

“I Don’t Want to Hear Your Language!”

White Social Imagination and the Demography of Roman Corinth

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Abstract

This article aims to deconstruct the hidden pervasive whiteness in biblical scholarship and to propose another way to reimagine the linguistic dynamic of Roman Corinth from an Asian American perspective. It highlights the legal and historical interconnectedness of whiteness and the dominance of English. English is a critical marker of whiteness in the United States. In this context, immigrants are expected to conform to and assimilate themselves with whiteness by performing English. This particular racialized context has influenced and resulted in a scholarly historical reconstruction of immigrants in Roman Corinth as “Greek speaking im/migrants.” Immigrants can come from many different places but their linguistic identity has to be placed, subjected, and categorized under the dominant tongue: English in America or Greek in Corinth. Such a position consequently erases the rich linguistic experience of both Corinthian and contemporary immigrants. A white historical reconstruction, however, should not be the end of story. This article proposes another possibility of reimaging the rich linguistic experience of Corinthian immigrants by grounding such imagination in the Asian American experience and by looking at Josephus and tongue(s) speakers in the Corinthian church.

Key Words

Whiteness, Roman Corinth, immigration, politics of language, tongues, Josephus, Asian American

Introduction

On 10 December 2017, South Korean student Annie An was studying with Sean H. Lee, her personal tutor, at a local Starbucks coffee shop in Walnut Creek, CA. Since both of them are from South Korea, they understandably conversed in their native language, Korean. However, a white, middle-aged woman sitting next to them on the same long table was deeply troubled by the sound entering her ears—the sounds of a strange tongue. An recalled that, as she was walking to get her coffee, the white woman said, “This is America. Use English only!” (Perez 2017). She then went into a rant, attacking them. After declaring that everyone who comes to the United States has to speak English, the white woman continued, “You can sit and

be quiet. Fine. But I don't want to hear your language!"¹ Two Starbucks baristas asked the white woman to leave, but because she refused to do so, they called police to escort her out.

This story is what motivates me to write this article. It is only the tip of the iceberg of a long linguistic struggle in the United States that reflects the unwillingness of white English-speaking people to hear other languages in public spaces. The incident demonstrates that there is no place for other languages in the white imagination; every immigrant who enters the United States is expected to speak English. It is but one symptom of a larger historical and social struggle for linguistic domination.²

What does such mundane experience of Asian Americans have to do with the discussion of language and biblical scholarship? At its root is the pervasive whiteness of biblical scholarship. Of course, as Stuart Hall notes, "We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific"; any production of knowledge is, thus, always "*positioned*" (1990, 222). Biblical scholars—and most especially white biblical scholars—who operate within the particularity of the white social context in the United States, which is marked primarily by the dominance of English, promote a unique historical imagination. Whiteness is often hidden and unspoken in biblical scholarship, because white scholars tend not to explicitly express or interrogate their locus of whiteness in their reading and reconstruction of the past, simply assuming it as the norm. Yet their embeddedness in whiteness still affects their social imagination in a profound way. I will attempt to put my finger on that invisible whiteness.

The following cultural analysis is in full agreement with Gale Yee's insistence that, because Asian American biblical scholars like me work "within larger white institutional ... contexts," it is critical for us to "make whiteness transparent" (2006, 162). We first need to shed a bright light on whiteness, and then bring to it an Asian American hermeneutical intervention. In particular, I interrogate a recent work by Cavan Concannon ("*When You Were Gentiles*": *Specters of Ethnicity in Roman Corinth and Paul's Corinthian Correspondence*) that highlights the interconnectedness of language and ethnicity in the Corinthian church, in order to show the embeddedness of his historical imagination in a white American context. I expand the discussion by proposing Asian American linguistic experience as the starting point for historically reconstructing the social situation in Corinth. I do this by engaging Josephus and tongue(s) speakers in the Corinthian church, as depicted in 1 Corinthians 12-14. I begin with a brief historical exposition of the relationship between language and whiteness.

¹ See the entire video of the exchange in Annie An's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/100009072681713/videos/1876417779337293/>.

² For further discussion, see Baron (1992); Del Valle (2003); Crawford (2000).

Whiteness and the English Language

Frantz Fanon opens his book *Black Skin, White Masks* by foregrounding the issue of language. As he states:

I ascribe a basic importance to the phenomenon of language. That is why I find it necessary to begin with this subject, which should provide us with one of the elements in the colored man's comprehension of the dimension of *the other*. For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other. (2008, 8)

The main concern that motivates Fanon's discussion of language is the reality that Blacks in the Antilles somehow think that they "come closer to being a real human being" through their "mastery of the French [that is, the colonial power's] language" (2008, 8). To speak in a white tongue in such contexts equates, quite simply, with being human. Possessing a language, Fanon says, "consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language ... Mastery of language affords remarkable power" (2008, 8-9). While Fanon wrestles with French language as the identity marker of whiteness in the Caribbean islands, whiteness in the United States is manifested primarily by the English language—by being an Anglophone. Becoming and being "white" (and thus having power) in America means being able to speak English. This reality is clearly seen in the process of naturalization—that is, the legal admission of a foreigner as an American citizen—a requirement for which is the capacity to speak English.

An essay by legal scholar John Tehranian has demonstrated very well the legal and historical interconnectedness between being American and being white. In order for an immigrant to be American, that person needs to "perform whiteness." Historically, the US Congress in 1790—not long after the establishment of the Constitution—limited naturalization to "any alien, being a free white person."³ The white person was understood primarily as an "Anglo-Saxon," the race of those who signed the Constitution. As slaves, black Americans were considered only three-fifths of a human being and the white person's property,⁴ and thus were not eligible for citizenship

³ The background of this earliest (1790) Naturalization Act was that states like Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia had already limited granting citizenship to only white persons. See Haney (1996, 31).

⁴ Concerning the issue of whiteness, property, and economic exploitation, Cheryl Harris writes:

The hyper-exploitation of Black labor was accomplished by treating Black people themselves as objects of property. Race and property were thus conflated by establishing a form of property contingent on race: only Blacks were subjugated as slaves and treated as property. Similarly, the conquest, removal, and extermination of Native American life and culture were ratified by conferring and acknowledging the property rights of whites in Native American land. Only white possession and occupation of land was validated and therefore privileged as a basis for property rights. These distinct forms of exploitation each contributed in varying ways to the construction of whiteness as property. (1993, 1716)

(Oppenheimer, Prakash, and Burns 2016, 7). Five years after the Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans and African descents were finally included among the groups eligible for naturalization through the 1870 Naturalization Act.⁵ Throughout the history of the United States, immigrants from Asia were completely excluded from eligibility for US citizenship. Since whiteness itself is an unstable signifier,⁶ it has continued to change its shape and definition, especially after the coming of other European groups to the United States.⁷

This 1790 legal pronouncement can be understood as a performative act that constitutes Americans as racialized subjects; that is, white subjects. To be American is to be or become white. John Tehranian describes this ever-changing racial construction as “performing whiteness”:

Performance of whiteness was evidenced in two ways. First, a petitioner could point to his own adoption of white values and his personal dramaturgy of whiteness as evidence of his appropriate racial categorization. Second, a petitioner could point to the assimilation of his ethnic group into the core Western European, Christian tradition as evidence of his whiteness. Both methods ultimately relied upon proof of “Anglo conformity,” in the form of educational attainment, occupational dispersal, language choice, residential location, and intercultural marriage, as a condition of citizenship. (2000, 823)

What we see here is that “language choice” (i.e. speaking English) is an important marker of being white. Immigrants are to conform to and assimilate themselves with this marker by adopting English—meaning not just the capacity but the *practice* of speaking English. In the 1906 Naturalization Act signed by Theodore Roosevelt, the absolute requirement for English language became explicitly codified into the US legal system: “That no alien shall hereafter be naturalized or admitted as a citizen of the United States who cannot speak the English language” (*Immigration and Naturalization Act 1906*, 3592, §8). Language became the threshold between being American and non-American. As Dennis Baron puts it, “Language ... becomes a literal shibboleth of nationality, a badge of true Americanism, and anything less than fluency in English—a foreign accent, let alone

⁵ According to Robin DiAngelo and Michael Eric Dyson, “To have citizenship—and the rights citizenship imbued—you had to be legally classified as white. People with nonwhite racial classifications began to petition the courts to be reclassified. Now the courts were in the position to decide who was white and who was not” (2018, 17).

⁶ As in all other social signifiers, the signifier “white” or “whiteness” is unstable. It is not a set of fixed biological qualities. Whiteness as a racial category needs to be understood as a “discourse” or “sliding signifier”—to borrow Stuart Hall’s (2017) proposal.

⁷ For further discussion of the category “white person” as the Anglo-Saxon race, and the historical process of including other immigrant groups, such as the Irish, Jews, Italians, Greeks, and Slavs, under a larger umbrella of whiteness (especially in the nineteenth century), see Jacobson (1998).

maintenance of a minority tongue—is perceived to threaten national security and subvert [the] national ideal” (1992, 7).

Some background to the 1906 naturalization act highlights the interconnectedness between race (particularly whiteness) and language. At this point in history, Asian Americans were not part of the US naturalization system picture. The influx in the nineteenth century of new immigrants from other “undesirable” European countries, coupled with the internal struggles within Europe itself, created a sense of social instability and insecurity among Anglo-Saxons. It is no surprise that by the end of the nineteenth century, Anglo-Saxons began to embrace the term “English-speaking races” to identify themselves.⁸ For instance, a piece published by California’s *Daily Alta* newspaper in 1876, entitled “English-Speaking Races,” discusses the public lecture delivered by a famous orator, Henry Vincent. It reports:

The aboriginal Brittons possessed intellectual force, vivacity, social life, and the elements of grand national institutions. We have not descended from slaves ... The PREDOMINANT CHARACTERISTICS of English-speaking people therefore are sturdiness, strength, audacity, dogmatism, sagacity and industry. Before Britain had five millions of people, she was conquering nations, and had thrown off Papal infallibility. An English man must swagger; so must the American ... Americans have no more reason to be ashamed of their origin than the inhabitants of Great Britain, mother of empires, and progenitor and proud companion of the Great Republic. (“English-Speaking Races” 1876; capitals original)

The construction of the English-speaking races was part of the historical nostalgia that formed the connection between America and Great Britain—the mother of empires. Since many other whites were also present in America, the characteristic of whiteness expands from skin colour and place of origin to the language spoken.

A few years after the 1906 Naturalization Act, the US Immigration Commission published a comprehensive (42-volume) report on immigrants. One of the reports published in 1911 dealt with immigrant children in US schools. The classification of these children reveals the interconnectedness between whiteness as a racial category and the English language. The children were classified mainly on the basis of their fathers’ origins. On the one hand, children whose fathers were born in the United States (i.e. native-born) were placed into one of three broad categories: “White,” “Negro,” and “Indian” (Dillingham 1911, 171).⁹ On the other hand, when the fathers were

⁸ The reference to “English-speaking races” appeared largely from the nineteenth century. To read about the larger socio-political context of the appearance of this label, see Roediger (2018).

⁹ While the category “negro” covers “all persons of African descent born in the United States,” Dillingham’s report notes the following about the white category: “In determining the race of the father of the pupil: ‘American, White,’ should include all Caucasian origin born in the United States. Even when persons are reported as Germans, Irish, etc., they should, if born in the United States, be entered as ‘American, White’ (1911, 171).

foreign born, the Commission constructed a linguistically based racial category for classification: “English-speaking races” and “non-English speaking races.” What is interesting about this report is that while Canadians, English, Irish, Scots, and Welsh are categorized as “English-speaking races,” the Canadian French, Dutch, German, Hebrew (from Germany, Poland, etc.), Italian, and various other peoples were all categorized under a big umbrella of “non-English speaking races.” Since it is difficult to determine an immigrant’s race on the basis of their country of origin (because, for example, a Jewish or Hebrew person can be from Poland or Germany or any other place), the report apparently constructed these two overarching categories in order to make racial classification simpler, while reminding the teachers who helped collect the data to “Please note that the determination of the country of birth is not required for the blank, but the teacher will find it useful in fixing exactly the race to which people belong, but the *best criterion of race is the language spoken*” (Dillingham 1911, 170; emphasis added). Apparently, the implicit assumption is that an immigrant will not be completely “white” or “American” if English is not that person’s language.

David Roediger notes that:

the “American race” could absorb and permanently improve the less desirable stock of “all white immigrants,” perhaps in two generations, but only if its most desirable “English speaking” elements were not swamped in an unAmericanized Slavic and southern European culture and biology. (2018, 68)

The categories of being Anglo and being white intersect profoundly with linguistic performance—that is, speaking English. While all other racial categories have been removed from naturalization today, especially after the 1952 Immigration Act that allowed Asian immigrants to become US citizens, the requirement of knowledge of the English language still remains.

The performance of whiteness in the American immigration system also has a direct impact on Asian immigrants. Since the inclusion of persons of African descent through the 1879 Naturalization Act, the immigration system has worked primarily with the assumption of a black/white binary. Asian Americans were completely excluded from becoming US citizens. The Chinese Exclusion Act, signed by President Chester A. Arthur in 1882, was the most explicit codification of racial exclusion in American immigration laws. Two supreme court cases involving Asian Americans (*Ozawa v. United States* in 1922 and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* in 1923) first significantly shifted the definition of a “white person” from the common understanding of people from the “British Isles and Northwestern Europe.”¹⁰ As Tehranian has pointed out, these two cases are the legal

¹⁰ The entire Court statement regarding this issue of whiteness is worth quoting here because it reveals how the Court interprets the “white person” in 1790 and its expansion in subsequent years:

deconstruction of black/white binary: “A typical man would use skin color and physical features in order to determine a stranger’s racial identity. However, *Ozawa* and *Thind* rejected this methodology” (2000, 826). Implicitly referring to the 1906 Naturalization Act, the Court revealed that *Ozawa* was not only a highly educated person, he also “had maintained the use of the English language in his home” (*Ozawa v. United States*, 1922). Speaking English is thus a performance of whiteness. The *Ozawa* case, notes Tehranian, “maintained that color alone could not be determinative of whiteness” (2000, 827). In other words, whiteness is not only about one’s skin colour. Whiteness is what “white does” (Tehranian 2000, 827). One becomes white, not merely by “being white” but by performing whiteness—which includes speaking English.

Thus, one of the most essential markers of whiteness in the United States is speaking English. To be white is to speak English and vice versa. Consequently, to speak other languages is perceived as a threat to whiteness. Joshua Fishman notes that the movement to enforce the use of English in the United States “is a symptom of a deeper social anxiety of the white anglophone middle class of losing their power. In this sense, such fear of ‘foreign contaminants’ is a power struggle through and through” (Fishman 1988, 133).¹¹ In a white social imagination, everyone who comes to America, every immigrant, has to speak English. Once they step foot on American soil, they are transformed into the “English-speaking immigrants.” They may be immigrants, but their speech is English. Their foreign mother tongues, their

It does not seem necessary to pursue the matter of scientific classification further. We are unable to agree with the district court, or with other lower federal courts, in the conclusion that a native Hindu is eligible for naturalization under § 2169. The words of familiar speech, which were used by the original framers of the law, were intended to include only the type of man whom they knew as white. The immigration of that day was almost exclusively from the British Isles and Northwestern Europe, whence they and their forebears had come. When they extended the privilege of American citizenship to “any alien being a free white person,” it was these immigrants -- bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh — and their kind whom they must have had affirmatively in mind. The succeeding years brought immigrants from Eastern, Southern and Middle Europe, among them the Slavs and the dark-eyed, swarthy people of Alpine and Mediterranean stock, and these were received as unquestionably akin to those already here and readily amalgamated with them. It was the descendants of these, and other immigrants of like origin, who constituted the white population of the country when §2169, reenacting the naturalization test of 1790, was adopted, and, there is no reason to doubt, with like intent and meaning.”

See *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (Supreme Court 1923) and the analysis of this Court statement in Tehranian (2000, 824-825); Jacobson (1998, 15-16).

¹¹ Fishman further writes:

The truth is that ‘English Only/English Official’ efforts cannot hide the fact that the power of class (and those Anglos and non-Anglos who aspire to join its ranks) feels insecure about its own leadership role and its power prerogatives in American society; the distortion arises when others (those who are presumably ‘getting the wrong message’ by thinking that they too deserve some power in American life) are blamed for those insecurities and for the power class’s difficulties in finding genuine solutions to them. (1988, 133)

“most mobile of telephones” as Jacques Derrida famously puts it (2000, 91), are virtually non-existent in the white imagination. With that in mind, I now turn briefly to white social imagination and literary production, and then, at more length, to whiteness and biblical scholarship.

The White “Fishbowl”

Literary production cannot ignore the social location of the writer. That is, one typically arranges and imagines a literary world in accordance with one’s social location. Toni Morrison’s illustration of the “fishbowl” to explain whiteness and the production of American literature is a helpful analogy. Writing, she suggests, is like arranging the internal composition of a fishbowl. To uncover the invisible structure of the white fishbowl, one must read literature as a writer instead of as a reader. By reading as a writer, Morrison explains, “I began to rely on my knowledge of how books get written, how language arrives; my sense of how and why writers abandon or take on certain aspects of their project” (1992, 17). Reading particular literature is not only about looking at the contents of the fishbowl, but also about recognizing how the fishbowl is produced. Literature cannot escape the subject position of its author. Or, as Morrison puts it, “the subject of the dream is the dreamer” (1992, 17). In other words, reading American literature as a writer will make transparent that “Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (Morrison 1992, 17). That “choked representation” of black characters, black roles, and black figures, is profoundly embedded, surrounded, and rooted in the consciousness of invisible whiteness—the invisible fishbowl. That black social experiences are overlooked, arranged, and modified in American literature is not an innocent gesture at all. Rather, it is the reflection of “a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (Morrison 1992, 17).

A word needs to be said here about Asian Americans. Morrison’s observation should be expanded beyond a black-white binary. The Asian American experience has also existed in the white imagination as a “choked representation” (Morrison 1992, 17). The model minority myth is an example of such a choked representation. This myth is a product of the white fishbowl, constructed through a white-black binary. Asian Americans become the “model” of assimilation for non-white, or black, people.¹² They function as a

¹² As Laura Mariko Cheifetz (2014) correctly states:

The Model Minority Myth plays into this [black/white] binary by marginalizing the fastest-growing racial group from the discussion, and isolates distinct communities of people of color from one another. That’s right: Asian Pacific Americans aren’t black. (I have been accused of not being black. It’s true. I’m not.) And by not being black, we are divided from our African-descent brothers and sisters. The binary and the Myth mean the organizing power of people of color is divided, and we end up primarily relating with white people instead of with one another.

social translator of whiteness to black Americans. It is worth noting, however, that although the racialization of Asian Americans is the result of that binary, their presence in American racial discourses is also where the breaking down and deconstruction of the black-white binary occurs; because, as Jack Linshi puts it, they “are neither white nor black” (2014). Thus, any discursive interrogation of the racialization of Asian Americans would inevitably interrupt the black-white oppositional binary. That being said, let me turn now to whiteness in biblical scholarship.

The reality of the white fishbowl is also a sacred cow in the context of biblical scholarship. Denise Buell’s recent essay, “Anachronistic Whiteness and the Ethics of Interpretation,” tackles this issue by engaging the work of Sara Ahmed on the phenomenological approach to whiteness (Ahmed 2007, 149-168). Buell notes:

The orientation of New Testament and early Christian studies is “white” not because all scholars in these fields are white; in the most recent survey of members of the major professional society, the Society of Biblical Literature, 85 per cent of members described themselves as of European descent and 76 per cent as male. Instead, the orientation is “white” because of the “world that is inherited, or which is already given before the point of an individual’s arrival,” the histories and approaches of our fields, and the way that students are disciplined into the field. (Buell 2018, 153-154; citing Ahmed 2007, 153)

Buell’s insight of placing whiteness in the context of the “world that is inherited” is an important reminder that the dominant voices in biblical scholarship still come from that “white” world. To be a “biblical scholar” is to be familiar with white scholarship, to entertain the questions that white scholars ask, and to engage those concerns. This familiarity with white scholarship is essentially the core thrust of the doctoral training that almost every student of the Bible in every university, particularly in the United States, has to go through and assimilate with.

Although Buell seems to minimize the importance of the dominant presence of white bodies in biblical scholarship, it is critical to remember that whiteness is established both on the basis of, and for the sake of, those white bodies. That is to say, white bodies are the site and the *telos* of the construction of white ideology. These bodies are where the process of “materialization”—to borrow a term from Judith Butler (2011)—takes place in all its complexities and instabilities. As Marx and Engels pointed out over two centuries ago, ideology is the fruit of an economic and material base (1998). That is to say, ideology is not only produced by, but also serves the interests of, the real flesh-and-blood people (1998). Thus, when Cheryl Harris speaks about “whiteness as property” (1993), she is not talking about a disembodied system of ideas, but about real embodied historical-material processes.

The white fishbowl in biblical scholarship often goes undetected and unseen, not because it is absent but because it is rarely named as such. White

biblical scholars are often concerned about the contents of the bowl (i.e. the fish, the green vegetation, the castles, etc.) rather than the bowl itself. George Yancy puts it this way: “I know whites (academic and intellectual types) who are able to engage race and racism critically at the conceptual level, but appear to fail at challenging their own whiteness at a deeply interpersonal level” (2012, 26). This is also true in biblical scholarship: white biblical scholars do not explicitly acknowledge, let alone interrogate, their whiteness in their works. Buell highlights this reality of white invisibility by describing how the Society of Biblical Literature programme units are composed (2018). White male scholars, according to Buell, tend to present their works in the “unmarked” programme units, such as “The Pauline Epistles,” rather than coming clean and naming them for what they actually are: “White Approaches to the Pauline Epistles” (2018, 155). Whiteness remains unmarked, unnamed, and unchecked, in biblical scholarship.¹³

In the following discussion, however, I mark and name whiteness in the reconstruction of the social experience of immigrants in the Corinthian church. I will now briefly describe Cavan Concannon’s socio-historical proposal regarding “some” Corinthians.

Concannon’s Socio-Historical Proposal: “Greek-Speaking Im/migrants”

Framing his entire discussion in a Derridean hauntology (Derrida 2006), Concannon’s work, *When You Were Gentiles* (2014), is basically an attempt to conjure the spectres of “some” Corinthians who haunt Paul’s writing. He refers to this group as “the half-forgotten Corinthians,” arguing that “there were many different conversations going on in and around Corinth about ethnicity, its boundaries, its meanings, and its relationship to things like cultic practice” (2014, 13). Concannon’s book is an acknowledgment of diversity, in which he argues that Paul’s discourse is neither the only one nor the normative one, but rather, “merely one among many” (2014, 18).

After laying out the arguments for the competing “ethnic rhetoric” in Paul and Favorinus,¹⁴ which is marked primarily by its fixity and fluidity (Concannon 2014, 13-16),¹⁵ Concannon develops a social reconstruction of Roman Corinth and its implications for the composition of the Corinthian church. The abundant epigraphic evidence demonstrates that Greek was the dominant language in non-public spaces of daily life, and Concannon’s social reconstruction substantiates this. Since “Latin was not central to Roman identity as Greek was to Greek identity” (Concannon 2014, 66), the Corinthians would linguistically associate themselves with Greek identity in

¹³ Sara Ahmed states, “It has become commonplace for whiteness to be represented as invisible, as the unseen or the unmarked, as non-colour, the absent presence or hidden referent, against which all other colours are measured as forms of evidence” (2004).

¹⁴ Favorinus was a Roman travelling orator who came to Corinth in the second century CE.

¹⁵ Concannon borrows this notion of ethnicity’s fixity and fluidity from Buell (2005, 2-5).

all its instability and malleability. The negotiation with Roman identity was primarily at the level of political relationship. Concannon argues that, “[t]hrough the use of Latin was not required of the Corinthians, it was associated with imperial power, which marked its use differently from that of Greek” (2014, 69).

This leads to Concannon’s reconstruction of the demography of the Corinthian church, or more precisely “some” Corinthians in that church. Following Jonathan Z. Smith’s hunch (Smith 2011, 17-34), Concannon argues that he would take “an imaginative leap” to speak about them as “Greek-speaking im/migrants to Corinth” (2014, 77). It is indeed a “leap,” because the voices of those in the Corinthian church have been trapped and imprisoned in the eternal representation of Paul’s letter. In other words, historians do not have any access to these Corinthians’ voices in order to imagine who they were. Concannon’s leap, though, is not a difficult one, because the Greek language was indeed a prominent tongue in Roman Corinth. I would like to look more closely at the combination of “im/migrants” and the qualifier “Greek-speaking.”

Concannon does not deny that people in the Corinthian church were immigrants or displaced people, whose mobility was due to many different socio-political and economic reasons. Of them, he writes:

Movement was not experienced in the same way by everyone who arrived in Corinth. Some came willingly, like the initial colonists sent out from Rome. Others perhaps arrived under compulsion, driven by economic necessity or to serve the interests of a patron or as a woman or child in a larger *familia*. Still others arrived through violence, such as slaves shipped, sold, or carried to Corinth. Brought to Corinth through the currents of trade, mobility, and opportunity that brought pottery from Asia Minor or marble from Nicomedia, some of those to whom Paul wrote came to the city from elsewhere. (2014, 77)

Such a statement is an acknowledgement of not only the diverse ways of migration to Corinth but also their diverse origins. However, this migration is categorically limited only to “movement.” Concannon denies that the experiences of contemporary immigrants parallel those of his Corinthian im/migrants. As he notes, “This is not to say that Paul’s audience in Corinth was itself made up of immigrants as we use the term today, nor that it was an ethnic association, like associations of Syrians and Phoenicians in places such as Delos or Athens; rather I am using the term im/migrant as a way of focusing on trade, mobility and movement in the city” (2014, 77).

The slash (/) that Concannon places in between the prefix “im-” and the noun “migrant” can be interpreted as a strategic move to signify difference: These Corinthians are immigrants, but not immigrants in the sense that we are familiar with today. People did move from all over the Mediterranean world to Corinth, yet they spoke Greek. This graphic modification (i.e. the /) combined with the qualifier, “Greek-speaking,” is a clear indication of Concannon’s unwillingness to expand his imagination to

embrace the minority, non-dominant languages spoken by immigrants in Roman Corinth. By so doing, Concannon's immigrants are significantly different from those of Smith, who suggests that although these immigrants lived in a city dominated by the Greek language, their native and homeland languages were still active and operative, at least in their cultic practices (Smith 2011, 31). Concannon, on the other hand, seems to imagine a group of immigrants embracing Greekness and Greek language in its negotiation with Roman imperial power.

One of the most important aspects of immigrant life is when immigrants develop ways by which they can continue remembering their homeland and also connect their new space with their homeland. Indonesian immigrant churches, for example, conduct their worship in *Bahasa Indonesia* (the Indonesian language) and share Indonesian foods with one another for communal lunch or dinner after the service. Worshipping in our mother language and eating Indonesian foods are some of the ways we connect with our homeland. This echoes Concannon's comment that Corinthian "im/migrants would find ways to connect to the gods and traditions of their homelands" (2014, 163). He offers an example of the Egyptian immigrants, who might have navigated their relationship with the homeland by performing Isis and Sarapis worship through the Spirit (or spirits).¹⁶ He explains this further with reference to 1 Corinthians 12-14:

In speaking of and experiencing the Spirit, "some" im/migrant Corinthians may have imagined themselves as connecting to the spirits of their ancestors and homelands, whereas Paul may have envisioned in the practice a bastardization of prophecy, imagining the incoherent speech of the Delphic oracle ... The Spirit as a vehicle for connecting with one's ancestral spirits would be useful for Corinthians 'on the move' and looking for ways to negotiate connections between Corinth and their homelands. (Concannon 2014, 165)

Concannon obviously follows Smith's suspicion that there is some miscommunication between the Corinthians and Paul. However, he seems to ignore Smith's assertion that it was also their native languages—their mother tongues—that connected them to their ancestors and their homelands. Those foreign languages are what Paul perceives as the babbling of incoherent speech. Their language carries the memories of their homelands and their ancestors. I would argue, however, that such linguistic experience is not only true in a cultic setting, but also in a casual conversation. It is a common phenomenon that, when immigrants meet with other immigrants, they immediately speak their native language. Unfortunately, this more mundane immigrant experience eludes Concannon's social imagination (and perhaps his experience) altogether.

¹⁶ Concerning this issue of the immigrant negotiation between Corinth and homeland, Concannon also points to the baptism for the dead in 1 Corinthians 15 (2014, 164-169). Cf. Concannon (2016).

Immigrants and Their Language(s) in Roman Corinth

In order to understand Concannon’s “imaginative leap” that I have just described, it is important to acknowledge two social realities in Roman Corinth: 1) the presence of foreigners; and 2) the dominance of Greek and Latin languages. How does a biblical scholar understand the experience of these foreigners in Roman Corinth in light of the dominance of Greek and Latin languages? The answer to this question will be largely determined by the subject position of that given biblical scholar. A white scholar will likely be influenced by his/her embeddedness in whiteness. Greg Carey characterizes the influence of whiteness in biblical scholarship like this: “Privilege shapes knowledge. At least, it shapes our perceptions and values, even in academic contexts” (2013, 7). In other words, whiteness as a social position affects scholars’ historical imaginaries.¹⁷ Biblical scholars who work within the American white social location will be *positioned*—echoing Hall (1990, 222) again—to arrive at a particular historical conclusion about the early Christian movement. It is inevitable but often invisible, not explicit. To replicate Yancy’s (2012) gesture, this section is an attempt to put my finger on biblical scholarship and say, “Look, a white!”¹⁸ In the next section, I argue that Concannon’s reconstruction of immigrant linguistic experiences in Roman Corinth reflects his hidden and unnamed white social imaginary. Let me first describe two realities about Roman Corinth: the presence of foreigners, and the dominance of Latin and Greek.

Reality One: The Foreigners in Roman Corinth

It is common knowledge among scholars of ancient Mediterranean society that the socio-linguistic make-up of the first-century Greco-Roman world was multilingual through and through, in spite of the dominance of Greek and Latin.¹⁹ Multilingualism did not simply include Greek and Latin, but also Greek *or* Latin and local languages such as Syriac, Aramaic, Demotic, Carian, and Phrygian (see Brixhe 2003; Janse 2003). Thus, in spite of the powerful force of the imperial languages, people did not easily give up their local languages. Ramsay MacMullen’s famous 1996 essay demonstrates quite convincingly that Syriac, Coptic, Punic, and Celtic languages were able “to sustain themselves in spoken and even in written form against the competition of Greek and Latin” (MacMullen 1966, 1).²⁰ Werner Eck likewise

¹⁷ I use the term “imaginary” here, echoing Charles Taylor’s definition of the term: “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (2003, 23).

¹⁸ What Yancy does is the reversal of Fanon’s experience of hearing “Look, a Negro!” directed at himself (2008). That moment of pronouncement is the constitution, or interpellation, of black subjectivity.

¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion on multilingualism in the Greco-Roman world, see Clackson (2012, 2015).

²⁰ MacMullen also notes that “in the back-country, local dialects persisted for a long time, some not destined to emerge into the full light until the Middle Ages (Welsh, Berber, and

shows that despite most of the epigraphic remains in Asia Minor's urban contexts being exclusively in Latin, there is always a "discrepancy between reality and survival in epigraphic texts" (Eck 2012, 17). Language spoken and used in these social settings was a lot richer than what was displayed in and through the epigraphic texts.

Taken seriously, this picture of the multilingual Mediterranean world should affect the way scholars imagine the linguistic life of Corinth in the Roman period. The Roman general Lucius Mummius led the army to destroy Corinth in 146 BCE. Julius Caesar rebuilt and transformed it into a Roman colony in 44 BCE, giving it the new name *Colonia Laus Julia Corinthiensis*. Ancient authors such as Strabo (*Geography*, 8.6.23), Appian (*Punic Wars*, 8.136), Plutarch (*Caesar*, 57.8), Pausanias (*Description of Greece*, 2.1.2), and Dio Cassius (*Roman History*, 43.50–5)²¹ note that the way Caesar revived this politically dead Hellenistic city was by sending two groups (veterans and freedpersons) from Rome to live there. However, as Benjamin Millis has demonstrated, it is very likely that the majority of these displaced people in Roman Corinth were freedpersons (2010, 20–21). Knowing how slaves were recruited and traded in the Greco-Roman world (Hunt 2017), it is reasonable to infer that these people originated from many different places in the Roman Empire.

In addition to these two groups, Roman Corinth was also composed of negotiators, traders, visitors, and merchants. The two major ports that connect the city of Corinth to the Saronic and Corinthian gulfs—and thus the eastern and western parts of the Mediterranean world—were the primary sites of not only ancient economic and trading activities (see Slane 1989, 219–225), but also of transcultural exchange. Strabo said that because of Corinth's richness of economic and cultural exchange, it was known as a "wealthy" city (*Geography*, 8:6.20). Corinth was, as Concannon puts it, "the bearer of international commerce," a city that received "culture from far and wide" (2014, 48). In terms of the local elite, the existence of "eastern negotiators" also points to the city's immigrant composition, a point which Anthony Spawforth demonstrates in his important prosopographic analysis (1996, 171). Concannon notes that these families of negotiators "comprised a mixture of native Italians (from Italy proper, Sicily, and Magna Graecia), foreign citizens of Italian cities, freedmen of Greek and eastern origin, and slaves from those same regions" (2014, 57). In other words, these negotiators were "persons from a variety of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds" (Concannon 2014, 57). Other than these local elites, there is also ample evidence of Egyptians, Jews, Lycians, and other ethnic groups visiting or living in Corinth. It is no surprise that names of specific individuals, such as Favorinus, Junia Theodora, Alexas, and Sapiras, have been found there. In

Basque, for example), others destined to recede slowly before the pressure of classical languages: Celtic in Spain, Galatia, or North Italy, or Thracian, Dacian, or Lydian—though, before they disappeared, these too laid their distinctive marks on their successors" (1966, 1).

²¹ See Benjamin Millis' (2010) discussion of these passages.

addition, the famous Isthmian games celebrated in Corinth every two years also attracted foreigners (*xenoi*) from many different places (Plutarch, *Questiones Conviviales*, 8.4.1). Greek historian Polybius recounts that people spoke in many different languages during this festival (*Histories*, 18.46). Indeed, as Donald Engels notes, Roman Corinth “received immigrants; not from one or two regions, but from all over the Mediterranean world” (1990, 73).

Reality Two: The Dominance of the Greek and Latin Languages

The second reality in Corinth was the dominance of the Greek and Latin languages. In spite of the immigrant status of this city, the inscriptions found in public spaces are mainly in Latin, while inscriptions in other spaces are in Greek. Although it was a Roman colony, this city was a former Hellenistic polis, meaning that the descendants (and the artifacts) of those who were not displaced by the Romans after the 146 BCE destruction might still live there.²² Although Corinth was a Roman colony (Kent 1996), Millis demonstrates that graffiti, funeral inscriptions, and inscriptions concerning the Isthmian games point to the Hellenistic nature—and Greek language use—of this city (2010, 30). He concludes that they were “entirely Greek in origin” (2010, 30).

Relying primarily on the work of Millis, Concannon lays out this Greek-Latin prominence in great detail. “The evidence analyzed by Millis,” Concannon explains, “suggests that Greek, as opposed to Latin, was the language of ... daily life in Corinth and shows that the inhabitants of the city were predominantly Greek speakers or bilingual in Greek and Latin” (2014, 65). The situation in Corinth was hardly unique. Rather, it reflects the larger situation of the eastern Mediterranean region during the Roman period. Although Latin language was used predominantly in governmental and administrative activities, Greek is also amply attested.

That being said, the interconnectedness between the Greek and Roman natures of Roman Corinth is, of course, obvious and has been the focus of scholarly discussions for years. The more pertinent question for us here is: how do we examine the experience of non-Greek and non-Roman immigrants who visited and lived there? We need to seriously consider the experience of Egyptians (Smith 1977), and Syrians like Alexas (Morgan 1936), and Lycian immigrants who lived with Junia Theodora (Harvey 1998), and the Jewish and Samaritan communities (Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 281-282; see also Kaplan 1980), and many other immigrants in Corinth.

²² Scholars, such as Sarah James (2013), David Romano (1994), Irene Romano (1994), Elizabeth Gebhard and Matthew Dickie (2003), and Nancy Bookidis (2005), have demonstrated that the city was not left completely empty after the destruction. It was likely that only the elite aristocrats were deported and displaced by the Romans. Although there were no significant political activities from 164 to 4 BCE, the daily agricultural activities were still intact.

At this point, Smith is correct that the phenomenon of speaking in tongues related in 1 Corinthians 12-14 probably points to the ritual performed by some Corinthian immigrants (particularly second-generation immigrants) “in their native, homeland language” in order to communicate with “the ancestral spirits” (2011, 31). He argues that it was these native languages that Paul misunderstood and identified as glossolalia (2011, 31). Smith’s observation about immigrants being connected to their ancestors and homeland through their native language echoes Derrida’s (2000) description of the two “sighs” that immigrants—displaced people, the exiled—experience: the first is their homeland where they buried their dead ancestors, and the second is their mother tongue. It is their mother tongue that becomes “their ultimate homeland, or even their last resting place (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 87-88).” Thus, if it is true that there were many immigrants living and interacting in Corinth, scholars should not overlook the importance of discovering their mother tongue when reconstructing the social experiences of those immigrants.²³

The Spectre of Whiteness

Let me circle back again to Concannon’s work. How does Concannon arrive at his particular imaginative leap that some Corinthians are “Greek-speaking im/migrants”? This leap obviously places the dominant language as the mark of linguistic identity of immigrants in Corinth. Highlighting the non-neutrality of the act of conjuring, Concannon acknowledges that his project is as theological and political as “the monologic interpretations of malestream scholarship” (2014, 173). As he admits, “By conjuring these ghosts, I am myself making a decision, taking responsibility, committing myself to looking beyond, around, and outside Paul for ways of thinking, believing, acting, and doing that might have been and that might still be” (Concannon 2014, 173). However, while Concannon recognizes some elements of his partiality, he notably does *not* state his social location of whiteness.

Echoing Fernando Segovia’s analytical strategy that a flesh-and-blood reader is behind every reconstruction of history (2000, 7), I argue that the act of giving the Corinthian foreigners the label of “Greek-speaking im/migrants” reflects whiteness, rather than the rich immigrant experience itself. It truly brings to mind the American historical reality of subjecting all foreigners in America to whiteness, and, as I explained earlier, the ubiquitous idea that being an “American” can only be achieved through speaking and adopting English. The “Greek-speaking im/migrants” proposal is, therefore, a white historical retrojection.

Moreover, Concannon’s overemphasis of the idea that the dominant language in Corinth was the mark of immigrant identity directly contradicts

²³ I have elaborated these historical and archaeological materials in greater detail in my (currently unpublished) doctoral dissertation (Tupamahu 2018a).

his own desire to uphold diversity throughout his book. For instance, he discusses Cicero's statement that, due to Corinth's geographical location, its inhabitants "receive a mixture of strange languages and customs, and import foreign ways as well as foreign merchandise" which lead them to "corruption and denigration" (Concannon 2014, 145-146). Concannon then immediately registers his disagreement with Cicero's claims: "Though Cicero views the mixing of peoples, languages, and customs, and ideas as a denigration of morals and ancestral customs, I read this diversity as a site for the production of identities in 'multiple modes' of religion and ethnicity" (2014, 146). The use of the word "ethnicity" in this statement is quite ironic, because, by using it, he emphasizes again that when *he* speaks about im/migrants, he is not referring to their ethnicity:

[B]y speaking of 'some' Corinthian as im/migrants, I do not want to suggest that we are dealing with what, in other cities, we might call an 'ethnic' association, such as the association of Syrian merchants on Delos or the Tyrian traders of Puteoli. Though it is possible that such organizations formed the base for Pauline communities in other places, this is not what I focus on here. Rather, I use the term to focus our attention on the movement that characterized the life in Corinth, and which was also so problematic for Cicero. I look at how history might offer a 'mobile construction' by which identity was negotiated within a context of im/migration and movement in and around Corinth" (2014, 146)

Although Concannon disagrees with Cicero's position that diversity is negative, he clearly understands diversity as something that is rooted in "movement," rather than in the ethnicity or language of the people who are moving. Concannon's diversity is a white American imagination through and through. In this particular social imagination, immigrants can come from many different places but their linguistic identity has to be placed, subjected, and categorized under the dominant tongue, i.e. English in America or Greek in Corinth. Unfortunately, the richness of immigrant language disappears from Concannon's imagination. To paraphrase Gayatri Spivak's famous (1988) question: can the subaltern languages speak in Concannon's reconstruction of Roman Corinth? The answer is no, they can't. Immigrant languages have been silenced, not only under the regime of the Greek language, but also in Concannon's historical representation.

Like many other white biblical scholars who focus mainly on the content of the fishbowl and fail to interrogate the bowl itself, Concannon also does not explicitly state, let alone interrogate, his positionality within whiteness. The place where he does point to whiteness is where he talks about other biblical scholars who privilege the voice of Paul over the Corinthians.²⁴ His own whiteness remains unstated, hidden, and unmarked.

²⁴ Concannon states, "The ideology of Pauline studies privileges Paul's voice over others and makes use of his voice to enforce and authorize the theological, political, and social views of the interpreter, who is usually white, Western, and male" (2014, 172).

David Horrell’s concluding statement in his latest article on Pauline studies and whiteness is worth quoting here: “Assuming that our [white] interpretation is uncontextualized—unmarked, unlocated, *unraced*—is, I would suggest, no longer a feasible option” (Horrell 2017, 141; emphasis original). That is to say, white reading, white interpretation, and white imagination should be seen as particular as those of the black, yellow (and so on) imagination. For that to happen, it has to be stated explicitly.

Towards an Asian American Social and Historical (Re)imagination

As an immigrant myself, if someone calls me an “English-speaking im/migrant,” I will categorically reject that label, because it is a discursive disavowal of my mother language. To claim that I am an English-speaking person is what whiteness expects from me. I am a *bahasa Indonesia*-speaking immigrant who happens to speak English too. I do not identify myself with the English language. To echo Hannah Arendt (2003, 13), I always feel a distance from this language. The “English-speaking im/migrant” pronouncement is a performative act of submitting the richness of immigrants’ native tongues to the dominant tongue. The same can also be said about the Corinthian immigrants. The movement of immigrants to Corinth cannot be separated from the movement of their mother tongues, or (to echo Derrida again), their “most mobile of telephones” (2000, 91). The following discussion is an effort to take another “imaginative leap”—a leap that is grounded in the linguistic immigrant experience, rather than the white imagination and the white expectation of immigrants.

An Asian American social imagination does not begin from the voices in the centre of the dominant culture, who speak with the language of power. This means that I will not use the “model minority” discourse as a starting point of my hermeneutical strategy, because it reflects a white perception of Asian Americans. Instead, I will consider the Asian American experience of linguistic discrimination seriously as a way of reimagining the life of immigrants in Roman Corinth. As the story I told at the beginning of this article showed, Asian Americans often face discrimination on the basis of our language difference.²⁵ Our accent, particularly in the speech of first-generation immigrants, often marks our perpetual otherness in this society.

Josephus’ Speaking with an “Accent”

Flavius Josephus is, in many ways, relevant to our discussion of Corinthian immigrants. First of all, although he might not have a direct relationship with the city of Corinth, he was a person displaced from his Judean

²⁵ For a more detailed discussion on this issue, see Tupamahu (2019).

homeland to Rome.²⁶ Just like Favorinus, he was also a Roman citizen (*The Life*, 423), but unlike Favorinus, he was a contemporary of Paul's. Furthermore, a good number of the population in Roman Corinth were freedpeople from Rome. Knowing how slaves were recruited and sold in the Roman period, it is still reasonable to argue that they might have had similar experiences to those of Josephus who was brought to Rome after the Jewish war (66-70 CE). While connected with both Rome and Corinth, they were also connected to their homelands, as Concannon (2014) has rightly shown. Thus, here we see three levels of negotiation: Romanness, Greekness, and their given homelands. As a displaced person from Judea to Rome who spoke and wrote in Greek, Josephus can be a viable alternative model for our reimagination of immigrant linguistic experience in Corinth.

We know that Josephus's mother tongue was either Hebrew or Aramaic.²⁷ For, in the opening of *The Jewish War*, Josephus introduces himself as "a son of Matthias, a Hebrew race (*genei Hebraios*) from Jerusalem, and a priest" (*Jewish War* I.3).²⁸ The readers of Josephus's works would not fail to notice that the word *Hebraios* (in all its variations) is used to signify both the Hebrew people²⁹ and the language/speech.³⁰ Phrases such as *tēn Hebraiōn dialektion* (*Jewish Antiquities* I.33, 36) and *tēn Hebraiōn glōttan* (*Jewish Antiquities* I.34, 333; IX.290) can be rendered as either "the Hebrew language" or "the language of the Hebrews." Either way works. Notice that, as an immigrant to Rome, although all his works (at least all those that are available to us today) are in Greek, Josephus does not identify himself as a Greek-speaking immigrant. He is a Hebrew person. He might have learned Greek in Judea before moving to Rome,³¹ but he does not identify himself with this language. He even describes himself as a "foreigner"

²⁶ Titus took Josephus with him to Rome right after the war in Judea (66-70 CE) that ended with the destruction of Jerusalem. Describing this relocation as an "honour" conferred by Titus (*The Life*, 422), Josephus recounts that he received housing, an allowance, and also Roman citizenship.

²⁷ Scholars stand divided on the issue of whether the word "Hebrew" that Josephus uses means the Hebrew language, Aramaic language, or is a general term for a Semitic tongue that the Judeans used. I will not discuss this issue in detail here. The point that I would like to communicate is simply that Greek is not Josephus' first language. For further discussion on this issue, see Emerton (1961); Grntz (1960); Fassbender (2012).

²⁸ The phrase *Hebraiōn genos* also appears in *Jewish Antiquities* IV.127, 201; II.216; IX.211; X.183; *Jewish War* V.443. Josephus employs other phrases such as *Hebraiōn laos* (*Jewish Antiquities* VIII.335, 341; X.155) and *to Hebraiōn ethnos* (*Jewish Antiquities* IV.308).

²⁹ For example, see *Jewish Antiquities* I.258; II.78, 102, 119, 201, 206, 210, 226, 236, 238, 241; IV.7, 14, 99, 102, 112-113, 127, 129, 131, 146-147, 157, 159, 162, 203, 243; VI.344, 352, 369, 372; VII.68-69, 71, 74-75, 95, 100, 105, 123, 127, 138, 15; VIII.204, 211, 229, 255, 353, 381; IX.20, 62; X.38, 72, 128, 87, 194; XIV.255; *Jewish War* IV.460; V.382, 389; *Against Apion* 1.167

³⁰ Josephus uses different expressions such as *ten Hebraiōn dialektion* (*Jewish Antiquities* I.33, 36), *tēn Hebraiōn glōttan* (*Jewish Antiquities* I.34, 333; IX.290), II.3; *hen tais Hebraikais biblois* (*Jewish Antiquities* IX.208), and *hebraizōn* (*Jewish War* VI.97)

³¹ For a more detailed explanation on the possibility of Josephus knowing Greek before he left for Rome, see Rajak (2002).

(*allophulos*, lit. “another tribe”) when it comes to his relationship with Greekness and Romanness (*Jewish War* I.16).

Josephus’s relationship with Greek language is something to which I think many Asian Americans can relate. When he explains the process of writing (or translating from Hebrew) his *Jewish War* in(to) Greek, Josephus recalls that it took him a lot of time, because this language was “foreign and unfamiliar” to him (*Jewish Antiquities* I.7). The Greek expression he uses, *eis allodapēn hēmīn kai xenēn dialektou sunētheian*, literally means “into a foreign and unfamiliar habitual language to us.” It shows that Greek was not his habitual language, that is, a language that he always used or a language with which his tongue was familiar. There is a distance between him and this language. As J. N. Sevenster puts it, “Here ‘foreign and unfamiliar’ means that by nature Greek was a foreign language to Josephus, one he did not speak in daily life and hence one with which he simply was not familiar” (1968, 73, n. 4). Apparently, Josephus wrote the book in Hebrew (or Aramaic) first, and then translated it into Greek (*Jewish Antiquities* I.5; X.218).³² That is no surprise to me. I know many Asian students who write their papers in their native language first and then translate them into English. Or, they first think in their native language what to say and then the process of writing itself becomes an act of translation. So, Josephus’ experience is not foreign to Asian immigrants in the United States.

Not only does Josephus experience a distance from Greek at the writing level, he also feels such estrangement when speaking Greek. Toward the end of *Jewish Antiquities*, he makes another confession about his relationship with the Greek language. Acknowledging that it takes considerable effort (or pains) for him to learn this language, Josephus states that “the habitual use of my native tongue has prevented my attaining precision in the pronunciation” (*Jewish Antiquities* XX.263-4).³³ This pain happens only because the people in his adopted land do not appreciate people “who have mastered the speech of many nations” (*Jewish Antiquities* XX.263-4). According to Josephus, they are more passionate about “an exact knowledge of the law”³⁴ and the ability of “interpreting the meaning of the

³² In his 1928 Hilda Stich Stroock Lecture series, Henry St. John Thackeray introduced a theory that, because Josephus’s Greek composition is too good, and that “no trace of his native Aramaic” is found in *Jewish War* or his other works, he cannot be responsible for this excellent literary composition. As Thackeray explains, “This command of the language was, however, as I said, not wholly his own, and I propose in this lecture to go in quest of some of his assistants” (1969, 102). This explanation is often known as “the assistant theory.” A hint of this can be found in *Against Apion*, where Josephus admits that, in Rome, he received “the aid of some assistants for the sake of the Greek” (*Against Apion* I.50).

³³ Commenting on this statement, Jan Nicolaas Stevenster states, “The general purport of these words of Josephus is clear: he has taken great pains to acquire a thorough knowledge of Greek, even though certain factors impeded rather than helped him unlocated” (1968, 67).

³⁴ In another place, Josephus states, “Above all we pride ourselves on the education of our children, and regard as the most essential task in life the observance of our laws and of the pious practices, based thereupon, which we have inherited” (*Against Apion*, I.60).

Holy Scriptures” (*Jewish Antiquities* XX.264) than foreign language attainment.

We can say two things about Josephus’s confession of his own linguistic struggle. First, the inexactness of pronunciation, the speaking with an “accent,” is not a sign of a linguistic lack on the part of a foreign language speaker. Rather, as Rey Chow puts it, speaking with an “accent” is “the symptom precisely of discontinuity—an incomplete assimilation, a botched attempt at eliminating another tongue’s competing copresence” (2014, 58). In other words, despite the force of the dominant culture on Josephus, his mother tongue will continue to follow him even when he speaks Greek. Second, the attitude of those mentioned by Josephus who are unimpressed by people learning other languages should probably be interpreted as their effort to maintain their own local language in the midst of the immense influence of Hellenistic culture. Language contact is indeed unavoidable, however a shift from the local language to the dominant imperial language often does not occur without resistance. That being said, I will now briefly look at Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in order to revisit Paul’s discussion of speaking in tongue(s), reading it as a discourse on multilingualism and a window to the demography of the Corinthian church.

Tongue(s) Speakers and Paul’s Discourse on Language

A window through which we can see the experience of the Corinthian immigrants and their native languages can be found in Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 12-14. By constructing Paul’s audience as “Greek-speaking im/migrants,” Concannon fails to see the linguistic struggle in this church. Once the immigrant linguistic experience is flattened and submitted to the dominant tongue, it is almost impossible to see the richness of minoritized, marginalized, and silenced languages underneath the dominant language. The view that speaking tongue(s)³⁵ is an ecstatic form of speech would likewise lead inevitably to the same result. That is to say, when the phenomenon of speaking in tongue(s) is constructed by modern scholars as a non-linguistic spiritual experience, such a position would immediately erase the linguistic experience of the Corinthian immigrants.

Here I would argue that tongue(s) is a linguistic struggle through and through. The word *glōssa* itself has never been used in any Greek literature to refer to an ecstatic experience. Instead, this word is commonly used for both a physical tongue (a body part) and a language (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 2.420b).³⁶ Paul’s demand for a thorough translation (*diermēneuō/diermēnetēs*) in I Cor. 14:5, 13, 27-28 is an indicator that he is asking for the native immigrant languages to be translated into Greek. His use of the term *phōnē* also points to the linguistic nature of this phenomenon. Although I

³⁵ I use parentheses here to in order to indicate that the word *glōssa* appears in both singular and plural forms in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

³⁶ See also my discussion in Tupamahu (2018b).

will not go into further detail here to prove the linguistic nature of this phenomenon, if we understand the discussion in 1 Corinthians 12-14 as Paul's attempt to deal with linguistic difference (which, I think Smith has correctly suspected), this can strongly indicate the existence of many languages in Corinth and, particularly, in the Corinthian church.

Having said that, as an Asian American who struggles on a daily basis to speak English, I can relate to the experience of tongue(s) speakers in the Corinthian church. As I have pointed out above and elsewhere (Tupamahu 2019), when I meet other Indonesians in public gatherings, I immediately switch my language performance from English to my native tongue. When I pray, I prefer to pray in my mother language than in English. This, I imagine, is also the experience of tongue(s) speakers in Corinth. Corinthian immigrants who became the followers of Jesus would likely gather together to speak and pray in their native languages. Paul perceives this multilingual and heteroglossic (1 Cor. 14:21) phenomenon as something that is disorderly, chaotic, and useless for the church.

“Some” Corinthians who received Paul's letter, therefore, were not only immigrants, but also foreign-language speakers. They were not “Greek-speaking im/migrants,” as Concannon has postulated. Rather, they were foreign language speaking immigrants who happen to speak Greek. This social imagination is indeed quite different from that of a white imagination. However, this Asian American “imaginative leap”—to borrow from Concannon again—will help us see the richness of immigrant languages, in spite of the reality that they have been silenced and marginalized by the dominant language.

A Closing Remark

I will not close this essay with a conclusion, simply because I want to leave the topic open for further exploration. The purpose of this article has been two-fold: 1) to put my finger on whiteness; and 2) to offer an alternative historical imagination from an Asian American point of view. Whiteness in an American context is historically and socially connected to the English language. To be an American means to be white, and to be white is to perform the white tongue. The requirement of English language in the process of naturalization is a sign of the stubborn presence of whiteness. Thus, in a white social imaginary, the foreigners who move to the United States and become part of this society are, or have to be, English-speaking immigrants. They may come from different parts of the world, but they all speak—or are expected to learn to speak—English. Working from within this particular context, it is reasonable to infer that Concannon's “Greek-speaking im/migrants” proposal reflects the operation of whiteness in his historical imagination more than the actual immigrant cultural experience itself. His refusal to deal with immigrant native languages brings to mind the experience of An, the Korean-speaking student in California whose story I

narrated at the beginning of this article. To be told “I don’t want to hear your language” is a brutal signification of Concannon’s “Greek-speaking im/migrants” imaginary.

However, Concannon’s reconstruction should not be the end of story. Here, I offer a competing imagination based on an Asian American linguistic experience in the United States. The slipperiness of our speech and our accent points to the “co-presence” of our native languages every time we perform the English language. This is true also in the experience of a Hebrew/Aramaic-speaking immigrant to Rome named Josephus. His decision not to identify himself with the Greek language, in spite of the fact that he wrote multi-volumed works in that language, resonates well with the experience of many Asian Americans. As Sharmila Sen has noted in her memoir, her relationship with the English language is like “the relationship one has with another human being over the course of a lifetime.” Although “strangers can become intimate friends,” she acknowledges she does not have “a sense of deep intimacy with English” (2018, 171).

Furthermore, the experience of tongue(s) speakers in the Corinthian church indicates the existence of many foreign languages in both the city of Corinth and the Corinthian church. We will probably never know what languages were represented in that church. From my personal experience, however, although my Indonesian tongue might not appear in my dissertation at Vanderbilt University or in my other publications, it does not mean that the Indonesian language is non-existent in the city of Nashville in 2019. This, I argue, is also the experience of the Corinthian immigrants. Although we do not have epigraphic texts written in languages other than Greek or Latin, that should not lead us to imagine that they did not exist in first-century Corinth.

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