

Wrestling with the “Body of Christ” in an Age of Tribalism

Towards an Asian American Hermeneutics of Dissent

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Abstract

By examining both the deleterious effects and the strategic values of tribalism, this article compares White Evangelicals to Asian Americans, by evaluating Paul’s two conflicting images of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. White Evangelicals impose rigid, closed identity boundaries that make it impossible for outsiders to interrogate internally produced knowledge. In contrast, Asian Americans, who are conditioned by multiethnicity, intragroup tension, and even contradiction, must enact open, malleable, and porous identity boundaries that make it necessary to dialogue with values and knowledge developed outside the strategic alliance. These two contrasting approaches to knowledge production and group identity are documented and corroborated in Paul’s two readings of the body of Christ. A hermeneutics of dissent takes due account of the intratribal tension of Asian Americans and embraces the two conflicting readings, thereby offering an alternative vision to self-enclosed, insulated tribalism

Keywords

1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, White Evangelicals, Trump, identity, knowledge production.

Introduction

Donald J. Trump’s election as the 45th president of the United States in 2016 has prompted pundits to attribute the fracture of American society to tribalism. Describing Trump’s immigration policies and travel bans as “brutal,” Paul Waldman of the *Washington Post* writes, “in our lifetimes, there has never been a president more explicitly tribal than Donald Trump” (2018; see also Goldberg 2018). These words bespeak an unexamined rejection of tribalism, but why should we abhor it? After all, as even Waldman himself acknowledges, “tribalism is one of those things that everyone laments yet everyone engages in, to one degree or another” (2018). It is a way of life, and one could argue that, in a pluralistic democratic society such as the United States, tribalism might even be a necessary vehicle through which individuals form power blocs to preserve their political survival and relevance, especially those left out of the power centre.

Rejection of the human tendency to cohere within affinity groups could result in minoritized populations ceding the public arena to the dominant group, thereby descending into cultural assimilation and dissolution.

In anthropological terms, a tribe is an ethnic group of extended kinship. Kinship can be biologically based but is just as often “fictive” or “practical,” thus making it possible for non-kin to place themselves together inside a tribe (James 2006, 127). The sine-qua-non condition that defines a tribe is the putative existence of boundaries that demarcate insiders from outsiders—those who belong to the tribe and those who do not. Boundaries by themselves do not make a tribe, but nothing can be considered tribal without them. These conditions, at first blush, would seem to make tribalism irredeemably destructive, so much so that some have argued identity politics and multiculturalism—tribal formations all—are hurling “the Miracle of Western civilization and American experiment” towards its death (Goldberg 2018, 211). My reading of the body of Christ within the Pauline corpus persuades me to the contrary, however. It advances what I call a hermeneutics of dissent, which interrogates and embraces the productive inconsistencies, disagreements, disputes, dissensions, and even outright contradictions encoded in the biblical text. Only such an interpretive strategy can do justice to the experiences of “Asian Americans”—a political construct that represents an amalgam of diverse cultures, languages, religions, and peoples who, but for their common experience of minoritization, have no ancestral connection to one another (Yang 2012; Liu 2009). I would go further to argue that the same reading strategy is necessary also for all those who struggle to come to terms with an American pluralism in which no dominant culture exists.

To place this discussion in the concrete present, this paper compares two approaches to tribalism—one by White Evangelicals in the United States and the other by Asian Americans—through examining their appropriation of the Pauline metaphor of the body of Christ. White Evangelicals are tribal, in that they attach inordinate power to personal conversion. This is the singular event that grants converts new kinship, and new group identity, and includes them into the body of Christ. This inclusion yields a concomitant hermeneutics that treats outsiders as interlopers, competitors, and enemies: they are “the unsaved” who must be kept out and walled off. Loyalty to one’s own tribe always requires a negative evaluation of, or even downright antipathy towards, outsiders. Asian Americans are also considered tribal, in that their ethnic and racial identity is taken to be an entrance requirement to this social and political group, and thus they construct their group identity in the same way as White Evangelicals. The difference is that, while White Evangelicals consider themselves the rightful owner and definer of American culture, the Asian Americans identity is formed in response to pressure exerted by groups that enjoy and exercise superiority over them. In other words, the Asian American identity is forged in the crucible of external threats. If pressure to conform and assimilate were to dissipate, Asian American tribal identity would dissolve with it. This

inherently unstable identity turns out to be its own salvation, for it refutes the permanence of boundaries. The success of an Asian American alliance would lead to its dissolution, thus rendering its tribal identity merely strategic rather than ontological. These two identities, coming from opposite ends of the American social and political spectrum, will produce divergent readings of the Pauline text.

Tribalism and White Evangelicals

Conservative author Jonah Goldberg suggests that though tribalism might be part of human nature, it is inimical to progress, modernity, capitalism, and a highly structured system like democracy (2018). Tribalism cultivates “a romantic glorification or sanctification” of group identity, with the result that “those in the group are part of the tribe, the cause, ‘the movement,’ or any other abstraction that triggers ‘the coalition instinct’” (Goldberg 2018, 291).¹ The natural human proclivity towards clumping with and favouring those perceived to be like us prompts us “[to despise] the division between the religious and the secular, between the individual and the group, between civil society and the state”—all necessary partitions, according to Goldberg, within a healthy democracy (2018, 86-87). The survival of Western democracy depends on its ability to hold in check this natural “rust of human nature” (Goldberg 2018, 10, 211) that would only lead to decline and atrophy. Instead, Goldberg proposes that we avoid the pitfalls of giving preferential treatment of people, based on their supposedly fixed membership in a particular group; nor should we judge them according to their group identity, or make group identity an ineluctable fixity from which there is no escape (2018, 211). Goldberg blames identity politics for aiding the ascendancy of Donald Trump, who:

represents a reversion to a natural type of leader who speaks and thinks in tribal terms ... Beneath his suits and his abnormally long ties, he is a throwback, a kind of generic prototype of premodern man, obsessed with being the alpha of the group.... He is the representative of the people his supporters believe to be the only people who matter. (Goldberg 2018: 290, 291, 293).

Liberal Stevan Hobfoll agrees that group affiliation is part of the primordial human desire for attachment to family, clans, and kinship (2018); this natural tendency towards association with those who are perceived to be “like us” can turn tribal only if the group comes under threat, whether real or perceived. Such threats, “if consistent and presented with authority, can elicit strong affiliative behaviour and the fortress mentality of guard and counter-attack” (Hobfoll 2018, 27-28). Fear-mongering has always been part of politics, but with the advent of mass and social media, the spread of fear makes tribalism into a national, or even global, phenomenon. Hobfoll points

¹ Goldberg is here describing populism, but he uses tribalism, populism, and nationalism as confederated if not synonymous terms.

to conservative politicians, who appeal to their base's tribalist instincts by making up imaginary wars on Whites and Christians. For example, Texas governor Rick Perry, one-time US presidential hopeful, promised to "end Obama's war on religion," while Bobby Jindal, former governor of Louisiana and one-time presidential candidate, warned that liberals were threatening to transform a land of faith "into a land where faith is silenced, privatized, and circumscribed" (cited by Hobfoll 2018, 11). Such overt reference to religious wars reflects and perpetuates a brewing anti-Muslim sentiment (Hobfoll 2018, 33-34) and fuels the persecution complex of White Evangelicals, who oppose policies close to the core of their religious convictions (such as universal healthcare) just because they are proposed by the "other side" (Hobfoll 2018, 13-14). Like Goldberg, Hobfoll is also convinced that tribalism played an essential role in the rise of Trump, who infamously described Mexicans as rapists and criminals invading "our" southern border, and who claimed, falsely, that twenty-five percent of Muslims in the United States condone violence against Americans (Hobfoll 2018, 30). To Hobfoll, conservatives weaponize tribalism to advance partisan politics.

Goldberg and Hobfoll hold a dim view of tribalism, but for different reasons. Hobfoll finds it odious, partly because it belongs to the old western, colonial vocabulary of labelling "primitive" peoples (Hobfoll 2018, 45), but mainly because it exposes the tactics used by White America to manipulate fears of losing out to Nonwhite and non-Christian "strangers." Goldberg blames identity politics for reinventing a tribalism that erodes American liberal democracy and the latter's promise to transcend gender and ethnicity. The reinstatement of old ethnic borders that the West has worked assiduously to erase, Goldberg argues, instils within us an *us-versus-them* mentality, which has been responsible for a resurgence of tribalism and which has paved the way for the rise of Trump. On this latter point, Hobfoll is in full agreement.

Anthropologist Paul James proposes a neutral working definition of tribalism "as a social frame in which communities are bound socially beyond immediate birth ties by the dominance of various modalities of face-to-face and object integration, for example, *genealogical placement, embodied reciprocity and mythological enquiry*" (James 2006, 325-326; emphasis added). Even though this definition affirms the biological basis of tribalism, it also goes beyond bloodlines by allowing for fictive kinship when consanguinity or common ancestry is "not genetically verifiable" (James 2006, 76). James objects to the term "fictive," because it implies self-conscious fabrication, even wilful deception, when in reality the sense of belonging is highly dependent on the structure that shapes one's identity (James 2006, 127). The structure could be a clan, a group, a village, a church, a denomination, or a religious movement, and individuals derive their social identity by "placing" themselves in one such structure, thus creating a "practical kinship" (James 2006, 127). Members, therefore, enter a tribe by "genealogical placement" (James 2006, 127). In the parlance of American

Evangelicalism, this placement takes the form of personal conversion, which ritualizes entrance into the family of God, the body of Christ.

Becoming part of the body of Christ enables the converts to be in an “embodied” relationship with others in the same group, even across time and space. This means the relationship is person-to-person, or what James calls “face to face,” and not through some abstract and impersonal medium like money or commodities (James 2006, 5, 28-33). Personal presence—either physically or through church membership, for example—is paramount; it cannot be replaced by something like financial arrangement, or some other impersonal means. This embodied presence also implies that relations established in a local church can be expanded to churches in other locales and also be extended backwards or forwards in time to include spiritual ancestors and posterity (James 2016, 84-85). This allows individual members of a local church to establish a presence in a worldwide movement that is perceived to have a momentous beginning and a shared future.

Given the many structures that modern peoples belong to, tribal identity need not be unique. Multiple identities are possible when “different kinds of practical kinship are maintained, enacted and named according to the situation” (James 2006, 127). Membership in American Evangelicalism does not, for example, replace ethnic identity (African American, Asian American, White, etc.) but exists alongside it as the need arises. It is up to members to adjudicate whether the diverse kinship constructions conflict with or reinforce each other. It is precisely the intersection between these two types of structure that creates tensions and conflicts.

The induction of members into a church does not by itself make American Evangelism into a tribe; conversion is as old as the Bible and is practiced across all forms of Christianity. Paul regularly addresses members of the burgeoning Jesus movement as “sisters and brothers” (*adelphoi*), “sons and daughters” (*huiioi*), children (*tekna*), father (*patēr*), and other pseudo-familial relations. In order for the movement to cohere into a tribe, it must exercise what James calls “embodied reciprocity” (James 2006, 29, 312-313). This refers to an exchange of gifts within “an integrative frame of *embodied relations* that works to mediate and make people present to each other” (James 2006, 106 emphasis original). In a functioning tribe, the exchange of gifts is fundamentally different from the exchange of commodities: gifts embody the givers to their recipients and *vice versa* when the gifts are reciprocated. The exchange focuses not so much on the goods but on what they evoke and disclose—the person-to-person relation within a tribal structure. “*Reciprocity ... can be defined as exchange of goods within a network of exchange relations* that carries the ‘spirit’ of face-to-face integration between the persons involved in exchange, and which thus requires some form of ritual recognition or *social return*” (James 2006, 105 emphasis original).

If the main focus in this exchange turns out *not* to be the gift itself but rather the embodied act of giving and returning that is tokenized by it, one

could expand the definition of “gift” to include a gesture, gratuitous act, or lesson, as well as “gift” in the normal sense, especially during holidays like Christmas, or on occasions of personal milestones, such as graduation. These more abstract rubrics help us see that, within Protestantism, the church itself and all that it provides should be understood as gifts offered to members who, in turn, are expected to reciprocate by way of “ritual recognition” or “social return” (James 2006, 105). Religious education, social services, lessons, and even sermons are provided to members as “gifts,” while members reciprocate through such things as volunteering, making offerings and monetary pledges, filling in the pews, and giving the church respectability. Modern telecommunication makes it possible for the exchange of gifts across time in the form of recorded teachings, sermons, and talks between churches or different organizations, which take place over the airwaves and internet. All forms of oral or verbal communication become available to like-minded recipients of such gifts, who, for their part, reciprocate in the form of ratings or monetary contributions. Over time and space, these recorded teachings create an embodied presence for the speakers and authors, in the manner of an apostolic parousia, which solicits the audience’s and readers’ reciprocal presence which is no longer limited by space or time.

None of the specifics included in the consideration of the first two modes of face-to-face integration—genealogical placement and embodied reciprocity—is unique to White Evangelicalism. What sets them apart from other Protestant denominations and other religious groups is their epistemology, or what James calls “mythological inquiry,” which refers to how they construct knowledge and how they relate to the object of that knowledge. To cite James in full,

Tribal enquiry *qua* tribalism ... does not address a world “out there.” Rather, it treats the social and the natural as an integrated union in which events, moments and perceptible things are understood in reciprocal relation to each other ... Elements of knowledge can be lifted out from direct perception and palpable experience but only if they are “returned”—like the spirit of the gift always carrying the ghost of the giver, never lifted out as an independent thing. This means that knowledge can be used as a medium of exchange but only within a socially-sanctioned setting. It can be held and passed on, but only as something held in trust as one might hold a sacred object or a child. Tribal knowledge always *returns* to places, things and bodies. (2006, 122-123; emphasis original)

Tribal knowledge is always *embodied* knowledge. That means the proper mode of inquiry never permanently leaves out the inquirers, but includes them as part of the final construction of knowledge. The knower is always an integral part of knowledge. Because tribal exchanges are always reciprocal as well, the acquisition of tribal knowledge requires that a knower

enters into a social relation with other knowers in the production of that knowledge. A tribal inquirer is never isolated from the tribe.

According to exit polls, eighty-one percent of White Evangelicals voted for Trump in the 2016 US presidential election, and after two years in office, he still commanded an extraordinary sixty-nine percent approval rating among them (Schwadel and Smith 2019). White Evangelicals' enthusiasm for Trump seems counter-intuitive, because, for decades, they have demanded that their leaders have a strong moral character. Yet they cast their lots with an irreligious, thrice-married womanizer. Many suggestions for this incongruity have been advanced, from the cynical (political expedience), to the menacing (Christian nationalism) and the messianic (literally!), but none of these can explain White Evangelicals' maniacal commitment to Trump. Prominent Evangelical leaders like Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell, Jr regularly heap effusive praise on Trump and publicly defend his morally indefensible policies. Their loyalty to Trump has earned them the sobriquet of "court Evangelicals" (Fea 2018, 8-9).

The modern self-perception of American White Evangelicals as a distinct group can be traced back to the Civil War when Evangelicals, who dominated the population of southern states, defended slavery (Harlow 2015, 132-134; Fea 2018, 97-104). This threat from the "outside" consolidated the rank and file, and calcified the boundaries between Evangelicals and outsiders. It inculcated a fear and suspicion of the world in the form of scaremongering that the US government was at the ready to take away everything they hold dear. When major Protestant denominations split over slavery, this reinforced in Evangelicals an exceptionalism that has become the hallmark of the group. This fear and suspicion persist today, be it because "liberal America" removed prayer and mandatory Bible classes from public schools in the 60s and 70s (Fea 2019), or because the "liberal media" and "secular humanists" embarrassed their heroes (Wilson-Hargrove 2019), or because the government legalized such left-leaning policies as gay marriage (Hewett 2017; Hesse 2019) and abortion (Garrison 2019; Fea 2019). All of this might indicate an identity crisis, since "preservation of identity within a walled circle was the characteristic of the tribal society only" (Deka 1993, 90).

The Evangelicals' epistemological quest took the form of a biblical hermeneutics—the doctrine of inerrancy—which holds that the Bible, when interpreted literally, contains no errors of any kind (Noll 1998, 43-50; 2006, 31-50). In practice, though, Evangelicals were interested mainly in a literal reading only of *selected* passages. That was the case when the doctrine was deployed for the support of slavery, by appealing to such biblical passages as Gen. 9:25-27, Col. 3:22, 4:1, and 1 Tim. 6:1-2 (Noll 2006, 33-45), while ignoring or explaining away those that did not fit some of their other narratives, such as the Jubilee economic redistribution of wealth and property (e.g. Leviticus 25; Luke 4:18-19), or teachings against women adorning themselves (1 Tim. 2:9). All of this illustrates James's point that

the construction of tribal knowledge might detour from direct experience and personal perception, but it “always *returns* to places, things and bodies” (James 2006, 123). Since it was the defence of slavery that prompted the development of the doctrine of inerrancy,² results obtained by an application of that hermeneutics served to legitimate the institution of slavery and enable slave-owners to “embody” that knowledge. Only then could they retain their membership to White Evangelicalism.

White Evangelicals’ merging of a biblical defence of slavery and a biblical defence of enslaving people of another race (Noll 1998, 61-66; 2006, 51-74) helps us assess the limitations of tribal knowledge. Throughout the antebellum debate over slavery, no one from either side raised the question of why slavery necessarily meant slavery of *African Americans*. The Bible was thought to be silent on enslaving people of different races,³ and proslavery interpreters, equipped with a “self-confidence of moral intuitions on race” (Noll 1998, 61), simply assumed that slavery was necessary because of the superiority of Whites and that enslaving Blacks and other Nonwhites was stipulated in the biblical text. Without ever bringing the distinction between the categories of race and slavery to a conscious, examinable level of epistemological inquiry, defenders of slavery slipped facilely into defenders of White supremacy. As historian John Fea notes, “Slaveholders believed that their defense of a Christian civilization was directly connected to the purity of the white race” (2018, 103).

Reasons for confusing the categories of slavery and race are easy to trace if we follow their tribal reasoning. Since the distinction between slavery and race is never part of the tribe’s identity construction; the very boundaries drawn to protect members from outsiders requires that such distinction not be made. That is, Nonwhiteness and slavery become coterminous labels and that non-distinction becomes an item of faith for insiders. Once it is accepted that Whiteness requires a rejection of Nonwhiteness, this in turn produces a biblical interpretation that reinforces the superiority of insiders, thus advancing a Christian identity based strictly on Whiteness. In Paul James’s term, the knowledge thus produced “returns” to its starting point and allows for the reciprocal embodiment of that epistemological “discovery.” In this process of knowledge production, the biblical text was never allowed to question the Evangelical tribe’s assumption about why Blackness or Nonwhiteness should be equated with inferiority.

White Evangelicals’ obsession with rebuilding America as a Christian nation goes down the same epistemological blind alley and displays the same

² One indication that the doctrine of inerrancy is strictly an American phenomenon tied to the defence of slavery is that “it *had virtually no influence outside the country*, even among those who shared the conservative theology of proslavery defenders” (Noll 1998, 52; emphasis added). Noll also notes that “The American debate over the use of Scripture had almost no resonance outside the United States” (1998, 68 n.18).

³ This is, of course, not the case. Lev. 25:44-46 explicitly commands that the only slaves one is allowed to own must be from among the “nations [or Gentiles] around you.”

limitations. Since America was founded as a Christian nation, so goes the argument, it is only right and meet that they reclaim political power and “return” the United States to its Evangelical roots (Jeffress 2017b). The historical data yield a different picture, however (Boyd 2006; Fea 2016). Whether or not the United States was founded as a Christian nation became a hotly debated issue only recently. In the 1970s, all Americans—Evangelicals and non-Evangelicals alike—simply assumed they were living in a Christian nation (Fea 2018, 156); White Evangelicals began to press the issue, only when they perceived themselves to be under threat from the relaxation of immigration policies that brought more and more non-Westerners and non-Christians into the country (Fea 2019). This explains the White Evangelicals’ warm reception of Trump’s vilification of migrants seeking to cross the US border from Mexico, as well as his campaign promise to build a wall to keep potential migrants out (Wallnau 2016; Jeffress 2017a). Robert Jeffress, one of the earliest and most vocal Evangelical supporters of Trump, chose to speak about the book of Nehemiah for Trump’s inauguration sermon: “And the first step of rebuilding the nation was the building of a great wall. God instructed Nehemiah to build a wall around Jerusalem to protect its citizens from enemy attack. You see, God is NOT against building walls!” (Jeffress 2017a; emphasis original). The reason for White Evangelicals’ support of Trump is in line with other Trump supporters for whom cultural grievances and fear of losing status were the main reasons they voted for him (Mutz 2018).

As Fea observes, “Conservative evangelicals who sing the praises of America’s ‘Judeo-Christian heritage’ today, and those who yearn for a Christian golden age, are really talking about the *present* rather than the past” (2018, 160; emphasis added). Their epistemological search for America’s lost Christian past is motivated by an existential, embodied fear of losing their position in society. The knowledge so produced or “recovered” is a constructed America, run by people created in the image of modern-day White Evangelicals, and with none of the unpleasant arcana, such as taxes collected for a state church, doctrinal tests for officeholders, or Sabbath laws proscribing such things as alcohol consumption, sexual intercourse, or playing on Sundays (Fea 2018, 157). The rise of “Christian nationalism” among White Evangelicals (Whitehead-Perry-Baker 2018) is no accident: a study of their tribal epistemology reveals that such ideology is not peripheral, but is central to its constitution (Wallis 1997; Green 2015).⁴

⁴ In response to the White Evangelicals’ role in the American 2016 presidential election, Mark Labberton, president of Fuller Seminary, made the following statement:

The core of the crisis is not specifically about Trump, or Hillary, or Obama, or the electoral college, or Comey, or Mueller, or abortion, or LGBTQIA+ debates, or Supreme Court appointees. Instead the crisis is caused by the way a toxic evangelicalism has engaged with these issues in such a way as to turn the gospel into Good News that is fake. Now on public display is an indisputable collusion between prominent evangelicalism and many forms of insidious racist, misogynistic, materialistic, and political power. The wind and the rain and the floods have come, and, as Jesus said, they will reveal our foundation.

From the Body of Christ to a Hermeneutics of Dissent

The starting point for understanding Asian Americans as tribal is to accept that ethnicity is constructed and therefore malleable, flexible, and ultimately unstable (Wan 2000b, 2006; Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 9). “Asian American” is a political construct unique in the cultural and political life of the United States: “It was created in the West [read ‘America’] from the need to make racial categorizations in a racially divided or, at least, a racially diverse society” (Kim 1982: xii). “Asia” comes from a colonial construct that describes a huge landmass characterized only by its distinction from Europe, while “American” describes an amalgam of culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse peoples who, but for their common experience of American minoritization, have no ancestral connection to one another (Liu 2009; Yang 2012). Asian Americans nevertheless embrace the label (Hing 1993: 169), because it is politically advantageous. Once their interests “converge” (Bell 1980, 528-533; Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 20-24) with the powers that be who invented the category, the label then becomes politically necessary. This means that, while Asian Americans display characteristics of a tribe, they lack a stable foundation to be permanently tribal. The group’s *raison d’être* and cohesion depend on external threats and stimuli. As a situationally constructed political group, Asian Americans can adopt what Angela Harris calls “strategic identities” that can shift as the context demands and as relations change (Harris 1990, 610-612). Affirming the diversity *within* the many ethnicities under the Asian American umbrella, as well as their myriad relationships to the dominant cultures and other differently minoritized groups, is precisely what is needed to combat the perils of essentialism and to escape the blind alley of tribal inquiry.

A reading strategy appropriate to Asian Americans must subsequently honour the internal diversity represented by the label, while maintaining some form of group cohesion, no matter how transitory that might be. This means interrogating and embracing the productive inconsistencies, disagreements, disputes, dissensions, and even outright contradictions that are already encoded in the text itself. Biblical writings speak in diverse voices; more important, they modulate, correct, critique, and even reject each other, all within the canonical boundaries. Instead of reading the Bible as an inerrant monolith for the purpose of reinforcing tribalist praxis, a *hermeneutics of dissent* constructs group identity by noting and embracing diversity internal to a group and by maintaining openness to outsiders. When a hermeneutics of dissent is practiced by Asian Americans, it necessitates an acceptance of the different traditions that make up the political bloc called Asian Americans, a cognizance of the common forces from the outside that exert on Asian Americans, and a vigilant evaluation of that group identity.

In this moment for evangelicalism, what the storms have exposed is a foundation not of solid rock but of sand.” (2018).

A hermeneutics of dissent is encoded in Paul's development of the body of Christ image in his letters. Most scholars are content with staying with only 1 Cor. 12:4-30, but his discussion in Romans 12 actually provides a corrective, and we risk seriously misinterpreting the image without taking it into account. As always, the different contexts between Paul's two discussions are critical. Paul's purpose in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is to resolve a problem that was first brought to his attention through Chloe's people (1 Cor. 1:11), and this problem is "almost certainly an *abuse* of the gift of tongue" that spurs elitism and disrupts worship (Fee 1987, 570-571). In the extended discussion in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul elevates interpretation above glossolalia (1 Cor. 14:28) to stress that the ability to speak the language of angels (1 Cor. 13:1), or "the mystery in the spirit" (1 Cor. 14:2),⁵ might benefit the speakers but no one else, while intelligible speech benefits the whole assembly (1 Cor. 14:2-4; Wire 1990, 140-141). Paul does not wish to deny the prestige of speaking in tongues, just its elitist, antisocial nature.

To persuade the Corinthians to accept his point of view, Paul appeals to their tribal identity, by reminding them what they left behind to become who they are: "You know that when you were Gentiles (*ethnē*; NRSV "pagans"), you were being led while being led astray to speechless idols" (1 Cor. 12:2). Paul's words here mark the boundaries beyond which the Corinthians should not retreat. His placement of "therefore" (*dio*) in an emphatic position in the following verse looks ahead to how their present identity should inform what they must do: "Therefore, I am telling you that no one speaking in the Spirit of God says, 'Let Jesus be cursed...'" (1 Cor 12:3). The relationship between vv.2 and 3 has vexed many commentators (e.g. Barrett 1968, 279-280; Fee 1987, 578-582), but the series of contrasts set up by these two verses point to the eschatological Spirit. Whereas, while they were "Gentiles" the Corinthians were led to idols, now they participate "in the Spirit of God, the holy Spirit." Paul's words are literally, "you were being led while being led astray" (*ēgesthe apagomenoi*) to highlight the doubly passive character of worshiping false gods. Formerly they served "speechless (*aphōna*) idols" that, by implication, also rendered them speechless; now being in the holy Spirit gives them a voice to confess that Jesus is the lord.

This emphasis on the Spirit allows Paul to codeswitch from the Corinthians' own terminology of "spiritual things" (*pneumatika*; 1 Cor. 12:1) to describe their newfound powers, chief among them glossolalia, to "gifts" (*charismata* 1 Cor 12:4). There is debate whether *peri tōn pneumatikōn* ("concerning the spiritual things or persons") is masculine, referring to the pneumatics, or neuter, referring to the mighty works the pneumatics are able to perform as the result of their spiritual endowment. But since Paul is, above all, addressing concerns in 1 Cor. 12-14 about speaking in tongues, it seems more consistent to the subject matter to take the latter option. If so, by using the term *charismata* in 1 Cor. 12:4, Paul goes out of his way to reject

⁵ I am responsible for all translations unless noted otherwise.

the Corinthians' construction of their prowess as an endowment by the Spirit in order to stress the giftedness of their extra-human abilities (Thiselton 2000, 930; Wan 2009a). The word *charisma*, literally "result of grace," had not yet become a technical term. Paul's use of the term outside the context of 1 Corinthians mostly retains the normal meaning of "favour bestowed, gift" (Rom. 1:11; 5:15, 16; 6:23; 11:29; 2 Cor. 1:11; see BDAG 2000, 1081). In fact, in Rom. 1:11, Paul has to qualify *charisma* with *pneumatikon* in order to distinguish it from any other ordinary gift. In Rom. 12:6, in a passage covering an identical topic, Paul qualifies *charismata* with "according to the grace that was given to us," reinforcing the etymological derivation of the word (*charis*) and using the divine passive *dotheisa* to remind his audience that the source of these gifts is ultimately traced to God. In choosing *charismata*, therefore, Paul tries to shift the Corinthians' focus away from their extraordinary abilities and onto the source itself, namely "the *same* spirit." And that introduces his main topic in the next subsection (1 Cor. 12:4-11).

The subsection begins with three sentences of identical structure, with the last disclosing more details (1 Cor. 12:4-6):

There are varieties of gifts,
but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services,
but the same lord;
and there are varieties of activities (*energēmata*),
but the same God,
who activates (*energōn*) all [activities] in all [people].

In each of the three sentences, "varieties" is followed by "same," leaving the impression that Paul's real intention in discussing these gifts is to balance an abundance of differences with an emphasis on sameness. This impression is confirmed at the conclusion of the subsection: "*The one and the same Spirit* activates (*energei*) all these [=charismata], distributing to each one's own as it [i.e. the Spirit] wills" (1 Cor. 12:11; emphasis added). The verb *energein* ("to activate") picks up the same usage in 1 Cor. 12:6, and the two verses form an *inclusio*, bracketing everything in between. The phrases, "in the *same* Spirit" and "in the *one* Spirit," are reiterated in 1 Cor. 12:9 just for good measure.

In 1 Cor. 12:7, Paul writes, "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each" in order to promote *to sympheron*. The neuter participle *to sympheron* means "profit, advantage" (BDAG 2000, 960) but to no one in particular. A host of manuscripts, including a correction to the Codex Sinaiticus, have added *sympheron* to 1 Cor. 10:33 to read "my own benefit," and the author of the Epistle to Barnabas has to make the public nature of the word explicit when he uses it to mean "the public good" (*to koinē sympheron*; 4:10). Nevertheless, *sympheron* was commonly used in inscriptions to commemorate the public good contributed by Greco-Roman benefactors (for references see BDAG 2000, 960). Paul himself, with his twice-repeated

rejoinder, “All things are permissible [to me]’ but not all things benefit (*sympherei*)” (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23), already established the public character of the verb. It is, therefore, entirely justified to translate *to sympheron* as “the common good.”

All of this tells us that Paul takes the body of Christ as a symbol of unity, rather than an affirmation of differences. His opening statement equates the oneness of the body with Christ: “For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body, being many, are one body, so also Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12). The comparison set up by “just as ... so also” is between “body” and “Christ,” making it impossible to ignore the conclusion that “body of Christ” should be read as “body *which is* Christ,” where the genitive is one of apposition (Fitzmyer 1993). The oneness of Christ is then extended to “one Spirit,” by which “we all have been baptized into one body” and “one Spirit [which] we have been given to drink” (1 Cor. 12:13). Only after he establishes the premise of the body’s oneness does Paul enter into a consideration of the many functions and abilities of the body (1 Cor. 12:14-26).

Paul’s view accords with the widespread use of the body metaphor “to promote social unity by maintaining existing property and social relations and discouraging conflict” (Martin 1991, 564). At issue was the maintenance of the same mind (*homonoia*), which Paul shares with his contemporaries: the various organs depend on each other for the body to function properly (1 Cor. 12:15-21). What sets him apart is that he insists on turning the underlying hierarchy on its head, literally and metaphorically speaking, by moving lower down. As is richly documented in Dale Martin’s work, Greek writers from Aristotle onwards have argued that the top-down view of the government acting as the head and governing the rest should be regarded as “given” or “natural” (Martin 1991, 564-566; especially 564 n. 33). But Paul reverses that hierarchy by calling “the weaker members of the body ... necessary,” so that we “clothe with exceedingly greater (*perissoteros*) honour those members of the body that we deem to be ignoble” (1 Cor. 12:22-23a). There is little doubt what Paul is referring to here, because in the next breath he adds, “and our unrepresentable members have exceedingly greater (*perissoteros*) beauty” (1 Cor. 12:23b), setting up a word-play between “unrepresentable” (*aschēmōn*) and “beauty” (*euschēmosynē*). The adjective *aschēmōn* refers to “[what] is not openly done, displayed, or discussed in reserved society because it is considered ‘shameful, unrepresentable, indecent,’ or ‘unmentionable’”; simply put, it is a euphemism for the genitals (BDAG 2000, 147). Paul thus reverses the prevailing understanding that nature assigns the strong higher status in the social and political hierarchy (Martin 1991, 569). By contrast, God—not nature—has “harmoniously composed [*synekerasen*] the body by giving exceedingly greater [*perissoteran*] honour to the inferior [*hysteroumenō*]synkerannynai (“to mix together”) points to the creative act of God in composing the human body and, by extension, order in social relations. *Hysterein* is a relational term that refers to members who are not inherently weak but who are lower in

status, particularly social standing, only when compared to others (BDAG 2000, 1043). Yet, God has given them “exceedingly greater” (*perissoteros*) honour, recapitulating the reasoning established in 1 Cor. 12:23.

To address the factions in the Corinthian congregation, Paul promotes the ancient idea of *concordia* (“harmony”) by means of the body principle. While the strong and high-status members might appeal to a hierarchy based on nature, Paul insists that a body demonstrates its harmoniousness by treating low-status members with “exceedingly greater” honour. While all things might be permissible, not all things are beneficial. A body is as strong as its ability to treat its weakest members with respect. By using the common body metaphor, Paul makes use of—in terms of the categories established earlier—the principles of “genealogical placement” (to establish the tribal identity of the Corinthians) and “embodied reciprocity” (to maintain the relations between members of the same tribe). By instructing them that the “spiritual power” they so highly prize finds its source in the *same* Spirit, Paul appeals to the common genealogy they all share with each other and locates their common origins, not in nature or in kinship, but in the unpredictable Spirit. They all belong to each other and to the same body, which is Christ. He severs their linkage to the past by reminding them that they are no longer “Gentiles,” and that they have acquired a new identity because of the Spirit. Inasmuch as they “were being led while being led away” by idols in the past (1 Cor. 12:2), they are now in thrall to the Spirit of God, as evidenced by the observable proof that they do not curse Jesus but confess him as lord (1 Cor. 12:3). This new identity, however, implies an ethic of relational exchange. Because status in the new tribe is not so much achieved as it is ascribed, members are not simply assigned to an abstract position in a faceless hierarchy, with no thoughts of who might occupy the other positions. Instead, all members must relate to each other as equal-status recipients of the Spirit’s gift. If “*reciprocity ... can be defined as exchange of goods within a network of exchange relations that carries the ‘spirit’ of face-to-face integration between the persons involved in exchange*” (James 2006, 105; emphasis original), relations between members is “embodied,” in the sense that it is reflected in and refracted by each member’s embodiment of the Spirit-giver. In so doing, Paul has reinforced the tribal identity of the Corinthians.

Having thus established a tribal identity, Paul subverts it with his discussion in Rom. 12:3-8. The premise of Romans is different from that of 1 Corinthians. Paul specifically addresses Gentiles who became leaders of the fledgling congregation after Claudius had expelled its Jewish leaders from Rome, but who saw themselves as legitimate heirs poised to replace the returning leaders.⁶ To resolve this problem, Paul discloses a vision in which Jews and Gentiles are still kept distinct—hence the oft-repeated phrase, “to the Jew first then to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16; 2:9, 10; 3:9; also 10:12)—but they

⁶ On Paul’s intended audience being Gentile, see Stowers (1994, 29-36); Elliott (2008, 19, 177 n.67); Lampe (2003, 70 n.3). On Gentiles as converts to Judaism, see Wan (2009b).

have been incorporated into the eternal covenant, symbolized by the olive tree (Rom. 11:17-24). Paul signals to his Gentile audience that they have been grafted onto a Jewish tree, of which they would have no part were it not for divine grace. God's plan has always been the salvation of "all Israel," when the "fullness of Gentiles has come in" at the end time (Rom. 11:25-26). Gentiles (former enemies of God) are granted entry when the boundaries that kept them out are being extended outwards to include them (Rom. 5:10; see Wan 2000a). Consequently, distinctions between insiders and outsiders are fluid, even though Jews and Gentiles remain distinct. It is at this point where Paul offers his instructions to the Roman congregation on the body of Christ.

It is immediately striking how much briefer Paul's treatment is here. There is no critique of the body hierarchy, no mention of "one Spirit," "one lord," or "one God" activating all things in all people. There is no mention even of the signature phrase, "body of Christ," in Romans 12, only "one body in Christ" (Rom. 12:5; contra 1 Cor. 12:27). It is not hard to conclude that, in contrast to his earlier discussion in 1 Corinthians 12, the stress here is not placed on unity but on the diverse "practices" (*praxeis*; Rom. 12:4) within the body. Compare how the theme of one body with diverse members is introduced in the two passages:

For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body, being many, are one body, so also Christ. (1 Cor. 12:12)

For just as we have in one body many members, and all the members do not have the same practice, so we the many are one body in Christ, each one a member of others. (Rom. 12:4-5)

Whereas "one body which is Christ" is placed in the emphatic position in 1 Cor. 12:12, in Romans 12 the stress is put on individual membership within that body. The remainder of the passage enumerates a list of "different gifts" (*charismata ... diaphora*) with minimal elaboration (Rom. 12:6-8). Paul's concern here is to single out the individuals and to put the emphasis on the diversity within the body.

As usual, the context makes all the difference. As an introduction, Paul calls attention to the individuality of each member with a clumsy but effective phrase, "to everyone who is among you" (Rom. 12:3). He then introduces a concept found nowhere else in his letters: "To each has God *apportioned a measure of faith*" (*emerisen metron pisteōs*; Rom. 12:3), with "each" placed in an emphatic position. In 2 Cor. 10:13, he speaks of God who "apportioned (*emerisen*) to us ... the measure (*metron*) of rule" in reference to the different territories assigned to the different apostles, with "rule" (*kanōn*) here perhaps alluding to the agreement reached in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9). But Paul never uses faith as something quantifiable, either in its objective state as trustworthiness (of God or of Christ), or in its subjective meaning as total surrendering to God's election. It is probably better to take *pisteōs* ("of faith") in Rom. 12:3 as a genitive of origins, referring to our

obedience to God as the starting point for the apportionment of grace, and *metron* as “the norm that each person is provided in the appropriation of the grace of God” (Jewett 2006, 742; contra Dunn 1998, 719-720). The expression is therefore equivalent to “the grace that has been given to us,” which results in the different gifts each of us have been apportioned (Rom. 12:6).

While the different practices are evident within the body, borders delimiting it are uncharacteristically porous. Just as in 1 Corinthians 12-14, the different gifts are followed by an elaboration on “genuine love” (Rom. 12:9a), which redefines the shape, character, and even boundaries of the body. It requires “abhorring the evil, embracing the good” (Rom. 12:9b-c), with the implication that “distinguishing between the ‘evil’ and the ‘good’ is the means by which love is kept ‘genuine’” (Jewett 2006, 760). But Paul makes the distinction in order to weaken it, for he uses “good” and “evil” primarily as sociological categories that demarcate insiders from outsiders. “Embracing good” means “devoting to one another in brotherly and sisterly love, holding each other in high esteem” (Rom. 12:10). Similarly, Paul marks zeal, fervency, hope, affliction, and prayer (Rom. 12:11-12), not as virtues but as communal functions, epitomized by “sharing the needs of the saints, pursue hospitality” (Rom. 12:13). *Philoxenia* (“hospitality”) is a well-known virtue, but what makes it unique here is its absolute usage with no restriction to the object of hospitality and no reference to reward. Abraham’s reception of the three angels (Genesis 18) is the paradigm of hospitality in biblical literature, but Paul makes no use of “entertaining angels” as enticement (contra Heb. 13:2). Instead he uses an aggressive verb, *diōkein* (“to pursue or to persecute”), to make hospitality an active goal. The body must pursue hospitality with “vigorous intentionality” (Jewett 2006, 765), taking care to receive outsiders with no distinction and with no reward as motivation. Members practice it because of its inherent goodness. They do it because receiving strangers is the result of authentic love.

With this, Paul transitions to “abhorring the evil,” because once unconditional love towards strangers becomes a reality, the wall that keeps outsiders out crumbles, and enemies become indistinguishable from friends. The evil to be eliminated is enmity itself. In the next verse, Paul says, “Bless those who persecute, bless and not curse” (Rom. 12:14), deliberately using *diōkein* again in order to link blessing to the pursuit of hospitality. Some manuscripts have added “you” (i.e. “those who persecute you”), thus making these words into a situational response to persecution. But Paul’s injunction is broader and more absolute: Bless *all persecutors*. At stake is the true character of the body of Christ: its formation depends on our “being reconciled to God through the death of his son, *while we were enemies*” (Rom. 5:10). But if the body owes its existence to God’s reconciliation with enemies, then the enemy lines are blurred and enmity is nullified. Paul’s instruction here occupies the same space as Jesus’s “love your enemy!” Authentic love hollows out hostility and turns tribalism inside out. It is through enfleshing this inside-out love that the true character of the body of Christ is embodied. Read in this light, the instructions of Rom. 12:15-20—all linked syntactically

to “bless the persecutors” of Rom. 12:4—should be taken as principles governing how the body of Christ should behave towards the world (Dunn 1988, 2.755). Romans 12:15-17 is an expression of solidarity with strangers, enemies, and outsiders who might even do us harm: “To rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep, being mindful of the same thing with each other, not being mindful of the haughty but accommodating to the lowly, not repaying evil for evil but considering what is noble before all.” Tribalism that excludes is not permitted. We must be agents of peace “with all people” (Rom. 12:18) and turn ourselves inside out to allow the character of the body of Christ to spill into the world. “To be at peace” (*eirēneuein*) usually refers to peace within a community in the New Testament and early Christian literature. In Mark 9:50 and 1 Thess. 5:13, being at peace is delimited by “among each other or yourselves,” and internal peace is implied in 2 Cor. 13:11 (also *Shepherd of Hermas* 2:3). The only parallel is found in Heb. 12:14, “pursue (*diōkein*) peace with all,” with “all” referring to outsiders who have no knowledge of God, but its usage there is dictated by the author’s apologetic concerns. This makes Paul’s instructions to live peacefully with all people here in Romans 12 highly unusual if not unique.⁷

The rationale for this inside-out love is provided in the next two verses. We should not take vengeance into our hands because that is God’s exclusive arena, so we must “give space to divine wrath” (Rom 12:19). The body must practice inside-out love by feeding our enemies. In 12:20, Paul approvingly cites Prov. 25:21-22 (“If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him drink. For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will repay you with good things”) but with a twist. He replaces the last line on reward with, “Do not let yourself be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). Feeding our enemies must be practiced with no enticement of reward, because it issues forth from our inner character. It is also part of a strategy that seeks to defeat enmity with inside-out love—by feeding the enemies, blessing the persecutors, and crossing enemy lines to welcome them into your fold. The aim of inside-out love is not to enlarge one’s territories, but to surrender in order to render the idea of territory meaningless. This is as anti-tribal as any idea could conceivably be.

When these passages are studied side by side, Paul’s discussion of the body of Christ discloses an inconsistent, self-contradictory vision. In 1 Corinthians 12, it is a shining symbol of tribal unity that gives Paul a tool to deal with the bitter factions in the assembly. He overturns the usual hierarchy associated with a political body, to be sure, but in the end, the boundaries around the Christ-tribe are tightly drawn. *Concordia* is achieved at the expense of isolating the body from outsiders. The Corinthians are reminded in no uncertain terms that what they left behind belonged to their past lives when, as “Gentiles,” they were manipulated and “led by being led

⁷ Epictetus likewise urges that “[we] make peace with all people” as a philosophical ideal (4.5.24; cited in Dunn 1988, 2.748).

astray” towards dumb idols. What they face now is the spectre of a new identity, a new corporate body, and a new master. Members within the same body might display different manifestations of their spiritual prowess, but they are all issued from and by the same Spirit, and are all results of grace.

The extended discussion of corporate life in Romans 12 takes the body of Christ in a new and opposite direction. Within the body, differences between members are to be respected, even celebrated. The identity of the body does not depend on a renunciation of the past, or even those beyond its borders. While the language of grace is retained, it does not point beyond itself to the power behind it; it is, instead, the basis for differentiation. These same manifestations as witnessed in 1 Corinthians are now quantifiable and can be measured and weighed, so that whatever might be the “practice,” it must be exercised to the fullest extent. Most surprising, attitudes towards outsiders are radically different. By instructing his audience to love their enemies and to bless persecutors, Paul calls into question the distinction between outsiders and insiders and the very idea of enmity itself. This is a consistent view in Romans: Paul formulates the identity of the Christ-tribe as “former enemies,” with whom God has taken the initiative to reconcile. This new identity necessitates insiders “returning” to their former selves and, in so doing, keeping the border porous and indistinct. Paul’s tribal vision in Romans 12 thus contains seeds of its own demise.

This hermeneutics of dissent is necessary for Asian Americans because of the way in which *their* group identity is formed. The identity is borne out of a political necessity that has turned out to be productive, but its tribal identity is a fluid one because its formation is inherently unstable and it is working towards its own dissolution. Asian Americans are made up of peoples of disparate backgrounds and ancestral allegiances. The name itself is dependent on two identifiers that are freighted with colonial impositions and overtones. The existence of the group is subsequently situational, formulated in response to environmental factors over which it has little or no control. The Asian American identity is, in reality, a shifting collection of “strategic identities” that resemble each other only because of the common experience of minoritization. Nevertheless, its internal contradictions are also its unique strength, because its identity is not internally generated but must be tested against knowledge generated outside these identity boundaries. Any “embodied knowledge” that “returns” to itself must traverse outside its group boundaries and be critiqued and modulated by each constituent group’s cultural heritage and political gains. The intra-Asian American differences and the concomitant dissent generated therefrom turn out to be the redemption of the Asian American identity.

By contrast, the White Evangelicals’ production of knowledge is generated internally from a sense of entitlement. It is based on a White/Nonwhite binary that marks a permanent border separating insiders from outsiders. Such a binary reinforces and is, in turn, reinforced by a tribalist appropriation of the body of 1 Corinthians 12, while ignoring the

dissenting vision of the body in Romans 12. The result is a hermeneutics that produces a view of the world divided into binaries, including White/Nonwhite, saved/lost, and body of Christ/outside. Because their tribal identity is internally generated, the embodied knowledge produced therefrom is incapable of interrogating its underlying premises. A successful production of knowledge would only strengthen their inherited sense of entitlement and exceptionalism, and would further solidify the border walls they erect to keep insiders in and outsiders out.

Nevertheless, the tribal nature of White Evangelicalism is at odds with their aspirations, which are to impose an *internally negotiated* knowledge on the larger public outside their identity boundaries. Their participation in the US political process is accompanied by the stated goals of repealing legislation that protects reproductive and marriage equality rights, as well as reinstating school prayers and similar laws that favour Protestantism over other religions and Christian denominations. While all interest groups, including groups with deep, overt religious orientations, aim to effect legal changes that would advance their causes, the danger of White Evangelicals lies in their unexamined and unacknowledged privilege that is coterminous with their Whiteness. Even though they consciously and self-consciously construct their identity as a self-contained subculture that is removed and insulated from mainstream society—complete with well-defined boundaries erected to reinforce the insider-outsider binary—their Whiteness grants them easy access to the corridors of power that are denied to Nonwhites. This systemic advantage that American culture grants them—White privilege—must be disavowed and never openly acknowledged, for exposure would dismantle the boundaries that have been drawn for the purpose of protecting tribal identity. Political gains in the American system have to be explained—“returned”—to insiders as the result of the collective efforts of the tribe, in order to maintain the integrity of the constructed identity and, more importantly, to confirm the fundamental correctness of their tribal knowledge. Success in the public arena is understood as the triumph of carefully preserved doctrines, even if it can be easily demonstrated, to outside observers at least, that the power thus garnered is a product of structural biases based more on their Whiteness than on their Evangelicalism. The result is a perpetuation and propagation of a White nationalism cloaked in theological and biblical garb. The White Evangelicals’ support of Donald Trump’s ascent to the American presidency in 2016 is a case in point. Even after it has been amply demonstrated that his electoral victory was largely dependent on White grievances and White nationalism, White Evangelicals still steadfastly maintain that their success and subsequent access to political power are the result of doctrinal purity.

Against the deleterious potentials of tribalism, the Asian American insistence on porous, transitional, fluid borders based on shifting strategic identities becomes an urgent and necessary corrective. By foregrounding the inherent instability of constructed ethnicities, the Asian American project rejects the permanence of tribal identity. While identity and ethnic

constructions are necessary at times under certain circumstances, they must remain pliant, malleable, mutable, and temporary. They must be open to a future that includes erstwhile outsiders heretofore banished from the centre. This radical openness challenges all constructions that claim to be objective and systematic by exposing them as tribal, and as contrived artifice based on facile assumptions about the superiority of one ethnic tribe to all others.

Conclusion

More than a quarter of a century ago, legal scholar Robert S. Chang criticized critical race theory for “[claiming] that race matters but [failing to show] how different races matter differently” (Chang 1993, 1248). Chang’s criticism was mainly directed at the Black-White binary that characterized earlier iterations of the theory. Such a binary is, at heart, an essentialism: it reduces the multiplicity of races and ethnicities to non-differentiated White and Black, as if the diverse forms of oppression and the diverse experiences of minoritization could be flattened into a faceless sameness. I have dubbed this phenomenon the “myth of sameness” (Wan 2000b, 2009b, 2014). In fact, as I have argued above, the instability inherent in an amalgam of diverse races and ethnicities is what safeguards a movement or any social or ethnic construct from becoming destructively tribal.

Taking this criticism to heart in a 2017 edition of *Critical Race Theory*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic note the potentials of intersectionality between races and ethnicities that have been minoritized by the dominant culture. They thus redefine critical race theory accordingly:

The goal of a “unified” group may not reflect exactly those of certain factions within it, yet the larger group benefits from their participation of the increased numbers they bring ... It takes a multitude of the oppressed to make their voices heard and felt. But what about the voices that do not fit into one single category of oppression? ... These issues are particularly acute regarding inter- and intraminority relations and tensions. (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 63-64)

As shown in this study, it is precisely the “intraminority relations and tensions” that are capable of breaking the tightly spun vicious cycle between identity and knowledge. This can be illustrated by Chang’s original proposal to distinguish the three stages of responses to oppression (Chang 1993, 1315-1322). Stage one is characterized by a *denial* of racial and ethnic differences between Asian Americans and dominant cultures, and a reliance on the classic liberal principle of formal equality. Though this race-neutral strategy has had some successes in the past, it is widely derided nowadays for encouraging the goal of cultural assimilation and for ignoring the widespread refusal of the White majority to accept Asian Americans as fully-

fledged Americans.⁸ While few would deny that, after long and intense struggles, African Americans are Americans, in contrast, Asian Americans are still singled out for their phenotypes, supposed work ethics and successes, non-American accents (perceived or otherwise), and customs, among other things. One need look no further than the torrent of violence directed against Asian Americans during the outbreak of COVID-19 (Yam 2020): that they should be held responsible for a “*China virus*” (itself a racist trope) speaks volumes to Asian Americans being racialized as foreigners.

Failure to fully recognize Asian Americans *as* Americans makes it necessary to move to Chang’s stage two: *affirming* the differences between Asian Americans and others. This implies a strategy of not just accepting but especially *using* such differences productively and constructively. What makes this possible is the simultaneous recognition that Asian Americans are different vis-à-vis the dominant culture, and that American culture is diverse and pluralistic. Chang’s final stage of *liberation* points to a future when these differences are better assessed historically and ideologically so as to be transcended. The key for liberation lies with the pragmatic nature of Asian Americans who are adept at applying “multiple consciousness” to deal with different contexts in different guises.

Today we are coming to terms with the realistic prospect that true liberation of the final stage might never come to pass, and we are permanently stuck at the stage of affirming differences between Asian Americans and others, especially the dominant group. That is a blessing in disguise. As true liberation is deferred to the indefinite future, it becomes an eschatological goal that serves, among other things, to critique and counterbalance an over-confidence in the permanence of tribal identity. White Evangelicals have shown us the pitfalls of a tribal identity *without* eschatology and a confidence in one’s entitlements *without* the ability to sublimate them into something larger and broader. The decisive electoral defeat of Donald J. Trump in the 2020 US presidential election testifies to the limitations of White Evangelicals’ tribalism. In spite of their unwavering support the last four years, or perhaps because of it, more than eighty million voters resoundingly rejected Trump’s tribalist policy and, along with it, White Evangelicals’ vision of a White Christian nationalism. The future of the American experiment belongs to the type of intra-diversity as exemplified by the amalgam known as Asian Americans. It provides a model for how strategic but impermanent tribalism can be empowering and constructive, as long as such tribalism contains its own demise.

⁸The experience related by Amy Liu, that she was denied the American part of her identity by the English (Liu 2009), can be replicated in varying forms in the lives of all but the most sheltered Asian Americans.

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