant White culture. In turn, such ambivalence becomes the lens through which he reads Paul’s ambivalence toward the Jerusalem leadership in Galatians. Janette Ok (2019) focuses on the perpetual foreigner stereotype and its psychological impact on Asian Americans. While 1 Peter describes Christians’ identity as perpetual foreigners in order to promote their social cohesion and a stronger sense of in-group identity, Ok argues that it is problematic to apply such an idea to Asian American Christians.

¹⁴ In the *T&T Clark Handbook to Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics* (Kim and Yang 2019, 17-103), the contributors from six sub-Asian groups—Chinese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese—provide a brief history and context of each group within which their hermeneutical questions and issues arise.

¹⁵ Historical scholarship has begun to discuss race/ethnicity in constructing Christian identity, but its analyses focus more on antiquity rather than engaging how the interpreter’s race/ethnicity is involved in interpretation (Buell 2005; Nasrallah and Schüssler Fiorenza, 2009; also, see Sechrest 2009; Hockey and Horrell 2018). To explicitly engage the interpreter’s construction of race/ethnicity in an intersectional manner, see Smith and Choi (2020).

White binary. Others employ feminist, queer, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial theories that intersect with critical race theory.¹⁶ The theory of intersectionality is particularly useful for dealing with “multiple convergencies of race, gender, and sexuality” (Liew 2009, 252). What makes our project distinctive is that we approach race/ethnicity and racialization of Asian America in biblical interpretation in creative ways, exploring diverse topics such as racial microclimes and capital, racial animacy and assemblages, the politics of language, and nationalism and dissent.

Critical Race Theory in Asian American Biblical Criticism

In the first article, Haley Gabrielle explores *DesiCrit*, proposed by Vinay Harpalani, which emphasizes the racial ambiguity of South Asians. Gabrielle utilizes two concepts—microclimate and racial capital—to explain racial malleability. While microclimate means historical and political climates in which ambiguous individuals and groups are racialized, racial capital can transfer, be acquired, and confer social benefits. Using these concepts, Gabrielle analyses Acts’ representation of Paul as a religiously, nationally, and geographically ambiguous diaspora Jew. The first microclimate is Damascus in Acts 9, where the divine voice to Ananias highlights Paul’s shared diasporic root in a large city, and this functions as capital strengthening the divine appeal. On Paphos in Acts 13, Paul’s name change (from Saul) provides political capital before Roman audiences, while the “translation,” or name change, from Bar-Jesus (reflecting his Jewish background) to Elymas (with the title of magician) serves to differentiate a rejected and rejecting form of Judaism by Paul and Barnabas. Lastly, in Jerusalem in Acts 21, Paul’s physical appearance leads the Roman tribune to misidentify Paul as an Egyptian rebel. Still, he asserts an alternative identity with his Greek language as a form of cultural capital. In short, binary categories are malleably transferred to Paul’s ambiguous identity to afford him more or less capital.

Dong Hyeon Jeong article employs the discourse of New Materialism and posthumanism, particularly Mel Chen’s concept of animacy, to re-read Peter’s encounter with Simon the tanner (Acts 9:43, 10:5-6, 32). Peter’s sojourn with Simon the tanner is viewed as usurping an industry by an empire as its ancillary machine. The book of Acts continues this theme with the recruiting of Cornelius the centurion in the following narrative. Jeong moves beyond arguing about this “usurpation” only as a colonial endeavour or mimicry, but instead provides insights into the proximity of nonhuman skins (the tanning industry) to the colonized skins of Peter’s community. Through the “touching” of these two skins, two (colonized) bodies become one fluid assemblage, revealing entanglements in their colonial and material realities. This assemblage not only critiques the animalization experiences

¹⁶ The concepts of hybridity and mimicry in postcolonial theory have been widely used in Asian American biblical interpretation. For interpretations employing the idea of “racial melancholia” in psychoanalytic theory, see Liew (2008, 95-114); Choi (2019b); Yee (2018).

of both nonhumans and minoritized bodies, but also challenges the anthropocentric tendencies of Asian American biblical criticism.

In the third article, Ekaputra Tupamahu highlights the implicit role of language in constituting racial identity. He identifies a long linguistic struggle in the United States that asserts the dominance of the English language in the White social imagination. Tupamahu argues that the use of language conceals the power of the dominant group to enforce a racialized social hierarchy. Control of the English language is therefore in direct correlation with White American identity. By contrast, improper use of English represents a departure from the normative standard of whiteness. Tupamahu triangulates the relationship between power, status, and linguistic ability as an index of one's location in the racialized order. He argues that this is evident not only in the contemporary White American context and its relationship to Asian American immigrant communities, but also in the social situation of first-century Corinth.

In the final article, Sze-kar Wan examines the "body of Christ" motif in the writings of Paul through two different lenses of tribalism. Wan observes that the group identity of White evangelicals is roughly similar, if not singular, in its composition. In terms of ethnic, religious, and political affiliation, they are White, Christian, and conservative. They are a tight-knit group, not easily swayed by outside influences. By contrast, the group identity of Asian Americans is characterized by multiplicity. Their group identity is comprised by various ethnicities, languages, religious traditions, political affiliation, and cultural practices that defy simple categorization. Tension, conflict, and dissent abound and are in fact integral to the formation of Asian American identity. Based on this comparison, Wan argues in favour of an Asian American hermeneutics of dissent. He reasons that this has the advantage of embracing conflicting readings of 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12.

These articles are distinctive insofar as they theorize approaches to race/ethnicity inflected and shaped by Asian American experiences. As a collection, the articles call into question dominant power structures, engage in critical self-reflection, and shed light on the many challenges minoritized communities face. Beyond situating anti-Asian racism as a form of systemic racism, they show how biblical interpretation can negotiate Asian American identities that are racially ambiguous and malleable (Gabrielle), fluid and non-binary (Jeong), linguistically enabled and performed (Tupamahu), and heterogeneous and conflicted (Wan). Moreover, these negotiations are embedded within various Asian American contexts ranging from the experiences of South Asian Americans in racial hierarchies (Gabrielle), the anthropocentric tendencies of Asian American biblical interpretation (Jeong), the complexities of language in immigrant communities against the tyranny of English, American exceptionalism, and white normativity (Tupamahu), and negotiating Asian Americans' intratribal tension in opposition to the tribalism of White evangelicals (Wan). In short, the articles

speak to and from Asian American identity formation shaped by the continuing effects of structural racism and White supremacy.

Conclusion

In this introduction to our special issue, we have addressed Asian American negotiations of race and ethnicity in biblical interpretation against the larger backdrop of two forms of systemic racism. Although the histories of the racialization of African Americans and Asian Americans are not the same, we have tried to situate anti-Asian and anti-Black racism as symptomatic of structural racism and White supremacy. In this way, the special issue interrogates the racialization and political formation of Asian Americans over and against the totalizing narratives of post-racial liberalism that obscure structural racism and imperial exceptionalism (Hong 2017, 275). Moreover, our collective work highlights the need for coalition-building among minoritized biblical scholars.¹⁷ Asian American biblical criticism is indebted to, and has developed in conversation with, African American biblical scholarship. Liew's article, "Black Scholarship Matters" (2017) is a gesture of solidarity with African American biblical scholars.¹⁸

There are several issues that minoritized scholars must continue to wrestle with, such as anti-Black racism among Asian American communities and anti-Asian racism among African American communities. Additionally, voices from other minoritized groups, including Latina/o/x biblical scholars, must be included in the conversation.¹⁹ Other avenues can be pursued concerning the history of state violence against African American and Latina/o/x communities. Another direction for Asian American biblical criticism is to consider negotiations of race/ethnicity beyond the US context in the Asia-Pacific, as well as the criminalization and militarization of the US-Mexico border for Latina/o/x and Asian immigrants. Much work has been done and much work still remains. For even as the pandemic has forever changed the world as we know it, White supremacy and systemic racism continue to prevail globally.

Reference List

¹⁷ The anthology *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* is an example of coalition-building work (Bailey, Liew, and Segovia 2019).

¹⁸ On 12-13 August 2020, the Society of Biblical Literature offered two webinars: "#BlackScholarshipMatters: Visions and Struggles" and "Lessons and Hopes." Two Asian American biblical scholars and one African American biblical scholar—Tat-siong Benny Liew, Raj Nadella, and Kimberly Russaw—were instrumental in organizing this event. The videos of the two symposia can be found [here](#).

¹⁹ The notion of brownness is highly complex in racial dynamics and politics (e.g. colourism). Two contributors are of South Asian and Southeast Asian descent, but they are seldom recognized as Brown but rather as Asian Americans.

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