Introduction to the Special Section on American Buddhism, Race, and Power

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To say that the United States is experiencing a tumultuous existential crisis of cultural and political identity may, indeed, be an understatement. Race, especially, is at the heart of many current cultural divides and political battles. From debates over Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, to fearmongering over Critical Race Theory (CRT) in public schools, to racialized policies over citizenship and immigration, the United States is facing a racial reckoning in nearly every corner of society. While race is by no means the only factor of American societal divisiveness, race is surely what Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe as a "master category—a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States."[1] As much as many Americans would like to believe that we live in a post-racial society, evidence of systemic racism and instances of deep racial strife persist. Manifestly, the issues of racialized difference and systemic racism are too deeply rooted in American history and cultural identity to easily dismiss.

This is what Buddhist scholars, leaders, and activists describe as America's racial karma: the persistence of racial iniquities and inequities from American history that continue to uphold systems of racial injustice. Larry Ward defines America's racial karma as the continuing manifestation of racial trauma and racialized consciousness, both individually and collectively. He writes, "The seed of racialized consciousness and its karmic effects are part of the very fabric of American life,

1. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2015), 106.

so much so that many don't know how to breathe outside the climate of white supremacy."[2] The political and cultural strife American society now experiences is not the consequence of any one politician, cultural event, or ideology. Rather, we are experiencing the penalties of decades and centuries of unresolved racial injustice. American Buddhist institutions, communities, and individuals are not exempt from the pervasive influences of America's racial karma. Scholars of American Buddhism over the past two decades have recognized and researched many intersections of American Buddhism and race, but if the current political climate is any indication, there is clearly still much work to be done.

With this in mind, I organized and moderated a panel for the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in 2023, co-sponsored by the Buddhism in the West unit and the Asian North American Religion, Culture, and Society (ANARCS) unit.[3] The express purpose of this panel was to bring together junior scholars of American Buddhism to critically reflect on the unique positionality and practice of Buddhism at the intersection of race and power in the United States. Indebted to the existing scholarship on Buddhism and race, this panel highlighted the new perspectives, themes, and theoretical frameworks embraced by emerging scholars of American Buddhism. This special section of *The Pacific World* is a continuation of the conversations initiated by that AAR panel. While not all the participants of that panel are contributors to this special section, nor were all the contributors to this section participants on that panel, this purpose remains the same: to consider deeply and widely the manifold manifestations of race in American society and history, recognizing there is much more work to be done to understand how American Buddhism fits into, is shaped by, and influences America's collective racial karma.

In the first essay of this section, Kirby Sokolow, PhD candidate in religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania, explores the relationship between American Buddhist prison programs and political

2. Larry Ward, *America's Racial Karma: An Invitation to Heal* (Parallax Press, 2020), 88.

3. "Buddhism, Race, Power, and Solidarity in North America," co-sponsored by the Buddhism in the West unit and the Asian North American Religion, Culture, and Society unit, annual conference of the American Academy of Religion, San Antonio, TX, November 19, 2023.

constructions of both Buddhism and incarceration. She utilizes the concept of "Buddhist exceptionalism" to describe how many of these Buddhist prison programs frame Buddhism dichotomously with criminality, defining the reforming power of Buddhism for individual converts in contradistinction with the base criminality of general prison populations. As expedient as this may be for imprisoned Buddhists to assert their improved character and fight for their rights, this framing also reinforces long historical and deep systemic racial ideologies of inherent criminality and disciplinary punishment. Moreover, the ways that these Buddhist prison chaplains and inmates describe the reforming power of Buddhism perpetuates the racialized and Orientalized construction of Asian religions. Nevertheless, Sokolow concludes her article with potent examples of American Buddhists who reject the discourse of individual Buddhist exceptionalism, working instead to dismantle the structural inequalities of the carceral system. In this way, Buddhist prison chaplains, advocates, and activists have great potential to address directly the racial karma of America's history, laws, and politics of incarceration.

In a similar way, Girim Jung, assistant professor of religion at Wesleyan College, argues that the normative academic and popular perceptions of Buddhism and race in the United States hinder Asian–Black Buddhist community and solidarity. Drawing from a wide range of academic fields, disciplines, and theoretical frameworks, Jung explores the complex entanglements of Black American and Asian American religious subjectivities with broader American history and culture. In so doing, he demonstrates how both Asianness and Blackness in the United States are often interpolated through whiteness, both academically and popularly, such that Asian American and Black American collective identities are built into existing racialized hierarchies. The prevalence of systemic white normativity and supremacy, what Jung refers to as vertical epistemic violence, makes horizontal relationality with other minoritized groups difficult. Jung highlights the works of Rima Vesley-Flad and Chenxing Han to suggest practical steps for reorienting Buddhist communities of color toward religio-racial solidarity, especially by addressing US systemic anti-Blackness, dismantling the two-Buddhisms paradigm, and embracing international and liberative frameworks of community.

The final essay in this section brings a new perspective to the problem of America's racial karma. Like Sokolow and Jung, Elaine Lai,

lecturer of religious studies at Stanford University, recognizes the persistent force of America's racial past in the current moment. However, she goes further to suggest that the fundamental obstacle to addressing historic and societal injustices is the dominant American political narrative of progress. Rooted in Christian teleology, American political perspectives of time are often linear, deterministic (or, perhaps providential), and progressive. Consequently, there is a prevailing cultural expectation that the natural direction of history is inevitable progress and eventual eschatological justice. Lai contends that a shifting in perspectives of time, particularly reorienting towards Buddhist conceptions of samsaric time, is an important step toward both recognizing how political narratives shape social action or inaction and addressing the multifarious factors of systemic racism. Instead of proposing any single alternative or solution, Lai offers glimpses into Buddhist literature and other liberative hermeneutics to defamiliarize normative narratives and unfold the potential for narrative multiplicity. It is in this process of experiencing, experimenting, and empathizing with different narratives that we can learn to sit with the discomfort of America's racial trauma and develop true liberative interconnection.

These three essays present a continuation of the valuable existing research and conversations on American Buddhism and race, but they are also a call and an encouragement for greater attention and analysis to the many ways American Buddhism is implicated in America's racial karma. These essays remind us that America's racial strife and structural inequality are not accidental, but are rather the cumulative result of intentions, actions, and consequences repeated over generations. Yet, as Larry Ward and other Buddhist thinkers remind us, karma is not fate. This is a process that can be transformed, a pattern that can take new shape. By bringing attention to how racial dynamics manifest in sanghas, prisons, popular culture, and politics, these essays seek to offer new perspectives and analyses that have the potential to interrupt cycles of harm and cultivate more equitable communities. Despite the many political forces that are intent on silencing all discussion of race, racism, and critiques of America's racist history, we claim our collective responsibility to address and attend to America's racial karma as scholars of American Buddhism. It is our hope that these essays inspire more scholarship that works toward the liberation of all beings, shining brighter lights on the ignorance and avoidance of America's racial injustice, shame, and trauma.