Buddhist Exceptionalism behind Bars

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ABSTRACT

Many Buddhist programs in US prisons focus on reforming incarcerated people. Often the leaders of these programs celebrate their incarcerated students for undergoing extraordinary transformations from so-called angry prisoners into calm and compassionate bodhisattvas. Those deemed exceptional may attain celebrity status and often receive privileges both within prison and from outside supporters, such as nationwide protests on their behalf and superior, pro-bono legal resources. This article explores discourses of Buddhist exceptionalism, which raise up some incarcerated people as extraordinary but relegate others to an undifferentiated, unrepentant mass of "inmates" or "criminals" deserving punishment. As not only Buddhist leaders but also journalists and celebrities repeat these discourses, they normalize the US's ongoing racialized system of mass incarceration and the disenfranchisement of people trapped inside.

Keywords: Buddhist modernism, United States, prison, exceptionalism, racialization, individualism

After eight years of journeying into New York State prisons, teaching incarcerated people about the Dharma, fighting red tape, and ministering to people on death row, Kobutsu Malone's approach to Buddhism behind bars changed radically. Since 1992, Malone's organization, the Engaged Zen Foundation, had focused on teaching people in US prisons about karma and no-self and transforming them from "angry and abusive inmate[s]" into "warm and caring individual[s]" through zazen meditation.[1] In 2000, however, Malone "greatly changed

1. Letter from Kobutsu Malone to State of Arkansas Clemency Board, May 5, 1996, ID: apap208, Engaged Zen Foundation Records, M.E. Grenander

the mission statement of Engaged Zen Foundation" from an organization "concerned exclusively with fostering contemplative practice in prisons" to one dedicated to prison abolition.[2] In the Summer 2003 issue of *Spring Wind*, published by the Zen Lotus Society, Malone describes his organization as:

> Now inexorably committed to the abolition of punitive incarceration in any form, to the dismantling of the prison industrial complex and to the adoption of alternative, restorative methods of dealing with what is colloquially known as "criminal justice."[3]

Before 2000, the Engaged Zen Foundation had organized direct actions on behalf of people in US prisons.[4] Its efforts, however, focused primarily on individual incarcerated Buddhists. For example, in the spring and summer of 1996, Malone organized a letter-writing campaign for Frankie Parker, a white Buddhist on Arkansas's death row.[5] Hundreds of Buddhist leaders, lay practitioners, and even some Christian ministers from around the world urged Arkansas Governor Jim Guy Tucker and his successor Mike Huckabee to commute Parker's sentence to life imprisonment.[6] These letters mostly repeated the argument Malone and Engaged Zen Foundation President E-Kun Liz Potter had modeled in their call-to-action: Parker deserved clemency because he had reformed himself from an "aggressive and abusive" criminal into an insightful and compassionate Buddhist.[7]

In *Spring Wind*, however, Malone questions prison Dharma programs' exclusive focus on incarcerated Buddhists. He writes, "Buddhism is concerned with the emancipation of all beings. What are these prison Zen programs doing? What about those prisoners asking

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Department of Special Collections & Archives, University Libraries, University at Albany, SUNY (hereafter EZFR).

2. Kobutsu Malone, "The Paradox of Freedom: Prison Dharma on the Edge," *Spring Wind,* Summer 2003, 15, 17 (EZFR).

3. Ibid.

4. E-Kun Liz Potter, "Emergency Execution Appeal," 1996 (EZFR); Letter from Mary Jean Crume to the Ecumenical Buddhist Society and supporters, April 28, 1996 (EZFR); "Special Request," *Still Point* 21, no. 5 (May 1996): 9 (EZFR).

5. Potter, "Emergency Execution Appeal" (EZFR); Letter from Crume to EBS (EZFR).

6. Letters to Arkansas Governor Jim Guy Tucker and Governor Mike Huckabee on Behalf of Frankie (EZFR).

7. "Emergency Execution Appeal" (EZFR).

for help, but unable to attend the programs?"[8] By focusing on incarcerated Buddhists' individual transformations, he argues, they ignore the state-sanctioned suffering everyone inside endured.

Malone links the Engaged Zen Foundation's metamorphosis to his own growing awareness of the systematized abuse and neglect incarcerated people experience in "the coercive and oppressive environment of the prison."[9] As he formed relationships with people in prison over the years, his "perception sharpen[ed]," and he began to question the motivation behind "prison Dharma work" altogether. "The blithe notion that we Dharma practitioners, as outsiders and free, law-abiding citizens," he writes, "are offering Dharma to imprisoned people who are somehow lacking is part of a pattern of arrogance that is hard to recognize." Malone highlights an assumed hierarchy between non-incarcerated Buddhist teachers and imprisoned people that undergirds most approaches to prison Dharma work. He urges other Buddhists to "break through our illusory ideas and delusive thoughts" by refocusing on the suffering wrought by the US carceral system.[10]

Since the mid-to-late twentieth century, a period during which faith-based prison initiatives and the popularity of Buddhism in America both grew exponentially, hundreds of Buddhist programs have flourished in US prisons.[11] Today, organizations like the Prison Mindfulness Institute (formerly the Prison Dharma Network) and

8. Malone, "Paradox of Freedom," 16.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Fleet Maull, "The Prison Meditation Movement & the Current State of Mindfulness-Based Programming for Prisoners," *Mindful Justice* (November 2015), https://www.prisonmindfulness.org/_files/ugd/8ea141_052233c39f154ba7ae2bd41da4a88911.pdf; Brad Stoddard, *Spiritual Entrepreneurs: Florida's Faith-Based Prisons and the American Carceral State* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution* (Princeton University Press, 2011); David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (Yale University Press, 2019); Scott Mitchell, *Buddhism in America: Global Religion, Local Contexts*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

manuals like *Sitting Inside: Buddhist Practice in America's Prisons*, both developed by formerly incarcerated white American men, promote their projects as ones that support rehabilitation and lower recidivism rates by introducing Buddhist principles and practices to incarcerated people.[12] Meanwhile, smaller Buddhist temples like the San Diego branch temple of the International Bodhisattva Sangha, a Chan sangha founded in Taiwan, have described "help[ing]" incarcerated people "with their reformation endeavors" by corresponding with, ministering to, and sending books on Buddhism to people in prisons on the West Coast.[13]

Many Buddhists who teach in US prisons celebrate their incarcerated students for undergoing "remarkable" transformations from so-called angry prisoners into calm and compassionate human beings.[14] Those deemed exceptional may attain celebrity status and receive privileges both within prison and from outside supporters, such as nationwide protests on their behalf and superior, pro-bono legal resources.[15] This article explores how these discourses of Buddhist exceptionalism, which raise up some incarcerated people as extraordinary, also

12. Kobai Scott Whitney, *Sitting Inside: Buddhist Practice in America's Prisons* (Prison Dharma Network, 2003); "About PMI," Prison Mindfulness Institute, https://www.prisonmindfulness.org/about.

13. Shirley Tam (@Shirley Tam (譚觀覺)), "About Me," Facebook, May 5, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/notes/4724944797576521; International Bodhisattva Sangha (IBS) Prison Program (@IBS USA 美國菩薩寺), "To all dear IBS USA sponsors and volunteers," Facebook, December 20, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=520714463425879&set=a.318524470311547; "About Us," International Bodhisattva Sangha, https://ibsmeditation8.wordpress.com/about/.

14. Tonen O'Connor, *Buddhas behind Bars* (CreateSpace, 2012), 143; Letter from Malone to Arkansas Clemency Board (EZFR).

15. Rebecca Solnit, "Another Birthday on Death Row," *Lion's Roar*, August 14, 2018, https://www.lionsroar.com/the-key-to-freedom/; Reuters, "A Buddhist Whom Many Tried to Save Is Executed," *New York Times*, August 10, 1996, https://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/10/us/a-buddhist-whom-many-tried-to-save-is-executed.html; Joan Duncan Oliver, "Jarvis Jay Masters Continues His Fight for Freedom," *Tricycle*, October 26, 2022, https://tricycle.org/article/jarvis-jay-masters/.

relegate the majority to an undifferentiated, unrepentant mass of "inmates" or "criminals" deserving punishment.

By *Buddhist exceptionalism* I mean not only discourses that praise certain incarcerated people as exceptional, but also how the repetition of this rhetoric reinforces a state of exception in which the US government violates the civil and constitutional rights of people deemed "criminal" with impunity and under the guise of protecting the safety of all. I build on affect theorist and women and gender studies scholar Jasbir Puar's discussion of US sexual exceptionalism as a narrative that not only constructs certain groups as exemplary national subjects, but also normalizes what Giorgio Agamben has theorized as a "state of exception."[16] State-of-exception discourses, Puar explains, "rationalize egregious violence" by a state or regime "in the name of the preservation of a way of life and those privileged to live it" by negatively constructing a group or nation as an exceptional threat requiring an exceptional response.[17] At the same time, state-of-exception discourses may "consolidate national sentiment and consensus" supporting state violence by incorporating certain members of groups that have historically had "limited legal rights" into the body politic, recognizing their excellence as national subjects vis-à-vis the exceptional threat.[18] In the case of Buddhist exceptionalism, I argue that discourses celebrating certain incarcerated people's transformations from "inmates" into "Buddhists" normalize the US's ongoing *racialized* and *racializing* system of mass incarceration and the disenfranchisement of people trapped within it.

By describing mass incarceration as *racialized*, I refer to the way it functions as a system of legal codes, procedural rules, sentencing requirements, policing strategies, surveillance technologies, and reentry policies that create and maintain racial hierarchy in the US.[19] Mass incarceration reinforces white supremacy by disproportionately policing, arresting, and imprisoning people of color (particularly Black

16. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007), 6–11; Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, vol. 2 of *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Stanford University Press, 2017), 167–192.

17. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 9.

18. Ibid., 3–4.

19. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 10th anniv. ed. (The New Press, 2020), 13.

and Brown people) and ascribing the permanent stigma of "criminality" to them.[20] At the same time, mass incarceration is also a *racializing* institution, by which I mean mass incarceration as a system constructs the social meaning of racial categories and marks racial boundary lines.[21] For example, legal theorist and civil rights lawyer Michelle Alexander has discussed how mass incarceration (re)produces racial stigma against Blackness "by defining negatively what it means to be black."[22] Through techniques including legalized racial profiling, preemptive arrests, and discriminatory sentencing, mass incarceration defines being Black as "being a 'criminal.'"[23] As a "race-making institution," mass incarceration also constructs other racial categories, some of which—particularly whiteness—it defines positively and as not-criminal.[24]

The veil of colorblindness facilitates the racialized and racializing nature of the US carceral system. As sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has argued, since the end of Jim Crow in the 1960s, colorblind "practices that are subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial" have replaced explicitly racist ideologies as the primary means through which white supremacy is upheld in the US.[25] These practices include gerrymandering voting districts; maintaining housing segregation through real-estate advertising; and blaming racial disparities in employment and higher education on the so-called poor work ethic of people of color. Colorblind racism also includes the way Americans collectively accept how the carceral system "label[s] people of color 'criminals'" and sanctions discrimination against them in everything from housing to employment, education, and voting as a normal, natural, and necessary part of US society.[26] In other words, the racism of mass incarceration is *structural*. It is "embedded in normal operations of institutions," shapes social relations, and depends on even well-intentioned people

20. Ibid., 103.
21. Ibid., 197–200.
22. Ibid., 197.
23. Ibid., 198.
24. Ibid., 200.
25. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 3, 9.
26. Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 2; Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Seven Stories Press, 2003).

normalizing it through the repetition of seemingly neutral discourses and imagery.[27]

In this broader context in which criminality is associated with Blackness and Brownness, this article demonstrates how people navigating a racist system that has its own agenda—one that has been established through decades of court decisions, legislation, political campaigns, and media imagery—can end up reproducing some of its logics and reinforcing the public consensus that sustains it, even unintentionally.

By exploring the rhetoric of Buddhist exceptionalism, I deny neither the ways Buddhist leaders have also fought for structural change nor the value incarcerated people find in Buddhism. People in US prisons often describe studying sutra passages and practicing vipassana or zazen meditation as transformative experiences through which they "find freedom" even while trapped behind razor wire.[28] My ongoing research explores these testimonies and the creative ways imprisoned people renegotiate power as they engage in collective Buddhist study and practice.[29] In this article, however, I focus on how discourses celebrating incarcerated Buddhists repetitively construct racialized hierarchies and reinforce a prison system built upon them.

In the age of colorblindness, Alexander argues, success stories about Black people outside of prison (e.g., in higher education, politics,

27. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation," *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 3 (1997), 476; Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 19–26; Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 183–184.

28. Jarvis Jay Masters, *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row* (Padma Publishing, 1997); Jenny Phillips, Andrew Kukura, and Anne Marie Stein, *The Dhamma Brothers: East Meets West in the Deep South* (Freedom Behind Bars Productions, 2008).

29. I use "study and practice" not to separate activities like reading Buddhist texts and meditating as distinct aspects (or the only aspects) of Buddhism but to challenge the Buddhist modernist tendency to prioritize textual practice, popular notions of Buddhism as always meaning meditation, and Orientalist assumptions about Buddhism as a religion of mysticism and ritual alone. See: Thomas Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844–1912: Victorian Culture & The Limits of Dissent* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000); McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*; Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and 'The Mystic East'* (Routledge, 1999).

the arts) mark certain Black people as worthy figures of civil rights advocacy but designate others, like those with criminal records, as "damaged goods," reinforcing the racial caste system of mass incarceration.[30] In the pages that follow, I illustrate how narratives praising incarcerated men who have "transformed" themselves through engagement with Buddhism operate in a similar fashion, perpetuating the liberal individualism and emphasis on personal responsibility through which the racialized and racializing US carceral system maintains widespread legitimacy.

BODHISATTVAS IN HELL

Buddhist leaders involved in prison programs often describe incarcerated Buddhists as exceptional individuals who have not only risen out of a "worthless existence," but also serve as models for others who retain a lowly state as prisoners.[31] Many repeatedly juxtapose images of the wise and compassionate Buddhist and the ignorant and violent prisoner, emphasizing the former's superiority to the latter. For example, in a 2011 blog post, Chief Operating Officer of the San Diego branch of the International Bodhisattva Sangha Raymond Tam describes his first journey to California's Calipatria State Prison in 1995. When Tam entered the prison, he expected to find people with "minimal or no sense of morality" inside. In fact, he had been "reluctant" to participate in the program because he assumed "teaching the Dharma to a group of convicted criminals would not only be difficult but also seemingly absurd and fruitless."[32] Upon meeting the Buddhist group, however, Tam was "surprised" to find that they were respectful and eager to embrace the Dharma.[33]

The shock Tam experienced resulted from the discrepancy between his assumptions about who a "prisoner" was and who a "Buddhist" was. He imagined the two figures as part of a dichotomy: The prisoner was irredeemable, ignorant, and dangerous, whereas the Buddhist was full of the "riches contained" in the Dharma, a skillful teacher,

30. Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 228, 248.
31. Raymond Tam, "Open-Mindedness," January 26, 2011, International Bodhisattva Sangha, https://ibsmeditation8.wordpress.com/2011/01/26/1010/.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.

compassionate, and safe.[34] Upon visiting Calipatria, Tam discovered that these classifications were not permanent. If an incarcerated person has a "sincere and genuine" willingness to "behave in strict conformity with the sacred precepts" or guidelines for a Buddhist life, he writes, they can "give up" their "worthless existence" as a prisoner.[35] Rather than inmates to fear, they can become people who "pursue a virtuous life" even while imprisoned.[36]

Tam describes his trip as an experience that taught him to "not perceive things with a closed mind and be prematurely judgmental."[37] While he recognizes that all people in prison are not inherently immoral and ignorant, however, his focus on their transformations from angry and deluded prisoners into warm and wise Buddhists ultimately affirms the dichotomy by denigrating those who have not undergone such a metamorphosis. While Tam presents the Buddhist path as open to all, following it is a choice, and those who reject it remain "worthless."[38]

When incarcerated people engage with Buddhism, the way outside leaders like Tam describe them begins to change. Rather than prisoners aimlessly wandering an immoral path, they become teachers of wisdom. In turn, Buddhist leaders start to characterize them as exceptional within prison society. In *Buddhas behind Bars*, former Milwaukee Zen Center Resident Priest Tonen O'Connor, who ministered in prisons for over fourteen years, highlights the "remarkable" nature of three incarcerated men.[39] "These three men," she writes, were "swimming strongly, breasting the waves of negativity as they set their sights on 'the other shore'" of positive change.[40] According to O'Connor, these three "buddhas" differed from other people in prison because they actively resisted the "daily onslaught of negativity, anger, violence, and hatred" that characterized prison life.[41] By celebrating the personal effort of a few incarcerated individuals and raising them up as role models of "positive change" for other people in prison, she reinforces

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. O'Connor, *Buddhas behind Bars,* 143.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., editor's introduction.

the "myth of choice," the notion that people are imprisoned because of their bad decisions alone.[42]

This narrative of personal responsibility normalizes mass incarceration. "The mass incarceration of people of color," writes Alexander, "can be justified only to the extent that the plight of those locked up and locked out is understood to be their choice, not their birthright."[43] O'Connor accepts the carceral system as a flawed but natural part of society, essentializing it as "a system that by its very massive nature cannot cope with change" and emphasizing the possibility for individuals to "overcom[e]" the negativity of both their "mind-set" and the system itself.[44]

As Buddhist leaders construct hierarchies between exceptional incarcerated Buddhists and typical "inmates," they often draw on both classical Buddhist concepts and modern Romantic and Enlightenment ideals. Many leaders, for example, have depicted incarcerated Buddhists as bodhisattvas, beings who have followed the noble path to awakening and help others cultivate the same state of wisdom, generosity, and compassion they have perfected.[45] Through their dedication to teaching others about suffering, its cause, and its cessation, bodhisattvas guide others to "perfect bliss" and are thus "worthy of respect."[46]

Buddhist leaders who work with incarcerated people generally treat the bodhisattva path as open to all but requiring significant

42. Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 197.

43. Ibid., 248.

44. O'Connor, *Buddhas behind Bars*, 149.

45. Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Shambhala Publications, 2006), 34; Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 18, 230–231; Donald S. Lopez, Jr. and Jacqueline I. Stone, *Two Buddhas Seated Side by Side: A Guide to the "Lotus Sūtra"* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 36–39.

46. Śāntideva, *Way of the Bodhisattva*, 31, 36; Śāntideva, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra,* trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (Oxford University Press, 1995), 5. Buddhist views on the role of and path to becoming a bodhisattva are not monolithic. Some texts deem only men capable of following the bodhisattva path, whereas other texts and traditions consider the path open to all; see Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to "The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā)"* (University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 96–100; Lopez and Stone, *Two Buddhas Seated Side by Side*, 15, 23, 149–159. Some assert becoming a bodhisattva is possible "in this very lifetime," while others consider it a long

dedication.[47] According to former Buddhist Churches of America minister Hogen Fujimoto, who volunteered in California prisons in the 1960s and 1970s, incarcerated people have to abandon their former lives as angry and deluded prisoners to become bodhisattvas. This process requires extraordinary effort. Fujimoto bases the title of *Out of the Mud Grows the Lotus* (comprised of his correspondence with incarcerated people) on "a well used quotation in Buddhist circles" about people achieving awakening even in the darkest environments.[48] Even in "the mud" of "samsara: this world of greed, hate, and ignorance," he writes, human beings could "awaken to the realm of perfection, just as the beautiful lotus blossom grows out of murky waters."[49] Fujimoto maps this cosmological metaphor onto the physical environment of US prisons. "In this book," he writes, "the mud refers to prisons in which prisoners of all races are serving terms for various crimes."[50] By drawing a direct connection between "the mud" of samsara and "the mud" of prison life, he highlights the delusion, greed, hatred, and suffering of the beings inhabiting both.

Yet even in the "rough" and "isolated" mud of prison, Fujimoto asserts, incarcerated people can become awakened beings and "blossom into full glory" as "beautiful lotus flowers."[51] These exceptional cases attain a "rare understanding and profound insight" uncommon among "inmates" typically trapped in a realm of karmic suffering and despair.[52] If this group models a Buddhist life for others, he asserts, they can foster peace in prison and around the world.[53] Through this metaphor of incarcerated Buddhists as lotus flowers literally rising above the mud, Fujimoto constructs a hierarchy between these rare individuals and most other people in prison. Whereas those in the mud

and grueling process requiring thousands of rebirths; see Lopez and Stone, *Two Buddhas Seated Side By Side*, 21–22; Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, 7–8.

47. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Be Free Where You Are* (Parallax Press, 2002), 21, 26–27; O'Connor, *Buddhas behind Bars,* "Editor's Introduction"; Hogen Fujimoto, *Out of the Mud Grows the Lotus* (Lotus Press, 1980), 76–81; Ryusho Jeffus, *Incarcerated Lotus: Dharma Practice for Inmates* (CreateSpace, 2017), 30–32.

48. Fujimoto, *Out of the Mud*, xiii.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid., xiii–xiv.

52. Ibid., xiii–xiv, 49.

53. Ibid., 80.

remain trapped by the three poisons, the lotus flowers find a way to grow in wisdom and beauty.

Fujimoto celebrates an incarcerated person called R.T.H. as a "true Bodhisattva" because of his dedication to Buddhism and his "true understanding of the self."[54] While most people and nations focus on ego, Fujimoto writes in a 1968 letter to R.T.H., through personal effort R.T.H. has awakened to the reality that all things are impermanent and interconnected and there is thus no discrete, singular self.[55] He also depicts R.T.H. as embodying a bodhisattva's role as a generous teacher. In a 1971 letter, he says R.T.H.'s loyal companionship to Buddhist leaders experiencing loss and his dedication to sharing "the joys of his faith" with others exhibits a "Bodhisattva's altruism in action."[56] Fujimoto raises R.T.H. up as someone who inspires even outside Buddhist leaders like himself with his great insight and generosity.[57] In his eyes, R.T.H. transformed into a bodhisattva filled with wisdom and compassion who lives a life of doing "good even unsolicited" that few others could.[58]

As they praise exceptional incarcerated Buddhists, some leaders draw on narratives of compassionate and powerful bodhisattvas like Avalokiteśvara (Ch. Guanyin; Jpn. Kannon) and Kṣitigarbha (Ch. Dizang; Jpn. Jizō) traveling into the deepest hell realms to save beings facing karmic torture.[59] By appropriating these stories' narrative structures, they juxtapose the exceptional wisdom and compassion of incarcerated Buddhists with the delusion and violence of most prisoners. For instance, in a 1999 speech delivered at Maryland Correctional Institution, renowned Vietnamese Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hahn asserts that every incarcerated person has the potential to become a "bodhisattva who brings compassion into his environment" and help

54. Ibid., 76, 80.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 76, 107.
57. Ibid., 80–81, 107–108.
58. Śāntideva, *Way of the Bodhisattva*, 35; Fujimoto, *Out of the Mud*, 80–81, 107.
59. Zhiru Ng, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva: Dizang in Medieval China* (University of Hawaii Press, 2007); Stephen Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton University Press, 1988); Caroline Hirasawa, "The Inflatable, Collapsible Kingdom of Retribution: A Primer on Japanese Hell Imagery and Imagination," *Monumenta Nipponica* 63, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 1–50.

others escape suffering.[60] In order to encourage imprisoned people to embrace compassion and their buddha-nature, Hanh shares a story about Avalokiteśvara, who journeyed into both the deepest hell realms and the realm of the hungry ghosts to "completely liberate" beings undergoing karmic torture for their past deeds.[61] In Hanh's rendition, Avalokiteśvara helped hungry ghosts by manifesting as one "with a very ferocious face."[62] Even those who appear "ferocious," Hanh notes, could transform into awakened bodhisattvas and lead others out of suffering.[63]

At the same time, Hanh notes that, as a bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara does not belong to the hungry ghost realm. Bodhisattvas inhabit sublime heavens, have compassionate hearts, and produce a world of "peace," whereas hungry ghosts are ferocious, suffer underground for their wickedness, and spread suffering to others.[64] Through this juxtaposition, Hanh not only stresses the cosmological difference between bodhisattvas and those trapped in samsara, but also encourages incarcerated people to follow Avalokiteśvara's lead to a superior existence. Like Avalokiteśvara, he asserts, they can "transform Hell into Paradise."[65] They can choose to use their wisdom and compassion to lead greedy, ignorant, and angry people in prison-hells out of delusion and towards freedom.

While not all Buddhists teaching in US prisons draw directly on savior bodhisattva narratives, many have described prison as a hell realm.[66] In the summer of 1996, 657 people from twenty-one countries meditating at Plum Village, the French retreat established by

60. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Be Free,* 26–27.
61. *The Basket's Display: "Kāraṇḍavyūha Sutra,"* trans. Alan Roberts and Tulku Yeshi (84000, 2013), 28–29, https://archive.org/details/KarandavyuhaSutra/page/n27/mode/2up; Alexander Studholme, *The Origins of Oṃ Maṇipadme Hūṃ: A Study of the "Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra"* (SUNY Press, 2002), 123–125.
62. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Be Free*, 24.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., 27; *The Basket's Display*, 27.
66. Fleet Maull, *Dharma in Hell: The Prison Writings of Fleet Maull* (Prison Mindfulness Institute, 2005); Whitney, *Sitting Inside,* 11; Ajahn Pasanno, *The Last Breath* (Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, 2003), 9. This imagery became particularly popular in medieval China and Japan. See: Stephen Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese*

Thich Nhat Hanh, drew on this imagery in a letter urging Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee to commute Frankie Parker's death sentence. In the letter, the group praises Parker as "a unique prisoner" who has "risen from the darkest of hells on earth to become a practitioner and teacher of peace."[67] Parker, they explain, has undergone an ontological transformation from a suffering prisoner into a peaceful Buddhist who shares his wisdom with others so they can abandon their violent lives. "The model he is now setting with his life," they write, "shows other prisoners that there is a way out of violence" and "torment."[68] While the group does not directly compare Parker to Avalokiteśvara or Kṣitigarbha, they portray him as a beneficent savior helping beings in hell-prisons recognize that they are responsible for the suffering they endure; it is a just form of karmic recompense. Parker, they remark, is different from most people in US prisons because, while he is still behind bars, he has escaped his mental prison. Meanwhile, other incarcerated people remain doubly imprisoned by physical cages and by the despair their violence and ignorance caused. By presenting Parker's transformation as evidence that incarcerated people can reform themselves, these discourses affirm the widespread belief that justifies the racialized nature of mass incarceration: that "all those who appear trapped at the bottom actually chose their fate."[69]

MODEL PRISONERS

When Buddhist leaders celebrate the exceptional transformations of incarcerated Buddhists, their discourses also reflect liberal understandings of the human as an agentive citizen-subject who consents to the codes of civil society. Despite the massive changes to the US carceral system over the last two centuries, modern Enlightenment theories about society and crime have survived in the American imagination.[70] In particular, the theory of the social contract developed by political philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, and Thomas

Buddhism (University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 1–2, 5; Hirasawa, "The Inflatable, Collapsible Kingdom," 8–14.

67. Letter from 657 Plum Village Summer Retreat attendees to Governor Mike Huckabee, August 7, 1996 (EZFR).

68. Ibid.

69. Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 248.

70. Ibid., 147.

Hobbes has had a lasting impact on popular American understandings of crime and punishment.[71] Rousseau writes that humans are naturally driven by animal instincts of "primitive independence" and "self-preservation" but form collectives to better protect themselves.[72] In so doing, each individual consents to a social contract, agreeing to sacrifice their "natural freedom" for the sake "of the general will."[73] In the process, they become a "subject" or "citizen" and gain the rights and protections of one.[74] For Rousseau, violating the law means reneging on this contract: abandoning reason and morality and living by one's "physical impulses and the right of appetite."[75] As a result, a person transformed from a citizen with rights back into a "stupid and unimaginative animal" deserves punishment but can also be reformed.[76]

As they developed the first US penitentiaries, prison reformers like Thomas Eddy, Benjamin Rush, and William Bradford drew on social contract theory and depicted the "criminal" or "prisoner" in humiliating terms. In their eyes, prisoners were "wretched" or "unfortunate being[s]" who lived "idle" lives and fell into "vicious habits" like intoxication and gambling.[77] Today, the label of "criminal" or "prisoner" remains a dehumanizing one that casts anyone imagined

71. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract & Discourses* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1923), 5, 11, 14; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan,* ed. G.A.J. Rogers and Karl Schuhmann, 2 vols. (Continuum, 2005), 2:99–264; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Black Swan, 1698), 165–358; Caleb Smith, *The Prison and the American Imagination* (Yale University Press, 2009).

72. Rousseau, *Social Contract,* 9, 13.

73. Ibid., 15.

74. Ibid., 18. Smith, *Prison and the American Imagination*, 31, 46–48.

75. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 18.

76. Ibid., 19, 31.

77. William Bradford, *An Enquiry into How Far the Punishment of Death Is Necessary in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: 1795), 5, https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_an-enquiry-how-far-the-p_bradford-william_1793/mode/2up; Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, *A Statistical View of the Operation of the Penal Code of Pennsylvania to Which Is Added a View of the Present State of the Penitentiary and Prison in the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: 1817), 5–6, https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-2165049R-bk; Roberts Vaux, *Brief Sketch of the Origin and History of the State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: McLaughlin Brothers Printers, 1872), 11; Thomas Eddy, *An Account of the State Prison or Penitentiary House, in the City of New-York*

as such (whether they have broken the law or not) as a deviant, dangerous "Other" unworthy of rights or protections.[78] In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, news media, films, and television have reinforced these stereotypes by disseminating them through repeated scripts, imagery, and genres.[79] These media forms have also reinforced racialized stereotypes about who a criminal is (and thus who is "bad," "dangerous," and "depraved") in much the same way, which I discuss below.

Many Buddhist leaders who teach and minister to people in prison represent the prisoner as the "Other" of not only the awakened (or awakening) bodhisattva, but also the modern citizen. In a 1996 letter to Governor Tucker, a Little Rock-based Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist describes how, "through great diligence, study, and meditation, Frankie Parker transformed himself into a man of incredible realization."[80] After visiting with Parker on death row for two and a half years, she characterizes him as an exceptionally dedicated Buddhist practitioner who had attained "pure wisdom."[81] She admires his ability to live a Buddhist life amid the horrors of death row and considers Parker exceptional based on the qualities he had cultivated as a Buddhist.

On one hand, the leader describes Parker as a bodhisattva: He is wise and kind, and he serves as a "role model" for "even those lost in the greatest hells, other prisoners."[82] On the other hand, she praises Parker's introspection, "inner transformation," and dedication to "finding peace within," reflecting a Buddhist modernism that, per religious studies scholar David McMahan, embraces the European Enlightenment as much as the Buddha's enlightenment.[83] In her letter, the Dharma teacher celebrates Parker's embodiment of Enlightenment

by One of the Inspectors of the Prison (New York: Isaac Collins and Son, 1801), 49, 55, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.$b19798.

78. Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 176.

79. Charles Ogletree, Jr. and Austin Sarat, *Punishment in Popular Culture* (New York University Press, 2015).

80. Letter from Arkansas psychotherapist to Governor Jim Guy Tucker, August 6, 1996 (EZFR).

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

83. McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 5.

values like rationality alongside classical Buddhist virtues perfected by buddhas and bodhisattvas like lovingkindness.[84]

She also distinguishes Parker from modern assumptions about the criminal as driven by uninhibited drives and emotions. Parker's wisdom, she writes, makes him unusual not only among people on death row, but also among the "ministers, doctors, therapists, politicians, and many, many extraordinary people" she has worked with as a psychotherapist for over twenty years.[85] "The levels of understanding that he has reached and lives almost impeccably," she asserts, "are beyond those of almost anyone I have ever met in our conventional world."[86] By comparing Parker to people without criminal records and with professions often characterized by rationality and altruism, she rhetorically breaks him out of prison society and highlights his proximity to citizen-subjecthood. She affirms this proximity by attributing his commitment to "offering others a way out of prison by finding peace within" to "deeply felt humanitarian caring for everyone."[87] This rhetoric places him in the powerful position of someone with help to give, rather than a person in need.[88] Her emphasis on Parker's humanitarianism, moreover, indicates that, while he is remorseful, he is not controlled by overwhelming emotions. His compassionate actions are not "out of guilt" but intentional. In these ways, she characterizes Parker as a rational, self-possessed subject who contributes to the safety of society—in other words, someone recommitted to the social contract.

Buddhist leaders also highlight incarcerated Buddhists' difference from the typical prisoner by portraying them as "model prisoners," a term that renders them similar to non-incarcerated citizen-subjects. Rather than an official classification, prison authorities, journalists, religious leaders, and others typically use the term "model prisoner" informally to refer to incarcerated people they deem compliant with prison rules and, thus, positive role models for all others. The term dates to at least 1850, when English historian William Hepworth Dixon

84. Letter from Arkansas psychotherapist to Tucker.
85. Ibid.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.
88. Lauren Berlant, *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (Routledge, 2004), 4.

uses it in a scathing critique of London's Pentonville Prison and English novelist Charles Dickens employs it in a depiction of the character Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*.[89] Despite the different contexts, Dixon and Dickens both characterize the model prisoner as someone prison authorities have labeled exceptional because of their upstanding behavior and promise for moral reform.[90]

Since the mid-to-late twentieth century, Buddhist leaders, prison officials, journalists, and celebrities have recognized incarcerated Buddhists as model prisoners because of their extraordinary discipline, mental fortitude, compliant attitudes, and dedication to improving their moral character.[91] For example, in a letter dated April 25, 1996, celebrated American Zen leader Philip Kapleau calls on Governor Tucker to abandon the execution of Frankie Parker "and seek another form of punishment."[92] Among seven reasons why Tucker should spare Parker's life, he includes: "Frankie Parker has made a 100% turn around from that of a violent, abusive individual to a model inmate and his actions now have a positive influence on other inmates."[93] According to Kapleau, Parker attained the status of model inmate through a personal, positive behavioral transformation that also benefited prison society. By uplifting Parker as a model inmate, however, Kapleau separates him as an exceptional case, reinforcing assumptions that most people in prison remain "violent," "abusive," and in need of such a role model. Other Buddhist teachers including the Ecumenical Buddhist Society's Anna Cox and Florida-based Zen teacher Kinloch

89. William Hepworth Dixon, *The London Prisons: with an Account of the More Distinguished Persons Who Have Been Confined in Them* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1850), 156; Charles Dickens, *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1850), 674.

90. Dixon, *London Prisons*, 156, 165; Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 674–676.

91. David Ward and Allen Breed, *The United States Penitentiary, Marion, Illinois: Consultants' Report Submitted to Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. House of Representatives*, 98th Congress, 2nd session (Committee Print, Ser. No. 21), December 1984, 32, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/103769NCJRS.pdf.

92. Letter from Philip Kapleau to Governor Jim Guy Tucker, April 25, 1996, RL.11661, Series: Correspondence, Box 5, File: Parker, Frankie, 1996, Philip Kapleau Papers, 1952–2009 and undated, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University (hereafter PKP).

93. Letter from Kapleau to Tucker.

Walpole have similarly celebrated incarcerated Buddhists' compliance and potential benefit to prisons.[94]

These narratives about exceptional incarcerated Buddhists do not challenge dominant perceptions of the prisoner or criminal wholesale. Instead of introducing nuance, they reinforce common biases by praising only certain incarcerated people as exceptions to the rule and casting doubt on all others. In this way, these discourses construct a hierarchical relationship between the "prisoner" and the "Buddhist," one that marks the former as morally depraved and the latter as embodying a relatively virtuous existence, akin to that of a non-criminal citizen.

THE INCARCERATED ORIENTAL MONK

As Buddhist teachers simultaneously draw on narratives of bodhisattvas in hell realms and social contract theory, repeatedly juxtaposing the wise and compassionate "Buddhist" and the deluded and violent "prisoner," they also reproduce dominant, racialized assumptions about each figure. In particular, narratives about incarcerated Buddhists' exceptional transformations often reproduce Orientalist depictions of Buddhism as an ancient "Eastern" religion at odds with modern "Western" culture.[95] In *Prison Chaplaincy Guidelines for Zen Buddhism*, Kobutsu Malone characterizes Zen as "an ancient tradition that is a lineage of direct teaching transmission extending from Siddhartha Gautama...to the present day."[96] Malone focuses on Zen's "ancient" roots and its direct connection to the Buddha in South Asia, repeating late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Orientalist discourse about "the origin of Buddhism" as "uniquely and exclusively tied to one individual and to his reputedly revolutionary spiritual vision."[97] He omits the nuanced, dynamic history of Zen, including the

94. Anna Cox, "Commute Sentences of All on Death Row," *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, August 7, 1996 (EZFR); Kinloch Walpole, "Working with Prison Groups," *Bodhi Seed* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2000) (EZFR).

95. Edward Said, *Orientalism,* 25th anniv. ed. (Vintage Books, 1994).

96. Malone, *Prison Chaplaincy Guidelines for Zen Buddhism* (Engaged Zen Foundation, 2006), 2.

97. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 134.

ways people across the world have creatively made and re-made Zen through discourse, ritual, art, community, institution-building, and other endeavors. Instead, he depicts Zen's history as a unidirectional, flattened narrative about an Asian religion containing the wisdom of an ancient past.

Malone also describes an irreconcilable difference between "Eastern traditions" like Zen and contemporary Western society.[98] Characterizing Buddhism as "unlike any other religious tradition that many Western chaplains may have encountered," he asserts that "the profound differences in the Buddhist approach to life cannot be conveyed through words or written laws."[99] Malone depicts Buddhism as an essentially and ineffably unique Eastern religion, reinforcing tropes about a mysterious Orient and its ancient wisdom.[100] His claim that Western chaplains had not encountered anything like Buddhism before also present Buddhism as intrinsically different from so-called Western religions. In these ways, Malone constructs what postcolonial theorist Edward Said describes as "a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')."[101] Malone's approach to Buddhism in US prisons re-presents an all-too-common Orientalist narrative of Buddhism and America as fundamentally at odds.

Thus, when Malone describes Parker's exceptional understanding of Buddhism, he refers to a distinctly "Eastern" Buddhism preserved in the teachings of the Buddha. In other words, his descriptions of a sincere, compassionate, and wise bodhisattva behind bars already rely on racialized assumptions about what a true and exceptional model of Buddhism should look like.

Specifically, as Malone and others sing Parker's praises, they often racialize him as the figure religious studies scholar Jane Iwamura calls the "icon of the Oriental Monk."[102] This figure developed after World War II as "ominous caricatures" of Asians and Asian Americans

98. Malone, *Prison Chaplaincy,* 3.
99. Ibid.*,* 2.
100. Said, *Orientalism,* 26; Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 6, 28; King, *Orientalism and Religion,* 146; Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, 132.
101. Said, *Orientalism*, 43.
102. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism,* 61.

dominant in the early twentieth century "were replaced with friendlier, more subservient models."[103] Depictions of the Oriental Monk emphasized his access to "ancient truth" as well as his "spiritual commitment, his calm demeanor, his Asian face, his manner of dress, and—most obviously—his peculiar gendered character."[104] For over half a century, filmmakers, magazine editors, television creators, and others have flooded popular culture with the Oriental Monk icon, emphasizing his exotic nature and contrasting him with the hegemonic norms of American society (which, despite their seemingly non-raced quality, have historically been associated with and constitutive of whiteness).[105]

While Frankie Parker did not have the Asian face of the Oriental Monk, Buddhist leaders often map the stereotype onto him. In a comment for the *Shambhala Sun*, Malone describes Parker as someone who "had been living as a monk for quite a while" even before he received ordination.[106] Malone understands "genuine" Buddhism as an ancient, Eastern religion, and his descriptions of Parker and his "perfect monk's life" reflect this Orientalist framework.[107] For example, he and other Buddhist leaders often marvel at Parker's unmatched wisdom. Parker, Malone writes, has achieved "profound insight into the teachings of the Buddha" and demonstrated "deep and comprehensive understanding of the laws of karma and compassionate action."[108] While Malone believes most people in "the West" have misconstrued these teachings, he says Parker has mastered them.[109] In a 1996 comment for the *New York Times,* he describes Parker's understanding of Buddhism as not only superior to that of any "inmate [he] had ever met," but

103. Ibid., 9.
104. Ibid., 6, 18.
105. Ibid., 160–166; Joseph Cheah, *Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 3–7; Jasmine Syedullah, "The Unbearable Will to Whiteness," in *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, ed. George Yancy and Emily McRae (Lexington Books, 2019).
106. Amy Green, "Frankie Parker's Death," *Shambhala Sun*, November 1996 (EZFR).
107. Emails between Malone, priest, and acquaintance, Engaged Zen Foundation.
108. Letter from Malone to Arkansas Clemency Board.
109. Letter from Kobutsu Malone to an incarcerated person, 2000 (EZFR).

also "as deep…as many Western Buddhist teachers."[110] By commending Parker's exceptional insight in to the Dharma, Malone indicates that he has rare access to authentic "Eastern" Buddhist knowledge.[111]

Moreover, Buddhist leaders refer to Parker not by the birth name his white Southern parents had given him, but by names that suggest his unique connection to Asia and presumed difference from most people in prison. Buddhists who formed relationships with Parker, including Malone, Cox, and the Ecumenical Buddhist Society's Jean Crume, usually call him Sifu, Jusan, and Fudo.[112] Malone and his teacher Eido Shimano had, respectively, given Parker the names Fudo and Jusan during ritual ceremonies.[113] In Japanese, both names connoted a conquering of death, while the former also connects Parker to an "immovable" savior bodhisattva who remains "chained to a rock in hell until all beings are liberated from suffering."[114]

According to Parker, other people in prison dubbed him Sifu not because it meant "teacher" in Chinese, but because he reminded them of a movie character called Sifu who was "always quoting the Buddha."[115] Parker's friends had consumed media that included a figure whose singular, defining feature (at least in their memory) was dedication to Buddhism, evident in his continuous quoting of sutra passages. When they witnessed his interest in Japanese Buddhism, they read it and him through "images of the Orient…deeply embedded in a popular imagination" that had conditioned their own views of the world.[116] By regularly calling Parker Sifu, moreover, they constructed him as a living embodiment of the Oriental Monk icon. Despite his white skin, he became racialized as an Asian film character come to life. Parker accepted the nickname and its associations as appropriate (noting that

110. Kevin Sack, "Discovering Buddha on Prison's Death Row," *New York Times*, May 29, 1996 (EZFR).
111. Emails between Malone, priest, and acquaintance.
112. Kobutsu Malone, "Death Row Zen: Walking the Last Mile in Arkansas," *The Quaker Abolitionist* 2, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 4 (EZFR).
113. Ibid.
114. Ibid.
115. Frankie Parker quote in letter from Mary Jean Crume to Kobutsu Malone, April 9, 1996 (EZFR).
116. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 7.

he "sometimes [taught] Tai Chi to others...and Sifu means teacher"), eventually legally changing his name to Sifu.[117]

When Buddhist leaders began to call Parker by the names Sifu, Jusan, and Fudo, they too represented him as someone with an embodied, essential, and religious connection to Asia and Asianness. As these Orientalized stereotypes about Parker as a generous and insightful teacher named Sifu circulated in colorblind America, Parker became racialized as a living icon who reaffirmed the "imaginative construction" of the Oriental Monk.[118]

Buddhist leaders close to Parker also depict him like the stereotypical "venerable Eastern sage" who was "wise, noble," and "seemed to speak of an ancient wisdom."[119] Malone describes Parker's wisdom as apparent in both his "responses to centuries old Zen koans" and his "irreverent humor."[120] The latter, he says, was both disarming and instructive like the humor of eighteenth-century Japanese Zen Master Hakuin, "always pointing to the places inside people where they were holding on or grasping."[121] In these ways, he identifies Parker as part of a tradition of Zen masters, once again highlighting his proximity to ancient Buddhist wisdom.

Other Buddhist teachers marveled at Parker's warmth and often feminized him vis-à-vis other men in prison. Jean Crume celebrates Parker's ability to "nurture and care for" people, even in prison and even when meeting someone for the first time.[122] Both she and Malone describe his generosity in sending origami flowers and animals to Ecumenical Buddhist Society members and, during his final days alive, teaching guards how to "make something of beauty out of a piece of paper."[123] In these ways, they present Parker as a generous, thoughtful, and compassionate person who embodied not only characteristics of a bodhisattva, but also the gentle, more normatively feminine gender presentation of the Oriental Monk icon.

Buddhist leaders' descriptions of Parker distance him from assumptions about the aggressive, violent masculinity performed by

117. Parker quote in Crume to Malone letter.
118. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 20–21.
119. Ibid., 26.
120. Reflection by Kobutsu Malone on Frankie Parker's last day (EZFR).
121. Ibid.
122. Green, "Frankie Parker May be Dead by Now."
123. Letter from Crume to EBS; Reflection by Malone on Parker's last day.

men in prison. In a 1996 *Shambhala Sun* article, Anna Cox explicitly contrasts Parker's gender performance with that of other imprisoned men. "A lot of these guys don't like him," she explains, "because it's very scary when you're safe being a tough guy and somebody...affects you emotionally in ways that make you question your whole *modus operandi* in your little criminal world."[124] Rather than embodying a tough, masculine, criminal persona, Cox says, Parker engages with others on a softer, more emotional, and normatively feminine register. By highlighting his proximity to ancient wisdom, his similarities to and relationships with renowned Buddhist leaders, and his nurturing personality, these Buddhist teachers racialize Rev. Jusan Fudo Sifu William Frank Parker as the Oriental Monk icon.[125]

Buddhist leaders and practitioners also depict Jaturun "Jay" Siripongs, a Thai man executed in California in 1999, as the Oriental Monk. In *The Last Breath,* renowned Dharma teacher Ajahn Pasanno recounts serving as Siripongs's spiritual advisor during his last three days alive. In the book's foreword, he praises Siripongs as someone who "set an example from which all of us could find something to learn," framing the narrative as one about the life and death of a wise teacher.[126] In the pages that follow, Pasanno highlights Siripongs's generosity, equanimity, and peacefulness, attributing these qualities to the "deep transformation" he underwent in prison.[127] He describes these qualities as visible in not only Siripongs's words and actions, but also his body. "When I saw Jay," Pasanno writes, describing his first impression of Siripongs three days before his execution, "it was clear he had lived the last years of his life skillfully. Although he was waist-chained, he remained dignified. He was gracious and hugged his visitors."[128] Pasanno juxtaposes the chains wrapped around Siripongs's torso with the "dignified" way he carried himself, providing no further details; despite the physical markers of his status as a prisoner, Pasanno identifies evidence of Siripongs's wise and skillful character in his body language. While incarcerated people often describe yearning for physical

124. Green, "Frankie Parker May be Dead by Now."
125. Kobutsu Malone, "Death Row Practice: Walking the Last Mile," The Engaged Zen Foundation, https://www.engaged-zen.org/articles/Kobutsu-Death_Row_Practice.html.
126. Pasanno, *Last Breath*, foreword.
127. Ibid., 15–16.
128. Ibid., 10.

contact and (when allowed) eagerly hug their visitors, Pasanno characterizes Siripongs's engagement in this behavior as indicative of his graciousness and generosity, descriptors he also uses for the way Siripongs gave "himself completely to his friends during the visiting hours," joyfully sharing Buddhism with them.[129]

Pasanno not only characterizes Siripongs as someone who cared for others' emotions, but also praises his ability to balance generosity with a daily, hours-long commitment to meditation.[130] This dedication, Pasanno says, enabled Siripongs to achieve great wisdom, even during his last hour of life, a "very peaceful" time during which he "establish[ed] his mind firmly on his meditation object."[131] This wisdom was evident on Siripongs's body. Despite only knowing him for a handful of days, Pasanno recalls viewing Siripongs's corpse as a powerful experience. His body, he explains, had "the most serene expression on his face," along with "a brightness to his skin" and "the tiniest bit of a smile."[132] By describing Siripongs's corpse as exhibiting characteristics often attributed to the Buddha, particularly in classical Indian art, Pasanno again depicts Siripongs as embodying the skillfullness, generosity, and ancient wisdom of the Oriental Monk icon.

RACIALIZING THE "CRIMINAL"

The figure of the so-called unredeemable criminal also has a racialized history. In particular, the racist stereotype of the Black Criminal, which emerged in the US at the end of the nineteenth century, has only proliferated over the years.[133] While intimately connected to the racist assumptions about Black people's immorality and instability that undergirded slavery, discourses about the direct relationship between Blackness and criminality really began to solidify after Emancipation when state governments amended their constitutions to limit Black people's civil rights.[134] Some lawmakers embraced the eugenicist theo-

129. Ibid., 12–13.
130. Ibid.
131. Ibid., 28–29.
132. Ibid., 32; John Powers, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 59–60.
133. Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 198.
134. B.F. Moore, W.S. Mason, and R.S. Donnell, *The Report of the Committee Appointed to Prepare and Report to the Legislature a System of Laws upon the Subject*

ries of European criminologists like Cesare Lombroso, who attributed criminality to "bodily racial differences."[135] Others expressed doubt about biological racism, but still represented Black people as a particularly dishonest, "deprav[ed]," "licentious," and ultimately criminal race whose behavior state governments needed to "correct" with "proper moral training" in order to make them "in every way consistent with the safety and good government of the community."[136] To make their case, the committee pointed to a handful of Black people as exceptional examples of "sobriety, industry, and honesty."[137] In other words, after Emancipation, white lawmakers began to describe Black people as the modern criminal: sitting at the threshold of citizenship, showing promise for reform, but requiring surveillance and restrictions on their participation in so-called civilized society. By enacting Black Codes, these lawmakers not only reimagined Black people as "criminal," but also legally criminalized them.[138]

During the Jim Crow era, depictions of African Americans as an unevolved and thus criminal race proliferated in print media, film, and minstrel shows.[139] The widespread dissemination of these racialized stereotypes, particularly of Black men as violent brutes and sexual deviants, sanctioned their increased imprisonment, as well as discriminatory housing policies and other anti-Black disenfranchisement and violence.[140] While biological racism generally fell out of favor by the

of Freed Men, Etc., General Assembly of the State of North Carolina, 1865–1866 Session (Wm. E. Pell, Printer to the State, Document No. 9), January 22, 1866, 10, 12, North Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia, & Texas 1866 [3 of 3], State Constitutions and Papers Relating to Admission of States, Record Group 59: General Records of the Department of State, National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP) [online version available at Archival Research Catalogue (Identifier: 40439513) https://catalog.archives.gov/, accessed August 2, 2024].

135. Douglass Flowe, *Uncontrollable Blackness: African American Men and Criminality in Jim Crow New York* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 25 (introduction), Google Books.

136. Moore, Mason, and Donnell, *Report of the Committee*, 10, 12, 18.

137. Ibid., 12.

138. Flowe, *Uncontrollable Blackness*, 39 (introduction).

139. Ibid., 41 (introduction), 83 (chap. 2), 116 (chap. 3).

140. Ibid., 60 (chap. 1), 116–118 (chap. 3), 181 (chap. 5); Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Harvard University Press, 2017), 19.

mid-twentieth century, social scientists continued to develop new theories that promoted the same racist stereotypes of Black people, and especially Black men, as violent criminals. In the 1950s and 1960s, widely-accepted theories of social pathology reframed poverty as both the cause of crime and the result of Black people's "cultural and behavioral deficiencies."[141] In a 1965 report, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan argued that the heart of these so-called shortcomings was the "deterioration" of the Black family, which in his estimation had not achieved the same "high degree of stability" as white families.[142] While Moynihan attributed this supposed "family pathology" to the cruelties of slavery, he nonetheless continued to describe Blackness as the weighted center of criminality.[143]

Legislation reinforced this association between Blackness and criminality. In the 1960s, Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson spearheaded an anti-juvenile delinquency campaign dedicated to fighting poverty and thus curtailing this supposedly rampant social pathology.[144] Both administrations ramped up funding for social programs in urban Black neighborhoods while also increasing police presence and surveillance in these areas. By treating young Black

141. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*, 31–32.

142. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Chapter II: The Negro American Family," in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, March 1965, accessed August 2, 2024, https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan/moynchapter2.

143. Ibid., "Chapter III: The Roots of the Problem," https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan/moynchapter3.

144. "Remarks upon Receiving Report of the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime, 31 May 1962," White House Audio Collection, White House Audio Recordings 1961-1963, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum Website, accessed August 3, 2024 (Digital Identifier: JFKWHA-099-007), https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/jfkwha-099-007; Lyndon B. Johnson, Remarks upon Signing the Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act of 1968 Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/237791; Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*, 32–55.

people as the "delinquents" in question, both presidents promoted the idea that criminality was a problem of Blackness.

Johnson's early law and order policies, and particularly the Law Enforcement Assistance Act of 1965, created the infrastructure and public messaging for President Richard Nixon and President Ronald Reagan to later ramp up spending on law enforcement and surveillance, accelerate prison construction, enforce stricter sentences, and cut social services.[145] All of these measures targeted Black communities. Reagan's War on Drugs in particular authorized militaristic racial profiling strategies, harsh mandatory minimums, and rhetoric about Black "youth gangs" and "high risk youth."[146] Together, these policies produced what Michelle Alexander has called the racial caste system of mass incarceration in which discriminatory procedures at every level of the carceral system reinforce white supremacy by disproportionately policing, arresting, and imprisoning Black and Brown people.[147] Through this process and the colorblind rhetoric that often cloaked it, the racist stereotypes of Black people as "criminals" acquired a *semblance* of truth as members of these racialized groups filled prisons in massively disproportionate numbers.

As with the Oriental Monk, the Black Criminal has become a racialized icon in the American imagination. For decades, news reports, television shows, magazines, and films of all genres have disseminated images of Black men as violent and manipulative criminals, influencing attitudes about crime and race and reinforcing anti-Blackness.[148] Between this media landscape and disproportionate incarceration rates of Black people (particularly Black men, though women's incarceration

145. Samuel James Ervin, Jr., Committee on the Judiciary, *Law Enforcement Assistance Act of 1965: Report*, report prepared to accompany H.R. 8027, 89th Congress, 1st session, August 31, 1965, Committee Print; Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*, 79–95. Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 134–179.

146. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*, 309–310.

147. Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 7, 248.

148. Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. and Shanto Iyengar, "Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (July 2000), 570.

rates have been rising sharply), the assumptions that Blackness means criminality *and criminality means Blackness* remain strong today.[149]

At the same time, racialized assumptions about other groups as violent "criminals" have also become ingrained in the American imagination. While stereotypes of Muslim men as terrorists emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and drew on centuries-old Orientalist tropes about Muslim men as "barbaric" and "innately violent," after 9/11 President George W. Bush's War on Terror supercharged them.[150] Muslims (and people racialized as Muslim) not only faced a wave of hate crimes and racist media depictions, but legislation like the Patriot Act also subjected them to increased racial profiling, surveillance, arrests, and incarceration, effectively criminalizing them.[151] Since the 1930s, public discourses and immigration policies have also marked Latinx (and particularly Mexican and Mexican American) communities as "criminal."[152] Between the criminalization of undocumented border crossing, media stories falsely linking undocumented immigration status and violent crime, and the integration of immigration enforcement and law enforcement, Latinx communities today experience disproportionate

149. Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 7; Wendy Sawyer, "The Gender Divide: Tracking Women's State Prison Growth," Prison Policy Initiative, January 9, 2018, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/women_overtime.html.

150. Saher Selod, *Forever Suspect: Racialized Surveillance of Muslim Americans in the War on Terror* (Rutgers University Press, 2018), 5; Nadine Naber and Junaid Rana, "The 21st Century Problem of Anti-Muslim Racism," *Jadaliyya*, July 25, 2019, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/39830.

151. Selod, *Forever Suspect*, 11–28, 99–124; Naber and Rana, "21st Century Problem."; Janet Reitman, "I Helped Destroy People," *New York Times*, September 1, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/01/magazine/fbi-terrorism-terry-albury.html; ACLU, "War Comes Home: The Excessive Militarization of American Policing," June 2014, 17–18, https://www.aclu.org/publications/war-comes-home-excessive-militarization-american-police; Kenneth Marcus, "Jailhouse Islamophobia: Anti-Muslim Discrimination in American Prisons," *Race and Social Problems* 1 (2009): 36, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-009-9003-5.

152. Cynthia Willis-Esqueda, "Bad Characters and Desperados: Latinxs and Causal Explanations for Legal System Bias," *UCLA Law Review* 67, no. 5 (November 2020): 1204–1223; Lisa Flores, *Deportable and Disposable: Public Rhetoric and the Making of the "Illegal" Immigrant* (Penn State University Press, 2020).

arrest, incarceration, and detention rates and receive both the harshest and the longest sentences.[153]

Thus, when Buddhist ministers and Dharma teachers celebrate incarcerated Buddhists in the US as exceptionally peaceful, wise, and honest individuals, they not only raise them up as saviors of hell-beings and models of disciplined, obedient subjecthood, they also distinguish them from dominant racialized depictions of violent, ignorant, manipulative and immoral Black and Brown "criminals." By repeatedly casting incarcerated Buddhists of all backgrounds and phenotypes in the role of the Oriental Monk and juxtaposing this figure with the stereotypical characteristics of the Black or Brown Criminal, outside Buddhist leaders construct a racialized hierarchy in which the Buddhist in prison is superior to all others who remain, in the words of historian of religious studies Kathryn Gin Lum, "lumped together as racial Others."[154]

In the age of colorblindness, the discursive patterns constructing this hierarchy are rarely explicitly raced. In part, Buddhist leaders develop this racialized hierarchy by emphasizing incarcerated Buddhists' individuality. They refer to them by their names, discuss their families, and describe their personalities. By contrast, they homogenize all other people in prison as a deluded, angry, and dishonest mass of inmates who remain nameless, faceless, and disembodied. This rhetoric leaves readers to fill in the gaps, to imagine these Others according to their own assumptions (conditioned by media imagery and over a

153. Ibid.; Deenesh Sohoni and Tracy Sohoni, "Perceptions of Immigrant Criminality: Crime and Social Boundaries," *The Sociological Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2014): 49–71; Cynthia Willis-Esqueda and Kiley Gilbert, "Thinking Critically about Race Bias and Culpability Perceptions of Latinxs in the Criminal Justice System," *Journal of Social Issues* 80 (2024): 740–760; Andrea Figueroa-Caballero and Dana Mastro, "Examining the Effects of News Coverage Linking Undocumented Immigrants with Criminality: Policy and Punitive Implications," *Communication Monographs* 86, no. 1 (2019): 46–67; Amanda Armenta, "Racializing Crimmigration: Structural Racism, Colorblindness, and the Institutional Production of Immigrant Criminality," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 3, no. 1 (2017): 82–95.

154. Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History* (Harvard University Press, 2022), 14–15.

century of racist law-and-order policies) about what it means to be a prisoner or criminal in the US today.

Moreover, by describing incarcerated Buddhists as undergoing sincere, religious transformations into both the icon of the Oriental Monk and model prisoners, outside Buddhist leaders also represent this select group as a kind of model minority. As historian Ellen Wu has described, the racialized figure of the Asian-American model minority has historically been, and continues to be, constructed in relationship to the assumed "cultural deficiencies" of Blackness.[155] This discourse emerged after World War II, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s. As Presidents Kennedy and Johnson implemented anti-delinquency programs in urban Black communities, social commentators, policy-makers, and other observers began to celebrate the apparent "non-delinquency" and "exemplary conduct" of Chinese Americans "within the urban enclave."[156] Meanwhile, Chinese American leaders, who had also faced "criminal" stereotypes and discriminatory legislation for decades, appropriated these tropes to demand recognition as respectable citizens and "rewrite their dissimilarity from stigma to virtue."[157] As the "success story" of Chinese Americans spread, commentators juxtaposed their exceptional family stability with the supposed social pathology of Black families.[158]

Wu highlights how these discourses about Chinese Americans—which emerged alongside "success stories" about Japanese Americans' remarkable recovery from internment—racialized Asian Americans as collectively not-Black.[159] However, it is worth noting that the relationship between not-Blackness and non-criminality in the construction of the model minority myth operated dialectically: Not only did depictions of Asian Americans as "nondelinquent" racialize them as not-Black, but their definitive not-Blackness also reinforced assumptions that they were definitively not-criminal. These assumptions have

155. Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 182–183.
156. Ibid., 182–183, 189.
157. Ibid., 182.
158. Ibid., 208.
159. Ibid., 149, 183.

survived and result in the widespread invisibility of mass incarceration's impact on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.[160]

Discourses about exceptional Buddhists behind bars operate in a similar way. They posit a direct, causal relationship between an incarcerated person's devotion to a supposedly calm, passive, and rational Asian religion and their existence as a newly-compliant and no-longer-criminal model subject. In this way, they racialize people in prison as inhabiting a certain stereotypically "Asian" quality or way of life—one that is entirely at odds with Black or Brown "criminality." For example, the press release announcing Malone's 1993 ordination at Sing Sing describe the event as an "extremely unlikely and remarkable meeting between a world-renowned Japanese master and American convicts."[161] The announcement represents the ceremony as a rare encounter between two separate worlds: one Eastern and one Western, one celebrated and the other condemned. The release continues, "Eido Roshi [who conducted the service] is a Patriarch of the aristocratic Rinzai Zen lineage that is the spiritual school of the samurai. The inmates are for the most part Black and Hispanic criminals of the poorest backgrounds and roughest habits."[162] Again, the Engaged Zen Foundation describes an antithetical relationship between the monk and the criminal. The former lives by the high-class, honorable, and "spiritual" codes of samurai, whereas the latter are dirt poor and driven by vice. The former is celebrated by name, while the latter remains a mass of inmates. And while the Engaged Zen Foundation only implicitly racializes the former by highlighting his embeddedness in an ancient Japanese tradition, it names the race of the latter, tying it directly to criminality: They are not just "criminals" but "Black and Hispanic criminals."[163] Ultimately, the organization constructs a racialized hierarchy between the monk and the convict, one in which Orientalist discourses about Eastern stasis and Western modernity, anti-Black and anti-Brown stereotypes

160. Raymond Magsaysay, "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Prison Industrial Complex," *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 26 (2021): 443–519.
161. Engaged Zen Foundation Press Release, "Inmates at Notorious Sing Sing Maximum Security Prison Discover Ancient Tradition of Zen," 1993 (EZFR).
162. Ibid.
163. Ibid.; Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 198.

of criminality, and assumptions about the relationship between poverty, race, and crime are all imbricated.

DISSEMINATION

As Buddhist leaders publish books, organize political actions, and post on social media, they spread the discourse of Buddhist exceptionalism through popular media circuits. Before a broad audience of non-incarcerated people, these leaders repeatedly highlight the wisdom, compassion, and humanity of a few Buddhist practitioners and stress their difference from all other "prisoners." As a Buddhist modernist discourse, the rhetoric of Buddhist exceptionalism both draws on and reinforces dominant racialized assumptions about "the criminal" and "the Buddhist" that have become ingrained in the American social imaginary via repetition in popular media and government reports and policies. Therefore, discourses about peaceful Buddhists who have transformed from violent criminals often not only appear "comfortably familiar"[164] to diverse audiences, but also "feel true" and spur further repetition.[165]

As Buddhist leaders write about and organize around exceptional incarcerated Buddhists, they draw the attention of journalists and celebrities who spread these discourses farther. News outlets reinforced the image of Jaturun Siripongs as both a "model prisoner" and an Oriental Monk in 1998 and 1999. Headlines in the *LA Times*, *Associated Press*, *San Diego Union-Tribune, Oakland Tribune*, and *Fresno Bee* all refer to Siripongs as an "ex-monk" or "former monk."[166] Especially when

164. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 32.

165. Donovan Schaefer, *Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism after Darwin* (Duke University Press, 2022), 70–79.

166. Esther Schrader and Richard Marosi, "Judge Halts Execution of Ex-Buddhist Monk," *LA Times*, November 17, 1998, Series 2, Box 6, Folder 15, M. Watt Espy Papers 1730–2008, M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University at Albany, State University of New York, https://archives.albany.edu/espy/catalog/3884 (hereafter Espy Papers); Kelly Thornton, "Former Monk Is Executed for Two Murders," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, February 9, 1999, Series 2, Box 6, Folder 15, Espy Papers; Michelle Locke, "Former Monk Executed for Two Murders," *The Fresno Bee*, February 9, 1999, Series 2, Box 6, Folder 15 (Espy Papers); Michelle Locke, "California to Execute Former Monk," *Associated Press*, February 8, 1999, Series 2, Box 6, Folder 15 (Espy Papers); Michelle Locke, "Ex-Monk Set to Die for

paired with Siripongs's headshot or a description of him as a "Thai national," these headlines prompted readers to see Siripongs through their own racialized assumptions about the "Buddhist monk" even before reading the article.[167]

Journalists reinforce these headlines with their descriptions of Siripongs' demeanor. In their *LA Times* article "Judge Halts Execution for Ex-Buddhist Monk," staff writers Esther Schraeder and Richard Marosi note that "inmates and wardens described [Siripongs] as a gentle man who prayed every day and painted pictures of his native Thailand in his cell."[168] While their characterization of Siripongs as a "gentle man" feminize him and separate him from the presumed violent masculinity of other men in prison, their mention of his Thai nationality and daily prayers exoticize him and demonstrate his sincere religious devotion. With a single sentence, Schrader and Marosi map the racialized icon of the peaceful, devoted, foreign, "effeminate and ultimately nonmenacing" Oriental Monk onto Siripongs before an American audience already conditioned to recognize him.[169]

Journalists also described Siripongs as a model prisoner, someone who had reformed himself in a way that made him more obedient than and thus morally superior to most people in prison. In a 1999 *New York Times* article subtitled "Model Inmate Asks Gray Davis for Clemency," journalist Don Terry highlights Siripongs's "spotless prison record" and quotes San Quentin authorities who called him "respectful," "peaceful," and "a positive role model."[170] These descriptions marked Siripongs—who Terry notes had been "a Buddhist monk in his native Thailand"—as a rare, positive case, and a "good prisoner."[171] When

Double Murder," *Oakland Tribune*, February 9, 1999, Series 2, Box 6, Folder 15 (Espy Papers).

167. Howard Mintz and Dan Reed, "Execution Set Tuesday," *San Jose Mercury News*, February 7, 1999, Series 2, Box 6, Folder 15 (Espy Papers); Howard Mintz, "Killer Gets Lethal Needle," *San Jose Mercury News*, February 9, 1999, Series 2, Box 6, Folder 15 (Espy Papers).

168. Schraeder and Marosi, "Judge Halts Execution."

169. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 18.

170. Don Terry, "Term Just Begun: Governor Faces Life-or-Death Choice," *New York Times*, February 4, 1999, Series 2, Box 6, Folder 15 (Espy Papers), https://archives.albany.edu/espy/catalog/3884.

171. Ibid.

trapped in prison, the Oriental Monk became the Model Prisoner, and thus the exceptional model minority.

As newspapers published headlines about Frankie Parker "Discovering Buddha on Prison's Death Row" and romantic descriptions of his calm and disciplined way of life, he also became an Orientalized icon.[172] In a 1996 *New York Times* article, journalist Kevin Sack describes the material elements of Parker's Buddhist life in great detail.[173] Not only was Parker's head "shaved" like a monk's, but he also wore a "ritualistic black apron, called a rakusu over his prison whites" and had "wrapped brown prayer beads around his hands while silver cuffs shackled his ankles."[174] Sack does not explain the religious significance of these "ritualistic" elements but lets them serve as exotica, marking Parker's difference and proximity to Asianness. Lacking an explanation, readers could map their own assumptions about Buddhism onto Parker. Moreover, by noting the contrasting hues of his black rakusu and his prison whites, his brown prayer beads and his silver shackles, Sack suggests a disjunction between Parker's status as a Buddhist and the status of a prisoner. The newspaper reinforces this juxtaposition with a large photograph of Parker bowing during an initiation ceremony in prison.[175] The repetition of this new Orientalist imaginary through both words and images solidifies Parker's uniqueness among people in prison.[176]

Sack also depicts Parker's demeanor as distinct from that of other imprisoned people. "Each night," he writes, Parker "waits for the rantings of the condemned to fade and then rises at 3 A.M. to meditate in silence for 40 minutes."[177] Whereas Sack portrays Parker as disciplined and dedicated to early morning meditation, his description of the "rantings" of everyone else in prison (dehumanized and rendered irredeemable with the label "the condemned") characterizes them as not only noisy and angry, but also irrational and lacking

172. Sack, "Discovering Buddha"; Julian E. Barnes, "A Buddhist On Death Row," *The Boston Phoenix,* August 2, 1996 (EZFR); Michael Hibben, "Guilty By Association."
173. Sack, "Discovering Buddha," EZFR.
174. Ibid.
175. Ibid.
176. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 7.
177. Sack, "Discovering Buddha."

self-control—the qualities of someone who violated the social contract.[178] By contrast, despite Parker's shackled wrists and ankles and the execution date hanging over his head, Sack represents him as a rational, self-determined, civilized subject. After all, his name and his face appeared in the *New York Times*.

Celebrities also repeat Buddhist exceptionalism discourses. In 2022, Oprah Winfrey marveled at the ability of Jarvis Jay Masters, a Black man who had been on California's death row for over forty years, to "survive with [his] mind intact" when "so many people lose their mind on death row and in solitary confinement."[179] Winfrey celebrated Masters' rationality and positive attitude as rare traits for a person on death row. In a 2022 video post on Twitter, she associates these qualities with Masters' embrace of Buddhism. Rather than "being embittered and angry over his plight," she says, Masters "became a Buddhist" who "made peace with his past" and became "filled with light."[180] Dichotomizing the peaceful Buddhist and the "embittered and angry" prisoner (and the racialized stereotypes associated with each), Winfrey rejoices in Masters's "miraculous" story, Buddhist life, and triumph over the mental challenges many people succumbed to on death row.[181] She arranged high-powered, pro-bono legal representation for him.[182]

Celebrated author Rebecca Solnit has also repeatedly expressed her admiration for Masters, praising his dedication to Buddhism and his ability "to make, in some ways, a good life within the most horrific limits imaginable."[183] In articles for Buddhist audiences and general audiences alike, Solnit describes these limits, including the abuse Masters

178. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 30–32.
179. Oprah Daily, "Oprah In Conversation with Jarvis Jay Masters | Oprah's Book Club #97 | That Bird Has My Wings," YouTube, posted January 2, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydv63L3IiUI.
180. Ibid.
181. Oprah's Book Club (@oprahsbookclub), "@Oprah's next Book Club selection is 'That Bird Has My Wings,' by Jarvis Jay Masters, who has maintained his innocence while incarcerated on death row for over 30 years. His memoir shares a powerful message of hope, and deep insight into how our childhoods shape us. #ReadWithUs," Twitter, September 13, 2022, https://x.com/oprahsbookclub/status/1569665676985475074.
182. Oliver, "Jarvis Jay Masters Continues His Fight."
183. Solnit, "Another Birthday on Death Row."

experienced in the foster care system, California's disproportionate incarceration and capital sentencing of Black people like Masters, and the racial stereotypes and legal procedures that perpetuate such discrimination.[184] "Jarvis is a remarkable person," Solnit writes in a 2022 article for *The Guardian*, "but his plight is sadly ordinary."[185]

While Solnit recognizes that such discrimination and violence are widespread, systemic, and institutional failures that too many people in the US endure, her essays repeatedly frame Masters's story as a narrative of overcoming.[186] Despite facing a traumatic childhood and a murder conviction based on shoddy evidence, she writes in the *Guardian*, Masters found "some kind of peace" on death row, transformed from a gang member into a "peacekeeper," and discovered he could transcend San Quentin's walls through creative writing.[187] He was no longer "the surly young Black man...locked up all those years ago," but instead "a devoted meditator...renowned Tibetan Buddhist practitioner and peacemaker."[188] Solnit depicts the carceral system and its failures as a static backdrop to a lone hero's journey. She presents the system, while horrific, as unchangeable. Individuals trapped inside it, however, can choose how they respond and, through individual effort, rise above it. "The most remarkable thing about [Masters]," Solnit writes for her thousands of Twitter followers, is that "while on death row for a crime he did not commit, he became a renowned Buddhist practitioner." She continues, "Stranded in hell, he built a refuge in his mind where he could find peace within and a strong

184. Ibid; Rebecca Solnit, "I Have a Friend on Death Row. He's the Most Remarkable Person I Know," *The Guardian*, December 27, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/27/us-prisons-death-row-rebecca-solnit; Rebecca Solnit, "Injustice Delayed," *Harper's Magazine,* March 4, 2016, https://harpers.org/2016/03/injustice-delayed/; Rebecca Solnit, "Bird in a Cage," *Harper's Magazine,* March 2016, https://harpers.org/archive/2016/03/259268/.

185. Solnit, "I Have a Friend on Death Row."

186. Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Duke University Press, 2017), 84–88.

187. Rebecca Solnit, "I Have a Friend on Death Row."

188. Rebecca Solnit, "Why Did We Stop Believing That People Can Change?" *New York Times*, April 27, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/opinion/forgiveness-redemption.html.

community beyond the walls. He's a self-made miracle."[189] By characterizing Masters as "self-made," Solnit embraces a liberal individualism focused on personal responsibility and an understanding of the human as an autonomous subject. By calling him a "miracle," she describes him as someone who responded to incarceration in an extraordinary, positive way that distinguished him from most other people in prison. As Solnit praises Masters's transformation, she sets him apart from all others who neither became Buddhists nor worked to "find peace" amid the "hell" of prison.[190]

THE STATUS QUO

As these discourses of Buddhist exceptionalism spread through print and digital media, they reinforce dominant racialized assumptions about Buddhism as a peaceful, passive Asian religion and about criminality as a problem of Black and Brown people. In the process, the US carceral system evades substantive criticism. Buddhist leaders' assertions that incarcerated people's transformations into bodhisattvas could turn hell-prisons into Paradise and death row into a peaceful temple present imprisoned people as the sole cause of violence and suffering inside.[191] Repeatedly, Buddhist leaders place responsibility on incarcerated people to become more compassionate, peaceful, or wise, while treating the racialized US carceral system as hellish scenery for people to act within rather than a system of disenfranchisement to act upon.

In these ways, discourses of Buddhist exceptionalism reproduce a liberal individualism that normalizes the ongoing disenfranchisement of imprisoned people in the name of safety and, sometimes,

189. Rebecca Solnit (@RebeccaSolnit), 2022, "So great Oprah chose this beautiful memoir by my friend Jarvis Masters on Death Row, but I wish she'd said the evidence powerfully supports his innocence. But that's not even the most remarkable thing about him. 1/3," Twitter, September 13, 2022, https://x.com/RebeccaSolnit/status/1569673440147419136; Rebecca Solnit (@RebeccaSolnit), "While on death row for a crime he did not commit, he became a renowned Buddhist practitioner. That is, stranded in hell, he built a refuge in his mind where he could find peace within and a strong community beyond the walls. He's a self-made miracle. [Me visiting] 2/3," Twitter, September 13, 2022, https://x.com/RebeccaSolnit/status/1569674571997118464/photo/1.
190. Solnit (@RebeccaSolnit), "While on Death Row."
191. Hanh, *Be Free,* 27; Letter from Arkansas psychotherapist to Tucker.

rehabilitation. This state of exception enables the medical abuse, neglect, and poor living conditions that make practically every prison sentence a potential death sentence.[192] As soon as people become "prisoners" they are marked for debility: for potential, preventable, and acceptable heat exhaustion deaths that happen in massive numbers each summer, for medical co-pays their meager wages cannot cover, for accelerated biological aging and horrendously unhealthy prison food that impair their immune systems, and more.[193] Medicalized racism only adds fuel to this deadly fire.[194]

Buddhist exceptionalism not only normalizes the perpetual violence of the American carceral system but also reinforces it. Stories about incarcerated Buddhists who have overcome anger, greed, and ignorance, emerging as wise and compassionate bodhisattvas, reproduce and disseminate the same assumptions about the "prisoner" or "criminal" that have informed the discriminatory policing, sentencing, and warehousing of millions in US prisons and conditioned Americans to accept this system: assumptions about an irrational, violent, insincere, less-than-human, Black or Brown, not-quite-citizen "Other" who *can* reform, but usually *chooses* not to and thus must, for the sake of societal

192. Agamben, *Omnibus Homo Sacer*; Hannah Calvelli, Olivia Duffield, and Brian Tuohy, "Why Medical Students Should Learn about Prison Health," *British Medical Journal* 384 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q213; Jim Daley, "NU Graduate Dies at Stateville During Heat Wave," *South Side Weekly*, July 4, 2024, https://southsideweekly.com/nu-graduate-dies-at-stateville-during-heat-wave/; Sam Levin, "'Like an Oven': Death at US Women's Prison Amid Heatwave Sparks Cries for Help," *The Guardian*, July 9, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jul/09/california-heat-wave-prison-inmate-death#:~:text=A%20woman%20in%20the%20Central,suffered%20a%20preventable%20heat%20death.

193. Ibid.; Farah Acher Kaiksow, Lars Brown, and Kristin Brunsell Merss, "Caring for the Rapidly Aging Incarcerated Population: The Role of Policy," *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* 4, no. 3 (2023): 7–11, 10.3928/00989134-20230209-02; Wendy Sawyer, "The Steep Cost of Medical Co-Pays in Prison Puts Health at Risk," Prison Policy Initiative, April 19, 2017, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/04/19/copays/; Leslie Soble, Kathryn Stroud, and Marika Weinstein, *Eating behind Bars: Ending the Hidden Punishment of Food in Prison,* Impact Justice (2020), impactjustice.org/impact/food-in-prison/#report.

194. Lindsey A. Vandergrift and Paul P. Christopher, "Do Prisoners Trust the Healthcare System?" *Health Justice* 9, no. 15 (December 2021), doi: 10.1186/s40352-021-00141-x.

safety, remain locked away. Buddhist leaders, journalists, celebrities, and others render this system acceptable by repeatedly juxtaposing the wise, compassionate, and peaceful Buddhist and the angry, greedy, and ignorant prisoner, asserting that people in prison can transform themselves if they put in the effort. This discourse marks those who do not transform as simply not having the will, rationality, or morality to do so and thus deserving of second-class status and misery in prison, regardless of the cruelties and injustices involved.

At the same time, by participating in the ongoing repetition of the Oriental Monk icon, and celebrating incarcerated people racialized as such as "model prisoners," the rhetoric of Buddhist exceptionalism also reinforces the systemic discrimination, disenfranchisement, and violence Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders face in the US. Reproducing Orientalist stereotypes of Buddhism as an ancient Eastern religion flattens the diversity of Buddhism and of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, homogenizing all three as "Oriental" communities of passive, pious, wise, and stagnant sages. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the Oriental Monk-as-Model Prisoner icon and the icon of the Black or Brown Criminal reinforces the model minority myth that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are naturally self-sufficient, successful, compliant "good citizens" unimpacted by the US carceral system.[195] In addition to bolstering anti-Blackness, the model minority stereotype obscures the poverty many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders face, reducing their access to social services while increasing their risk of racialized attacks by people who deem them "economic threats."[196]

As critical race theorist Raymond Magsaysay has demonstrated, the model minority myth also plays a key role in the mass incarceration of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, who may not make up a large percentage of the prison population but have faced disproportionate

195. Magsaysay, "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Prison Industrial Complex"; Cathy Hu and Sino Esthappan, "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, a Missing Minority in Criminal Justice Data," *Urban Wire*, May 23, 2017, https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/asian-americans-and-pacific-islanders-missing-minority-criminal-justice-data; Melissa Hung, "Supporting Asian Americans in the Criminal Justice System," San Francisco Foundation, July 9, 2018, https://sff.org/supporting-asian-americans-in-the-criminal-justice-system/.

196. Magsaysay, "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Prison Industrial Complex," 455, 464–465; Wu, *Color of Success*, 253.

and ever-increasing rates of arrest and imprisonment since the 1970s.[197] Magsaysay details the many ways schools fail young Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, driving them to miss class, face suspensions, and experience more police encounters.[198] At the same time, assumptions that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are definitively not-criminal model minorities have resulted in not only prisons, but also academics, activists, and journalists rendering their experiences with incarceration—including the racism they face as a "minority among minorities" *and* their radical activism inside—invisible.[199] Portrayals of incarcerated Buddhists as simultaneously the Oriental Monk and the reformed Model Prisoner reinforce these assumptions and this erasure.

When Buddhist leaders and others praise incarcerated Asians like Jaturun Siripongs as exceptionally pious, compliant, and peaceful individuals, they map both stereotypes onto them, singling them out as rare "success stories" of personal reform; linking that success to hard work, religious devotion, and cooperation with prison authorities; and raising them up as role models for all others in prison to follow through their own personal effort. At the same time, the model minority myth that Buddhist exceptionalism constructs celebrates an Orientalized stereotype that presumably anyone can embody if they put in the effort. Discourses that celebrate incarcerated Buddhists like Frankie Parker or Jarvis Jay Masters who are not Asians, Asian Americans, or Pacific Islanders as exceptional Oriental Monk icons—and particularly those that emphasize their "exotic" attire or "unique" interest in Buddhism—suggest that only so-called Asian religion, Asian material

197. Magsaysay, "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Prison Industrial Complex," 453–455, 483–485.
198. Ibid., 482–511.
199. Eddy Zheng, "Prison-to-Leadership Pipeline: Asian American Prisoner Activism," in *Contemporary Asian American Activism: Building Movements for Liberation*, ed. Diane Fujino and Robyn Magalit Rodriguez (University of Washington Press, 2022), 37–62; Magsaysay, "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Prison Industrial Complex," 445–456.

culture, and Asian film characters exist in prison, not real people of Asian descent.

CONCLUSION

Jarvis Jay Masters has repeatedly denied that he experienced a radical transformation and became a new, better person through Buddhism. As celebrated Buddhist leaders like Pema Chödrön commend him for having "transformed...at the core" and notable authors like Rebecca Solnit praise him as a "a miracle of cheerfulness...locked up among the most violent Californians," Masters has continuously rejected these narratives of Buddhist exceptionalism.[200] "Over the years, I have been asked," Masters writes in his memoir *That Bird Has My Wings*, "What experience created a reverberation that transformed me from the person I was then to the person I am today?" He continues, "The truth of the matter is that I have never changed. Rather, I have simply discovered who I've always been: the young child that knew his life mattered, that he could make a difference in the world, and that he was born to fly."[201] Instead of presenting his story as a teleological narrative of awakening; rising from the "mud" of hatred, greed, and delusion; and emerging as a compassionate being, Masters asserts that his "natural goodness," his buddha-nature, had always been with him.[202]

This "natural goodness," however, did not make him exceptional. In an interview published in a 2010 issue of the newsletter *Lotus on the Bayou*, he explains:

> Buddhist teachings taught me that, fundamentally, there wasn't anything really bad about me or the others I grew up with. Through meditation, I held onto the idea that I could reclaim...that boy who became lost in the system.[203]

Masters refuses to present his past as a young Black boy who was thrust into the cruelty and the instability of the foster system and "sometimes act[ed] out in violent and dangerous ways" as a worthless

200. Pema Chödrön, foreword to Jarvis Jay Masters, *That Bird Has My Wings* (HarperOne, 2009), xiv; Solnit, "Why Did We Stop Believing."
201. Masters, *That Bird*, xv.
202. Ibid.
203. *Lotus on the Bayou*: *Newsletter of Myoken-ji Temple, Houston* 8, no. 1 (2010), https://myoken-ji-usa.org/LOB8-1.pdf.

existence that he left behind once he took the precepts and began a rigorous meditation practice.[204]

Rather than distancing himself from the people with whom he grew up, Masters describes his journey as one that reminded him not only about his own value, but also about the goodness of others who faced similar circumstances, including those who had committed violence. Presenting himself as one of many "abandoned, abused, and wounded children who, by no fault of their own, become lost in the system, fill up the juvenile centers, and eventually overflow into the most hardened prisons," Masters denies both the idea that he was reborn into a superior existence through his Buddhist practice and that the goodness he reclaimed made him unique.[205] Rather than an individual crucible that he overcame through sheer will, he narrates his childhood adversity as part of a *collective* suffering endured by people who had been denied opportunities to live, thrive, "to love and be loved," but who continued to "matter" regardless of what they had done or where they ended up.[206] By rejecting the narrative of exceptional change, he also refuses to denigrate other people in prison or others for whom the racialized and racializing system of mass incarceration is "their birthright."[207]

While Masters has expressed remorse for the violence he committed, he has also undercut the "myth of choice," drawing attention to the dehumanizing nature of incarceration and the conditions of his own life on which this racialized system thrives, such as segregated housing, poverty, lack of access to substance use treatment, and the abuse and neglect rampant in the foster system. Each of these conditions disproportionately impacts people of color and maintains historical, racialized inequalities under the cover of colorblindness.

In his seemingly simple denial that he underwent an ontological change that differentiated him from not only his past self but also other people caught by the many arms of the carceral machine, Masters unsettles the racialized dichotomies of violence/peacefulness, hell-being/bodhisattva, and criminal/citizen on which discourses of Buddhist exceptionalism depend—discourses that construct hierarchies between those few individuals who deserve a life free from abuse

204. Masters, *That Bird*, 273.
205. Ibid, 274.
206. Ibid., 273–274.
207. Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 248.

and neglect and the unnamed mass who does not. He wanted his writing, he explains in a 2020 interview, to "break through the stereotypes people have about prisoners" and "humanize" not only himself, but also the people who surround him in San Quentin.[208] While protecting their identities by using pseudonyms, he has written extensively about his friends and neighbors inside, describing their unique personalities, complexities, and specific senses of humor, as well as their love for their families and their acts of kindness.[209]

Whereas colorblind discourses about exceptional incarcerated Buddhists construct new racialized hierarchies grounded in centuries-old Orientalist, anti-Black, and anti-Brown stereotypes, reinforce "the injustices of liberal individualism," and normalize the racial violence of the US carceral system, Masters embraced what angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah have called a "radical dharma" that "deconstructs rather than amplifies the systems of suffering, that starves rather than fertilizes the soil...that the deep roots of societal suffering grow in."[210] Masters centers community care rather than liberal individualism and expresses gratitude for not only the kindness Buddhist leaders outside prison showed him, but also the love he shared with other children growing up who "taught one another how to smile and cling to friendship when there was nothing else," people who discourses of Buddhist exceptionalism erase as part of the "mud" an awakened bodhisattva must leave behind.[211]

Jarvis Jay Masters's repeated rejection of Buddhist exceptionalism is not an exceptional stance. Rather than presenting him as a role model or wise teacher from whose unmatched insight we must all learn, I simply aim to demonstrate how his refusal to frame his story as one of personal transformation through Buddhism also means paying attention to the lives of people and the realities about incarceration that discourses of Buddhist exceptionalism too often obscure. Masters is exceptional neither for recognizing the structural, racialized violence the US carceral system perpetuates, nor for his message about

208. Susan Moon, "Finding Freedom: The Death Row Journey of Jarvis Jay Masters," *Lion's Roar*, September 19, 2020, https://www.lionsroar.com/finding-freedom-the-death-row-journey-of-jarvis-jay-masters/.
209. Masters, *That Bird*, 277.
210. angel Kyodo williams, Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (North Atlantic Books, 2016), xxiii.
211. Masters, *That Bird*, 277.

the inherent worth of every person touched by mass incarceration's enormous reach. Instead, he is only one voice in a chorus of activists and advocates—past and present, in prisons and out, Buddhist and non-Buddhist—trying to dismantle the dominant myths about personal responsibility, the "criminality" of Black and Brown people, and Asian "model-minorities" through which mass incarceration maintains its legitimacy.[212] Despite the strength of this collective voice, however, these messages about the need for structural change and an end to the systemic violence mass incarceration perpetuates have too often been, if not dismissed or ignored outright, misinterpreted and amplified as calls for more rehabilitation and more appreciation for the possibility that *some* people, but not all, can one day be reformed.

212. A few examples include: Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*; Zheng, "Prison-to-Leadership Pipeline"; Asian Prisoner Support Committee, *Arriving: Freedom Writings by Asian and Pacific Islanders behind and beyond Bars* (Eastwind Books, 2024); Orisanmi Burton, *Tip of the Spear: Black Radicalism, Prison Repression, and the Long Attica Revolt* (University of California Press, 2023).