Imagined and Realized Black-Asian Solidarity and American Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the question of Black–Asian solidarities in American Buddhism in response to Rima Vesley-Flad's examination of the possibility of Black–Asian Buddhist solidarities being stymied by historic tension and aversion among Black and Asian American communities. Rather than lingering on anti-Blackness, I focus on unpacking how Asian American racialization, particularly inscrutability, erases Asian American religious subjects in both religious studies and in public discourse. While a multicultural politics of representation highlights and celebrates Asian religious subjects and cultures, it commodifies Asianness while positing the impossibility of Asian Americanness. I analyze interpellations of Blackness and Asian Americanness that occlude Black–Asian solidarities both in popular US culture and in Rima Vesley-Flad's *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition* and Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge*. I conclude by suggesting that adopting Robin D.G. Kelley and Vijay Prashad's polyculturalism as a discourse and hermeneutic can not only reveal imagined and realized Black–Asian solidarities, but also Blackness and Asian Americanness unbound from US racial hierarchies.

Keywords: Polyculturalism, Black–Asian solidarities, American Buddhism, Racialization, Inscrutability

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines tensions in Black and Asian American Buddhisms in the imagined and realized forms of solidarity. It responds to Rima Vesley-Flad's suggestion in *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*[1] that while Black–Asian Buddhist solidarities are possible, historic tensions and aversion among Black and Asian American Buddhist communities prevent solidarity building. This is primarily framed around the question of why Black Buddhist practitioners typically affiliate with predominantly white sanghas rather than Asian Buddhist communities. Vesley-Flad notes the lack of research on this question and relies on Larry Yang's speculation that Black Buddhists are drawn to white sanghas because (1) Asian American Buddhist temples appear to be culturally exclusive and have social practices and hierarchies appearing to be antithetical to Western humanist values, and (2) white sanghas present Buddhism through the lens of Western psychology.[2] Adaptations away from Asian cultural particularities are desirable, while Asia unfiltered through the lens of Orientalism and the white gaze are undesirable.

Building on Yang's observations, I respond to Vesley-Flad's thesis on Black–Asian tension by arguing that such aversions emerge from structural impediments that disincentivize middle-class educated seekers of Asian religious cultures and spiritual technologies such as Buddhism from encountering Asia outside of the Orientalizing frames in which Buddhism has been domesticated by a predominantly white convert Buddhist community. Ann Gleig's 2019 article in *Lion's Roar* notes that American convert Buddhist spaces primarily appeal to "a narrow demographic of well-off college graduates."[3] In addition to a retreat model that inhibits people with lower levels of disposable income from accessing these spaces, American convert Buddhist spaces employ cultural currency that may be alienating for working class participants. Centering meditation certainly dissociates potential converts from chanting, merit making, and other lay Buddhist spiritual practices less commonly found in predominantly white sanghas.

1. Rima Vesley-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation* (New York University Press, 2022).
2. Ibid., 61–62.
3. Ann Gleig, "Beyond the Upper Middle Way," *Lion's Roar*, accessed September 13, 2019, https://www.lionsroar.com/beyond-the-upper-middle-way/.

However, Gleig also notes that it isn't just the focus on meditation itself that alienates working class participants: rather, it is also "the accessibility of practices, their relevance to daily life experience, and the social support available in the communities in which they are taught."[4]

If it is the case that the majority of US Buddhist converts have a college education and middle class cultural currency, then it may not be outlandish to envision that the college educated convert may have encountered Buddhism in college clubs related to US Buddhist organizations that are meditation-centric, or have been influenced by scholarly representations of Buddhism. These middle class convert Buddhists thus may have internalized a normative understanding of Buddhism presented in religious studies scholarship invariably shaped by Orientalist frames. Specifically, the academic discipline of religious studies has privileged the disciplinary boundaries of area studies that emerged in the Cold War context that effectively partitioned and divided the study of racialized "others"[5] both within the United States and "out there" in the rest of the world.[6] Buddhist studies fragments into two disciplinary areas that are conversant with one another through the axis of a white interlocutor: (1) within the specter of Asian studies as a tradition "out there" whether studied anthropologically as a lived tradition in contemporary Asia, or as a tradition

4. Ibid.

5. I use *racialized "others"* rather than *People of Color* here to highlight how academic discourse contributes to the categorization and differentiation of ethnocultural "others" in ways that reinforce racialization as well as create structural impediments that disincentivize the study of different racialized groups comparatively without referencing whiteness.

6. See Natalie E. Quli, "Western Self, Asian Other: Modernity, Authenticity, and Nostalgia for 'Tradition' in Buddhist Studies," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 16 (2009): 19; Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (New York University Press, 2016), 8. This tendency is not just something found in Buddhist studies, as Quli argues, that is due to an "area studies mentality," but also in anthropology of religion. "Today, the anthropology of Islam has moved away from a primarily orientalist narrative and attempts to offer more complex pictures of Muslim life.... However, although this work is important, much of it continues to focus on Muslims outside the United States and Europe, and this disciplinary emphasis on non-Western Muslims has an unintended effect: it reproduces the notion of Muslim as 'other,' which ends up reifying the static notions of 'us versus them'" (Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*, 8).

whose textuality is interrogated by various philological methods for its historical accuracy as well as internal philosophical coherency; (2) as a tradition practiced "within" the Western Hemisphere in the study of American religion that privileges phenomenological or sociological approaches to documenting the lives of Buddhists. In the former, the project of translation and comparison pits a (white) Western interlocutor against the Asian "other." The "other" is reified[7] as an entity that is both geographically and ideologically outside the spacetime of Western modernity. In the latter, the phenomenological study of American Buddhism takes a typological turn, as documented and critiqued by Joseph Cheah,[8] that reifies a racial hierarchy. As such, white interlocutors become overrepresented both in the analysis and in the representation of American Buddhism. This exacerbates the attempt to track Black–Asian entanglements within American religion outside of a trite narrative of Black–Asian tension.

What get occluded by both approaches in Buddhist studies are African American and Asian American religious subjectivities that deviate from expected racial, cultural, and religious/spiritual affiliations. African American religiosity is often interpellated[9] through Christianity, Islam, and new religious movements. Interpellation refers to the process of reading, defining, naming, and identifying things into subjects. Specifically, I am referring to Michelle M. Wright's usage of the term, in which interpellations are inexplicably linked to not only time and space but also the production and ordering of knowledge. Wright argues that the defining or "calling out" of a subject contrasts with the process of occlusion or the closing and veiling that obstructs or hides. Thus, for Wright, any process of defining or identifying a

7. Reification refers to "thingification," or the process by which subjects are turned into objects or objects are turned into subjects. In this context, I am arguing that Asians are "othered" and turned into an object. Rather than being seen as a human subject with historical agency, the objectified Asian "other" is suspended outside of history not as transcending it, but rather in stasis. See Quli, "Western Self, Asian Other," 8, 19–20.

8. Joseph Cheah, *Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 14–17.

9. For more, see Michelle M. Wright, "Black In Time: Exploring New Ontologies, New Dimensions, New Epistemologies of the African Diaspora," *Transforming Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (2010): 70–73, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7466.2010.01072.x.

subject necessarily invokes not only a scene of interpellation as elaborated by Frantz Fanon,[10] the materialization and internalization of ideologies in the subject, but also an epistemology, ontology, and narrative structure. The process of subject formation and identification or interpellation thus is one that simultaneously opens up and closes off certain possibilities in terms of the analytic frame being used as well as pertinent observations about the person or thing that is being subjectivized. In other words, the interpellative process reduces the multidimensionality of the subject, or the plurality within a collective identity category.

To the extent that the African American religious subject is imagined as Christian or Muslim, they occupy a non-normative, antithetical position to an assumed normative Christianity (read white, European, Protestant) and normative Islam (read Arab, Sunni, and Wahhabi). The notion that African American religious subjects are drawn to heretical, cultish, and charismatic expressions was first proposed in Arthur Huff Fausett's analysis of Great Migration African American religiosity in *Black Gods of the Metropolis*.[11] Furthermore, Dianne Stewart has argued that the study of Black religious experiences and African derived traditions has yet to reckon with anti-Africanness, Afrophobia,[12] and the problem of anthropological poverty that deprives Blackness of its humanness. Black Christianity, African American Islam, and Black new religious movements are understood as reactions to originary white violence on Blackness such that it reifies vertical interpellations of Blackness as that which is produced by white agency and the power to signify the subaltern "other." Furthermore, it prevents readings of Blackness and African American religiosity outside the bounds of the

10. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (Pluto Press, 2008), 88–108.

11. Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

12. See Diane Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 69–89.

reactionary, including Black practitioners of Asian religious cultures and spiritual technologies.

ASIAN AMERICAN INSCRUTABILITY

Parallel to anti-Blackness and interpellations of Black religiosity is the constant bypassing or erasure of Asian American religious subjectivity in the study of religion writ large. Much like how studies of African American religion have been relegated to the margins of religious studies scholarship, studies of Asian American religion likewise occupy a disciplinary ghetto of sorts. Asian studies in the area studies approach continues to be in vital conversation with Asian religious studies, but Asian American religious studies appears not to receive the same treatment within both Asian American studies and American religious studies. If present in scholarly spaces, Asian American religious cultures and subjectivities are inserted as part of an anthology of texts surveying and representing diversity within the discipline. Asian American religious subjects like Asian American representations writ large function as perpetual foreigners and religious outsiders.[13] This is salient in both representations of Asian American evangelicals on social media and the treatment of Asian American religion in religious studies, of which Vesley-Flad and her interlocutor's imagining of Asianness is also not an exception.

Justin K. H. Tse's analysis of the self-representation of Asian American evangelicals in digital spaces reveals how mainstream US evangelicals Orientalize and tokenize Asian American religious subjects, citing the 2004 VBS publication "Rickshaw Rally" as well as Saddleback Community Church senior pastor Rick Warren's racially insensitive post comparing his church's ministerial staff's attitude to the Chinese Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.[14] Asian

13. See Funie Hsu, "Engaged Buddhism in the United States," in *Oxford Handbook of American Buddhism*, ed. Ann Gleig and Scott Mitchell (Oxford University Press, 2024), 362–363; Helen Jin Kim, "Reconstructing Asian America's Religious Past: A Historiography," in *Envisioning Religion, Race, and Asian Americans*, ed. David K. Yoo and Khyati Y. Joshi (University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), 13.

14. Justin K. H. Tse, "The 'Open Letter to the Evangelical Church' and Its Discontents: The Online Politics of Asian American Evangelicals, 2013–2016," in *Religion, Hypermobility and Digital Media in Global Asia: Faith, Flows and*

American evangelicals exhibit a reactionary politics grounded in a vertical interpellation of Asian Americanness into the US racial hierarchy by demanding the reform of evangelicalism for the broader aims of racial harmony and reconciliation that included rather than excluded them. Tse notes that such a project is ultimately grounded in the soteriological commitments of Asian American evangelicals that mirror evangelical Protestantism's goal of "ecclesial salvation," which imagines that salvation from the human condition can only be realized within the church. Racial harmony within the church, an organ of the Christian vision of salvation, is a precondition for evangelical witness and engagement with the broader society, which it engages with a missiological purpose of saving them not only from the human condition (of sinfulness) but also broader racial injustice. This pseudo-ecumenical motivator that some Asian American evangelicals used to critique evangelicals broadly for their anti-Asian racist rhetoric and activity, however, was not accepted by all Asian American evangelicals. Other Asian American evangelicals and progressive Asian American Christians have contested such claims. Tse concludes that the digital space where conflicting interpellations of Asian American religious subjectivities occurred nonetheless is "not the space where the decisive confrontations with this infrastructural formation will occur."[15] Neither US evangelicalism nor religious studies as a discipline have been moved enough by this event to take seriously Asian American religious subjects. The Asian American religious subject remains an inscrutable "other," one that is interpellated through familiar lines of area studies and Asian studies that conflate diasporic Asian subjectivities with contemporary continental ones. Asian American inscrutability informs the absence or peripheral position of Asian American religious subjects substituted by the authoritative (albeit instrumental) presence of Asian religious subjects in studies of American Buddhism, race and religion, and Buddhist modernism. As Caroln M. Jones Medine observes, "ethnic Buddhists who taught white Buddhists sometimes are erased from the tradition."[16] Here, *ethnic Buddhist* is explicitly coded as

Fellowship, ed. Catherine Gomes, Lily Kong, and Orlando Woods (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 182–183.

15. Ibid., 197.

16. Carolyn M. Jones Medine, "Natal and Convert Buddhism and Mindfulness," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 41 (2021): 37, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48648935.

first-generation Asian Buddhist immigrants. However, Oriental Monk figures who are recognized as dharma teachers for white Buddhists need not be Asian American immigrants at all. Contemporary and historical Oriental Monk figures such as the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and D. T. Suzuki are all decidedly Asian religious subjects who are not immigrants to the United States. Jane Iwamura notes that while Asian religious subjects such as D. T. Suzuki are received as authoritative representatives of Asian religions that can be traced to American convert Buddhist reception history, Asian American religious subjects cannot. Iwamura highlights the role of Japanese Americans such as Bishop Takahashi and Mihoko Okamura in D. T. Suzuki's time in the United States.[17] While these Japanese American subjects contributed to the popularization of Zen in the 1950s, their contributions become marginal and opaque. Asian American religious subjects are either too foreign, attributing any religious commitments or activity to racial throwback, or are too Americanized for their religious practice to be authentic.

> In the representational scheme, Japanese American Buddhists were either portrayed as hopelessly tied to their Japanese roots or comically estranged from them. The most prominent role they are allowed to play in the history of Buddhism's development in the United States is a minor one. Like Mihoko Okamura, Japanese Americans are allowed to serve as able caretakers providing a comfortable environment for more authentic Buddhist representatives from Asia.[18]

Because Asian American subjects are inscrutable, they are overdetermined by their racialization that both occludes their religious subjectivity and prevents their disaggregation from their continental peers. Indeed, the inscrutability that contributed to the strategy of conflating Asian and Asian American subjects may have contributed to the perception that Japanese Americans were secretly loyal to Japan during World War II, which justified their internment. I discuss the instrumentalized presence of Asian religious subjects as proxy to the inscrutable Asian American other when I analyze Vesley-Flad's text by

17. Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 56–60.
18. Ibid., 60.

reading Jane Iwamura's Oriental Monk figure as foil to the Militant Black Radical.

To illustrate this phenomenon of Asian American erasure or inscrutability, consider the 2024 American Academy of Religion's Reading Religion press release in honor of AAPI Month.[19] Out of the five featured book reviews of recent publications, none of the books were authored by an Asian American scholar. Only one of the texts' subject matters focuses on Asian American religiosity, albeit honoring a Vietnamese American Catholic theologian's contribution to the study of Christian theology. The suggested books available for review repeat the same bias of books written not by Asian American authors, with subject matters pertaining to Asian religious traditions "out there" in Asia. Literary theorist Sunny Xiang notes the interpellation of Asian subjectivities through the framework of inscrutability. Inscrutability, like opacity, disrupts racial legibility and informs the racialization of Asian subjects as "other." The figure of the inscrutable Oriental for Xiang haunts the Cold War and post-Cold War literary archives that produces Asianness as a racial object, which warrants ongoing suspicion while simultaneously championing them as potential friends:

> Not all Asians and Asian Americans were seen as enemies. Many were cultivated as sources and championed as friends. In fact, the cold war personalities that will preoccupy me are "free Asians"—the native informants, junior partners, and little brown brothers who were intended as countermeasures to the overdetermined Oriental enemy.[20]

Model minoritized, exceptional cosmopolitan ethnic subjects that furthered US neoliberal multiculturalism were hypervisibilized to demystify the veil of inscrutability shrouding the Cold War military theater. While celebrated as whiz kids, Asian Americans nonetheless deviated from the boundaries of authentic Asianness to become further occluded as *tertium quid*, liminal and marginal subjects neither

19. "AAPI Month Reading," Newsroom, American Academy of Religion, May 7, 2024, https://aarweb.org/AARMBR/Publications-and-News-/Newsroom-/News-/2024/AAPI-Month-Reading.aspx.

20. Sunny Xiang, *Tonal Intelligence: The Aesthetics of Asian Inscrutability During the Long Cold War* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 34.

embraced by the America that they inhabit nor claimed by their home country as diasporic deviations.

POLYCULTURALISM

Vesley-Flad, Chenxing Han, and scholars of American Buddhism may frame Black–Asian relationality through the theoretical model of US multiculturalism. This model may exaggerate the incommensurability of Black and Asian being in a US racial hierarchy and promote simple readings of cross-cultural transgressions through the rhetoric of theft and appropriation. However, I argue against readings of Black–Asian relationality that both reify tension and promote a universalizing narrative of Black–Asian solidarity by redirecting our focus of Black–Asian entanglements away from the conventional disciplinary approaches to interpellating Buddhism, Blackness, and Asianness. Building on hip hop and religion scholarship over the past several decades, I read hip-hop culture as a religious space/site for Black–Asian polycultural production and performance that incorporates Buddhist spiritual technologies and practices that are counterhegemonic to its appropriation by white Western converts. Hip hop and religion scholarship have noted the intersections of hip-hop culture with Christianity as well as Islam. John Ivan Gill has argued that underground hip hop is an aesthetic religion that has progressive as well as liberative formations.[21] Gill uses the framework of theopoetics and process philosophy to make his case. However, I instead turn to Robin D. G. Kelley and Vijay Prashad's framework of polyculturalism to examine the composite nature of hip-hop culture as an aesthetic religion alongside arguments made by Price and Evans on Black–Asian relationalities informed by Asian religious cultures such as Buddhism that inform counterhegemonic interpellations of Black male subjectivities.

Kelley defines polyculturalism through an autotheoretical examination of his identity using the interpellative question of "So what are you?" Repudiating the rigid borders and ethno-nationalist sentiments that characterize multiculturalism, polyculturalism rejects the sense of racial or cultural purity and authenticity. "So-called 'mixed race' children are not the only ones with a claim to multiple heritages. All of us are inheritors of European, African, Native American,

21. See John Ivan Gill, *Underground Rap as Religion: A Theopoetic Examination of a Process Aesthetic Religion* (Routledge, 2019).

and Asian pasts, even if we can't exactly trace our bloodlines to these continents."[22] Rejecting the racial logic that grounds the appeals to blood, genetics, and ancestry in nationalism, polyculturalism acknowledges that culture is a dynamic process rather than "fixed, discrete entities that exist side by side."[23] Culture is lived, performed, remixed, and recreated constantly by people drawing from and drawn by multiple cultural lines. Kelley's essay points to the fluidity and hybridity of Blackness and "Black culture" that can be extended to all humans. Prashad further differentiates multiculturalism and polyculturalism by noting that while the former "tends towards a static view of history, with cultures already forged and with people enjoined to respect and tolerate each cultural world" that polyculturalism "offers a dynamic view of history" and "cultural complexity."[24] Kelley and Prashad are not advocating for the post-racial or collapsing of identity. Rather, culture as a historical process reveals its complex production, performance, and discourse by people across racial, ethnic, and national categories.

To unpack how polyculturalism as a framework informs a reading of Black–Asian entanglements that is not simply one that negates tension with an uncritical solidarity, I reference Su'ad Abdul Khabeer's implementation of polyculturalism in conceptualizing Blackness. Khabeer's analysis of Muslim Cool as performance of Blackness also accentuates Black–Asian entanglements at the intersections of Islam, hip-hop culture, and Blackness. Filipino American Muslim sartorial performances of Black Dandyism are one manifestation of Asian entanglement and solidarity with Blackness through Muslim Cool. For Khabeer, Blackness refers to "histories, traditions, and customs of Black peoples and to the circulating ideas and beliefs about people of African descent."[25] Blackness thus is both performance and discourse, a radical politics and culture that "relies on and exceeds the body, Black and otherwise."[26] The rejection of merely epidermalized or biological Blackness enables interpellations of Blackness that exceed a linear spacetime reifying

22. Robin D. G. Kelley, "Polycultural Me," accessed June 18, 2025, https://www.utne.com/politics/the-people-in-me/.
23. Ibid.
24. Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Beacon Press, 2001), 66.
25. Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*, 5.
26. Ibid.

vertical hierarchical interpellations. It also makes possible horizontal interpellations grounded in peer relationalities with people of African descent and beyond. It is here in peer relationalities with non-Black POC subjects that I find polyculturalism as the culture and discourse of Blacknesss that relies on and exceeds Black bodies. Hip hop, much like Muslim Cool and other aesthetic subcultures that resonate with and are mutually constituted by non-Black POC subjects, becomes a site where Blackness is expressed polyculturally. This polycultural interaction informed by horizontal peer relationships and exchange is not unilateral (wherein, Black expressive cultures constructed by people of African descent are received by and iterated on by non-Black POC), but rather also is the site of Black appropriation and iteration on non-Black POC cultures as well. This may be obvious in the analysis of the writings of Black Buddhists, where *buddhadharma* is received by Black Buddhist practitioners and resignified through their interpretive lens, experiential knowledge, and self-interpellation that is always raced, classed, and gendered. But what is significant here is that counterhegemonic Black subjectivities, or the culture and discourse of Blackness through hip hop, is also informed by interactions with Asian religious cultures and spiritual technologies.

Zachary F. Price[27] and Marcus Evans[28] examine the influence of Asian martial arts on hip-hop culture as facilitating the connection between the kinesthetic and spiritual in the embodiment of Asian spiritual technologies, including Buddhism. Price and Evans note the formation of a counterhegemonic masculinity that is raced and gendered in ways that subvert interpellations of Black male subjectivity grounded in "a history of Black men being hypermasculinized and 'dismembered' by 'lynching and castration' and other forms of racial violence."[29] This parallels forms of counterhegemonic Black subjectivities emerging through hip-hop culture. While within religious studies scholarship the precarity of Black life (particularly Black boys and men) has been analyzed, memorialized, and documented in recent

27. Zachary F. Price, *Black Dragon: Afro Asian Performance and the Martial Arts Imagination* (Ohio State University Press, 2022).
28. Marcus Evans, "Buddhism and Afro-Asian Masculinities in *The Man with the Iron Fists*," in *Buddhist Masculinities*, ed. Megan Bryson and Kevin Buckelew (Columbia University Press, 2023), 233-256.
29. Ibid., 250.

African American theology and philosophical treatises,[30] the ways in which counterhegemonic Blackness formed through hip-hop culture was also shaped by Asian martial arts and Asian religious cultures have yet to be examined. Furthermore, much of the publications on Black Buddhist subjectivities in the past several decades have represented Black queer and feminist subjectivities. Cis Black male subjectivities informed by an encounter with Buddhism that also acknowledges horizontal peer relationalities with Asian American subjects is both underrepresented and undertheorized. As such, Black–Asian relationalities in cultural discourses and performances that are often overdetermined as masculine or heteronormative like martial arts and hip hop may have been overlooked as the grounds for Black–Asian polycultural interactions that involve the remixing of religious cultures and spiritual technologies. However, before turning to Black–Asian relationalities in American Buddhism, I examine the complex pathways in which Blackness and Asianness have been signified and hailed in US cultural discourse, trace some of the critical scholarship resisting how Black–Asian interactions are represented, and analyze neoliberal multiculturalism promoting African Americans and Asian Americans to self-interpellate through monolithic notions of Blackness and Asianness that foreclose Black–Asian polyculturalism and horizontal peer relationships facilitating solidarity. As Michelle M. Wright notes, such collectivities that resist racialization may emerge as a reaction to whiteness itself.

INTERPELLATING BLACKNESS AND ASIANNESS

In *Physics of Blackness*, Wright cautions against collective identities predicated on white agency as originating a reactionary effect.[31] Such collectivities, while rightfully resisting objectification and dehumanization, reify the vertical racial hierarchy peripheralizing the agency

30. Notable texts include Biko Mandela Gray, *Black Life Matter: Blackness, Religion, and the Subject* (Duke University Press, 2022); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Orbis, 2015); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Fortress Press, 2009); and Josiah U. Young III, *Black Lives Matter and the Image of God: A Theo-Anthropological Study* (Lexington Books, 2023).

31. See Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

of the other. Wright argues that linear narratives, whether grounded in progressive epistemologies or Afropessimist forms, fail to capture multidimensional Blackness and the unpredictability of self-interpellation afforded by epiphenomenal, non-linear spacetime. Denise Ferreira da Silva condemns contemporary politics of difference expressed through the market and state-driven directive of neoliberal multiculturalism that relegates racialized and colonized "others" to the status of minor transparent "I's," "the resisting selfsame (interior/temporal) subaltern subject which actualizes itself when naming the (oppressive or repressive) mechanisms of racial exclusion."[32] Minor transparent subjectivity is bound to reactive, affectable subalternity.

Silva argues that the politics of difference ushered by neoliberal multiculturalism reproduces the asymmetrical relations between the European subject and the "other" through the analytics of raciality, the onto-epistemological apparatus formed by the human and social sciences "that has produced race difference as a category connecting place (continent) of 'origin,' bodies, and forms of consciousness."[33] Racial difference is used to signify the European historical self as a transparent subject while others are racialized as affectable subaltern subjects. Transparent subjects are self-determining historical agents due to their interiority: self-consciousness. Silva argues that the analytics of raciality "reproduce Descartes's outline of self-consciousness as the only existing being to enjoy self-determination" in that it prioritizes the mind governing the body, and the historical agent (1) determines the production of knowledge and human culture and (2) governs affectable things, including racialized subaltern others.[34] Culture now has replaced race and nation as the primary locus of difference that bifurcates humanity into the transparent and affectable, now rendered as minor transparent historical subjects with interiority and temporality. However, the "other" still is denied the self-determination that is

32. Denise Ferreira da Silva, "'Bahia Pelo Negro': Can the Subaltern (Subject of Raciality) Speak?," *Ethnicities* 5, no. 3 (2005): 323.

33. Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Towards a Critique of the Socio-logos of Justice: The Analytics of Raciality and the Production of Universality," *Social Identities* 7, no. 3 (2001): 422.

34. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxxvii.

subject to the hegemonic universality of European political, juridical, economic, and ethical authority.

Ferreira da Silva notes that

> Disregarding how scientific universality governs strategies of racial subjection enabled the 1980s celebrations or mourning of the demise of the Subject, which all too quickly and uncritically constructed the now "liberated" cultural others as minor transparent subjects. Two decades later, these cultural (historical) subalterns, still subjected to economic exploitation and dispossession, meet the force of law (juridical universality) almost exclusively in its punitive instantiation, in the policing of immigrants and refugees and the threat of self-righteous neoimperial violence.[35]

In other words, racialized collectivities interpellated by linear spatiotemporality resist (but fail to dismantle) the violence of vertical hierarchies that tout linguistic promotion from subalternity to minor transparency. This includes both (1) neoimperial violence inflicted on minor transparent subjects that excludes them from juridical universalism without triggering an ethical crisis and (2) the vertical hierarchies formed by linear historical accounts of minor transparency that fail to capture the plurality within a collective. Wright's warning frames my exploration of the tensions and paradoxes arising across Black and Asian American Buddhisms, and more broadly articulations of "Black and Asian race relations" in the 2020s.

When applied to the Asian American context, Wright's warning is hardly a new question. Since the end of World War II, Asian Americans' interpellation shifted from earlier nineteenth-century "Yellow Peril" to "Model Minority" Whiz Kids; Asian American collectivities have been imagined as conditional junior partners to whiteness: inactive politically, economically efficient and self-reliant surplus labor, holding cultural values compatible with US social norms. Comparative ethnic studies scholarship has disclosed numerous theories on the space and place of Asian American racialization on the vertical racial hierarchies of the US.[36] Asian American as Model Minority, as a vertical interpellation imposed from the exterior, was conveniently bypassed

35. Ibid., 35.

36. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (Routledge, 2015); Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2016).

by Asian American subjects who internalized this trope, performing Model Minority status to justify their socioeconomic success compared to their lesser fortunate racialized counterparts. As Claire Jean Kim notes, Asian Americans have been racialized through the process of racial triangulation: neither white nor Black, Asian Americans function as a buffer class that shields whiteness from the "others."[37] As this firewall/Whiz Kid/Model Minority, the Asian American subject is in adversarial relation to both whiteness and Blackness. US Black–Asian relations are often interpellated through reifying vertical racial hierarchies that presume competition and violence across Black and Asian collectivities. One group faces the brunt of white supremacy through the structural normalization of anti-Blackness, while the other is imagined to suffer anti-Asian violence by serving as white supremacy's shield. Kim's analysis, like Lynn Mie Itagaki's, is predicated on the eruption of Black–Asian tensions after the Rodney King verdict in 1992.

In *Civil Racism*, Lynn Mie Itagaki observes that Korean Americans' interpellation appears as the figure of the alien "other" shopkeeper violating the territorial integrity of a predominantly Black urban neighborhood and Black customers in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and Ice Cube's "Black Korea."[38] These animosities are persistently rearticulated in recent years with regular calls for Black customers to boycott Asian-owned nail salons and beauty shops,[39] and on the other end paranoid discourse by right-wing Asian Americans on social media[40] for the

37. See Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics and Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–138.

38. Lynn Mie Itagaki, *Civil Racism: The 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion and the Crisis of Racial Burnout* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 39–40.

39. See Aaron Wagner, "Word Choice and Media Exposure Affected Anti-Asian Boycotts During the Pandemic," Health and Human Development, Pennsylvania State University, November 15, 2022, https://www.psu.edu/news/health-and-human-development/story/word-choice-and-media-exposure-affected-anti-asian-boycotts/; and Ken Kalthoff, "Black Leaders Call for Boycott of Asian-Owned Business," NBC DFW, NBC Universal Media, December 21, 2011, https://www.nbcdfw.com/news/local/african-american-leaders-call-for-boycott-of-asian-owned-business/1909793/.

40. An example of far-right Asian American presence on social media that is explicitly anti-Black is Asian Dawn (Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/AznDawn/, Website: https://www.asian-dawn.com/, X: https://x.com/AsianDawn4).

right to defend their storefronts from rioters and looters during protests and other natural disasters. Black–Asian urban conflicts, and the respective interpellations, exclude the possibility of cross-racial solidarity or struggle and remain firmly in the vertical racial hierarchical structure of US racism and white supremacy. Whether "Peril" or Model Minority, Asian American collectivities are imagined as threatening vertical social order. Asian "others" become the face of invasive gentrification harming and displacing Black and Brown communities from redeveloping US urban and suburban landscapes. Inscrutable objects to both the white and Black gazes, Asian American presence or "Asian alien" becomes the "embodiment of the abstract evils of capitalism."[41] Black and Brown subjects are triangulated with the Asian "other" to occupy the Native/Settler positionality in gentrifying neighborhoods that are competing for survival against the personification of the evils of capitalism in the figure of the Asian alien. It is ironic that Spike Lee and Ice Cube, whose works disseminate representations of the Asian "other" as personifying the evils of capitalism, have amassed net worths of over $50 million and $160 million respectively through the propagation of Black culture in mainstream US society.

Spike Lee and Ice Cube's late 1980s/early 1990s works embody a new form of Black Orientalism and Nativism against an Asian alien as the embers of Black–Asian polyculturalism emerging in the long 1960s faded. Deregulation and neoliberalism embraced multicultural difference that was palatable to US consumer sentiment while simultaneously privatizing racial violence as evidence of failures of civility rather than endemic of structural racism harming Black, Brown, and Asian bodies. Discourses of civility did not just inform and affect white subjects. Anti-Asian racism materialized in exceptional events such as the murder of Vincent Chin, but also in microaggressions documented in US media culture and everyday encounters. Black–Asian tensions are simultaneously framed as incidents of private attitudinal prejudice and violence amongst people of color while also centering Black and Asian agents as perpetrators of anti-Black and anti-Asian violence. Such representations discursively occlude the white subject by imagining Black and Asian agents as proxies for white violence while also disavowing white complicity in such acts of violence. Structural racism

41. Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2016), 34.

as an apparatus of power that upholds white supremacy and power is decentered as Black and Asian agents are seen as private actors enacting civil racism that is attitudinal rather than indicative of structural problems. As Itagaki elaborates, civil racism imagines Black and Asian aggressors to be pathologically violent, anti-social, and most importantly unruly subjects failing to adhere to the rules of civility that threaten the imagined peace achieved by implementing neoliberal multiculturalism and diversity.[42] Black agents enacting anti-Asian violence are seen as reactionary rejecters of multiculturalism and civility, while Asian agents of anti-Black violence likewise are figured as unassimilable foreigners who reject US multiculturalism via attitudinal anti-Blackness.

These interpellations of Blackness and Asianness imagine both as derivative reactionary agency in relation to the white subject while simultaneously occluding originary white violence. If systemic racism and white supremacy racialize "others" as minor subjects, then Black–Asian tensions are secondary reactions to the originary violence of white agency. Black and Asian American Buddhist relationalities on which Vesley-Flad and Yang speculate are dependent on, but occlude through omission, white agential priority in reactionary Black–Asian tension. Itagaki's notion of racial pyramidization builds on Kim's racial triangulation to illustrate this effect further. Rather than comparing racialization processes two-dimensionally, Itagaki develops a three-dimensional approach. In a racial pyramid, "the various vertices or nodal points of intersection among racial groups can be imagined as a three-dimensional pyramid with its triangular faces."[43] The benefit of a pyramid is that visualizations of "the relations between and among the nonwhite racial groups and with Whiteness are more clearly disaggregated."[44] This complexifies rather than simplifies racial relations and conflict beyond the two-dimensional narratives that erase other collectivities critical to a nuanced contextualization. Placing Black–Asian, Black-white, and white-Asian relationalities as the various faces of the racial pyramid problematizes the two-dimensional narratives of Blackness and Asianness embedded in both Spike Lee/Ice Cube's and far-right Asian Americans' obscuration of whiteness

42. Itagaki, *Civil Racism*, 19, 44.
43. Itagaki, *Civil Racism*, 8.
44. Ibid.

and white agency in the constitution of Black and Asian reactionary agency. The effect is that both Blackness and Asianness can and cannot relate with one another except by mediating originary white violence, which threatens flattening the pyramid into superimposed triangles where one vortex out of three must be placed in relation to whiteness that is hierarchically above the other. Asians are both perpetual foreigners—threatening the undesirable residual effects of redlining and white flight from predominantly Black neighborhoods—and junior partners of whiteness representing the insidious effects of gentrification. Likewise, in far-right Asian American imaginations, Blackness represents acutely anti-Asian violence in the United States.

The narrative structures reifying Black–Asian animosity presume linear spacetime and epistemologies that flatten rather than complexify both collectivities. Similar reductive interpellations are operating in both Han's and Vesely-Flad's texts in the mediation of Blackness and Asianness via reference to the vertical US racial hierarchy. When Black–Asian relations and subsequently Blackness and Asianness are interpellated through the spatiotemporal confines of structural racism and white supremacy in the United States, what emerges are either the sporadic glimpses of cross-racial solidarity conforming to a linear progress narrative or its pessimistic counterpart sensationalizing Black–Asian intercommunal violence. As whiteness and originary white violence mediate Black–Asian relationality, this forecloses and occludes the possibility of horizontal peer relations defying neoliberal multiculturalism's banal public discourse of cultural appropriation and authenticity that presumes and polices cultural/ethnic purity. Is the food that that ethnic restaurant serves "authentic" enough? Is a particular sartorial aesthetic, cadence, or performance truly representative of that minoritized group? Or, to put it plainly, what is deeply unsettling when Blackness performs Asianness and Asianness performs Blackness in various modes and venues? Is there something irrevocably lost when Black–Asian polyculture forms in ways that upset us, in ways in which racialized bodies' appropriation and adaptation of white and European languages, aesthetics, and intellectual discourse seems to not?

This is at the crux of the question Yang raises that Vesley-Flad reiterates in her text. Something impels BIPOC Buddhists to engage in cultural apologetics that white convert Buddhists no longer see necessary to bother with. Likewise, Asian presence in what is coded as

monolithically Black cultures and traditions triggers similar apologetic rhetoric and discourse. These interpellations imply that Blackness and Asianness are mutually exclusive, never intersecting or interacting save the occasion of originary white violence. Yang's speculation on Black Buddhist aversion to affiliating with a predominantly Asian sangha reinforces what appears to be a secondary color line[45] that renders the Asian as the "other" not just of whiteness, but of Blackness as well. This does not mean that both Han and Vesley-Flad are exceptional in their deployment of reductive interpellations. Returning to Wright, many interpellative strategies that seek to imagine collective identity through a linear progress narrative will invariably be reductive, as not all constituents within that collectivity can be interpellated by such a narrative. Outliers that deviate or do not conform to that narrative frame will be seen as aberrations that fail the test of authenticity, enabling others to recognize that they properly belong or are identifiable as a particular collective, racialized subject. At stake in this debate is what Wright identifies as the "conundrum of whether Blackness is ultimately in the eye of the beholder or of the performer."[46] Are social and collective identities a matter of the performance of one's cultural

45. By "color line," I am referencing a concept elaborated by W. E. B. Du Bois of the division of humanity into white and non-white bodies. Ideologically, the color line creates a value judgment valorizing and prioritizing the rights, privileges, and existence of whiteness over and against racialized others. In the sense Du Bois used it, the color line materialized in the US through *de jure* racial segregation enforced by Jim and Jane Crow laws. By secondary color line, I am referencing Paul Gilroy's elaboration of the twenty-first century transmutation of the color line into what he refers to as "culture lines." Culture lines are formed in reference to "the relationship between cultural difference and racial particularity" to "become akin to a form of property" (Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* [Harvard University Press, 2002], 24). Ethnicity ties cultures to particular bodies in a way that functions similarly to biological racism. Thus, secondary color lines rely on culture lines that are formed to separate Blackness and Asianness, with the material practice of Black Buddhist practitioners avoiding predominantly Asian sanghas as *de facto* segregation implemented on the grounds of cultural/ethnic difference rather than the category of race. Incidentally, the culture lines appear to not be drawn as sharply between Black and white Buddhist practitioners in a way that compels Black Buddhists to reject frequenting a predominantly white sangha.

46. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 5.

identity being transparent to the one who hails the performer, or a matter of the performer's self-identification? In the case of American Buddhism, it's precisely this conundrum that affects both Black and Asian American Buddhists. In the interpellative scene, both Black and Asian American Buddhist subjects are being hailed in terms of multiple identity category markers. Black and Asian American religious subjects deviating from normative expected religious, spiritual, racial, gendered, and class performances are hailed in ways that lead to the failure to interpellate[47] them as Buddhist and/or Black/Asian American. The racialized religious performer self-interpellates as Buddhist. But the beholder perceives them as not authentically performing Buddhism in reference to the normative white Buddhist convert and normative understandings of Blackness and Asianness (excluded from "authentic" Buddhism). This occasions the apologetic discourse, where the racialized Buddhist subject must contend with their racial and religious performance being unrecognizable to multiple spectators, one who evaluate them on a normative Blackness that excludes Buddhism as an authentic affective spiritual technology for Black subjects and another who evaluates them on a normative Buddhism constructed on white convert Buddhist hermeneutics.

The problem with both interpellative frames is precisely that the vertical rather than horizontal emerges and is prioritized. Implicit in both are the presumption of "good" or "bad" subjectivities, with the specter of the liberal white subject haunting both. In linear progress narratives, Black–Asian cross racial solidarity becomes a teleological imperative for both collectivities to redress originary violence inflicted on them by whiteness, and to recover humanity in an otherwise dehumanizing reality. The liberative *telos* is shared across ideological lines, whether liberal or socialist, with differing means or methods employed and divergent views on the political structure of a liberated state of existence. The irrationality of racial injustice, enacted by both private and state agents, and reinforced by structural violence,

47. This is related to Wright's notion of qualitative collapse at the moment of interpellation. Various nuanced performances of Blackness are lost when interpellation occurs through solely the vertical and linear progressive understanding of time: "the moment of qualitative collapse when linear strictures erase or marginalize the interpellation of multidimensional Blackness—and may then 'cast off' that part of its collective that is thereby deemed irrelevant or inauthentic" (ibid., 144).

is something that must be inevitably corrected. Likewise, in the pessimistic frame of Black–Asian intercommunal violence, the racialized "other" is seen either as a proxy agent of whiteness or as a third party who is collectively interpellated as threat to Blackness (whether explicitly or implicitly motivated by white interpellations of Blackness). In each, the vertical is inexplicably intertwined with the attempt to construct a horizontal, the latter as reaction to existent vertical interpellations. These reactions can be witnessed in both Han's and Vesley-Flad's analysis of Black Buddhist and Asian American Buddhist narratives, where the non-recognition of both as Buddhist (in reference to a normative white Buddhism) leads to the racialized Buddhist needing to justify and rationalize their claim to Buddhism as authentic. Counterhegemonic narratives where the racialized Buddhist justifies that they indeed are authentic Buddhists prioritizes the vertical rather than horizontal possibilities in epiphenomenal time of "now" where such tests of authenticity in reference to normative white Buddhism may be altogether bypassed.

I am not denying the reality of the vertical and horizontal violence that inform these interpellations. However, I am arguing that there is a level of epistemic violence that forecloses the possibility of interpellations through horizontal peer relations rather than out of necessity to react against the vertical. What is lost therefore is Black–Asian peer relations that emerge organically without solely referencing the consequences of structural racism or perceptions that racialized subjects are uncivil actors who pathologically exhibit private, attitudinal prejudices that are antithetical multiculturalism, diversity, and civility. What is missing are unpredictable, chaotic (in Glissant's sense[48]) interpellations occasioned by Wright's notion of epiphenomenal time. The denial of a common present "now" for Black and Asian American subjects may suggest the impossibility of imagining them sharing the same spacetime coordinates outside of the representations dramatized by Spike Lee and Ice Cube. Perhaps for both Vesley-Flad and Han, it is precisely the lack of documentation and narrativization of Black and Asian American polycultural entanglements that forecloses analysis of the horizontal and epiphenomenal. Black and Asian American Buddhists are not documented to share in the same space nor to be

48. Edouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*, trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 14.

contemporaneous to one another. The lack of space for such narrativizations and analysis both within the discipline of religious studies and in public-facing popular discourses on American Buddhism exacerbates the epistemic gaps that connect Black and Asian American Buddhists. Discursively, it creates the condition for speculations like Yang's that Black Buddhist aversion to Asian and Asian American sanghas is due to (1) Asian immigrant cultural baggage that is incompatible with progressive liberalism (confirming Itagaki's analysis that civil racism imagines Asian/Americans as unassimilable perpetual foreigners), and (2) the appeal of white Buddhist rhetoric that aligns *buddhadharma* to Western psychology (echoing Puar and Chow's thesis[49] that cosmopolitan ethnic subjects aspire towards whiteness).[50] Asian

49. Jasbir Puar and Rey Chow develop the notion of a cosmopolitan ethnic subject who is an exception to the racialization of ethnic subjects as an unassimilable and undesirable other to Western modernity and the neocolonial metropoles (see Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer* Times [Duke University Press, 2017], 25; and Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [Columbia University Press, 2002], 2–3). Unlike racialized subaltern subjects, the cosmopolitan ethnic subject gains tacit approval to the metropole via their accumulation of capital, readiness to commodify culture, and aspiration towards whiteness by being both proximate to it and seeking recognition/approval from the white gaze. In the case of this aversion, I am suggesting the Black Buddhist may align themselves with interpretations of the *buddhadharma* that rely on Western psychology for their translation and verification not in the sense that they are cosmopolitan ethnic subjects, but their internalization of Western epistemologies. Alignment with white convert Buddhist interpretations of Dharma rather than Asian and Asian American Buddhist interpretations demonstrates another cultural line being drawn separating Blacks from Asians, with whites imagined as being on the same side of this line as Blacks due to sharing in secular modern spacetime.

50. My point here is not to raise doubts on psychology as an academic discipline, but rather the tendency in religious studies and popular cultural discourse to minimize the perceived irrationality of particular religious, spiritual, and cultural traditions through engaging in a process of translation and comparison with psychological research. This epistemic process is hardly unique to the reception history of Buddhism in the United States. Such efforts of translation and apologetics of "Western" religious/spiritual traditions can also be seen in pastoral/spiritual care and counseling that was predominantly an enterprise of Protestant and Catholic scholars in the twentieth century. See Pamela Ayo Yetunde, *Object Relations, Buddhism, and Relationality in Womanist Practical Spirituality* (Palgrave Pivot, 2018), 3; Robert Thurman, "Christian

and Asian Americans in these speculations are both hailed as uncivil perpetual foreigners and premodern, superstitious beings who have refused to conform to Western scientific thinking. Categorized as immigrant "others," Asian and Asian American Buddhists can never be imagined sharing the epiphenomenal "now" with Black Buddhists locating themselves in the modern, developed, secularized, and Western world. And as I will return to later in the paper, it is outside the conventional boundaries of what constitutes Buddhism where hip-hop culture, martial arts, and a shared Black–Asian visual and media culture as Black–Asian polyculturalism evidences horizontal interpellations of Blackness and Asianness that are counterhegemonic, spiritual, and disrupt Vesley-Flad's and Yang's characterizations of Black aversion to Asian Americanness.

Black identification or disidentification with Asianness renders a complex portrait of Black–Asian entanglements that cannot be easily collapsed into a facile discourse of racial competition or unanimous solidarity. Nevertheless, it evidences interpellations of Blackness in its myriad forms. Referencing various frames of relationality to Asianness may explain Vesley-Flad's quoting of Yang's speculation on why Black Buddhists frequent white sanghas as opposed to Asian and Asian American ones. Black–Asian polycultural entanglements reveal interpellative strategies for Blackness and Asianness that eschew those vertical racial hierarchies reifying originary white agency and a Black–Asian racial conflict narrative as well as vertical religious ones that erase Black and Asian American religious subjectivities falling outside of the "normative" expectations for both collectives. To understand how interpellations of Blackness and Asianness through vertical racial hierarchies and originary white agency occlude Black–Asian polycultural entanglements, I turn next to unpacking the problem of universalizing vertical interpellations of collective identities for both Black

Experiences with Buddhist Spirituality: A Response," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 21 (2001): 69–72; and Kadowaka Kakichi, "Introducing Zazen into Christian Spirituality," *The Eastern Buddhist*, 9, no. 1 (1976): 106–122.

and Asian American subjectivities in my close reading of Vesley-Flad's and Han's writings.

VESLEY-FLAD

Vesley-Flad raises the question of Black–Asian relations within her discussion of American Buddhism as an offshoot of Socially Engaged modern Buddhism.[51] The issue of race and culture emerge in the classification of two Buddhisms by white sociologists and Buddhist publication editors. Highlighting Joseph Cheah's critique of two Buddhisms as discursive practices of white supremacy, Vesley-Flad also considers the issue of cultural appropriation of Buddhism by white practitioners. Her citing of Cheah and Hsu emerges within the context of the oft-quoted Helen Tworkov comment that white convert Buddhism largely "evolved essentially independent of Asian communities."[52] Vesley-Flad considers Hsu's observation for the "need for reckoning with complicated dynamics *within* Buddhist communities of color" by highlighting historical and contemporary instances of cross-racial support. However, these examples examine Black–Asian relationality without reference to the religious or spiritual dimensions. Vesley-Flad turns to Asian American thinkers who have critiqued Asian and Asian American communities for their implicit anti-Blackness. The conversation is framed around the ambivalence of Asian American solidarity

51. For Socially Engaged Buddhism, see Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2009); and Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds., *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (State University of New York Press, 1996). I have not elected to discuss the transnational pathways of Engaged Buddhism as a modern movement originating in Asia because the primary concern of this essay is how Black and Asian American Buddhist relationalities are imagined as well as realized. The other project focuses on tracing a genealogy of Buddhist modernism to its Protestantization by Asian reformers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the transnational networks in which humanistic and engaged forms of Buddhist activism have proliferated from Asia to Europe and North America. In other words, Engaged Buddhism research traces what Jane Iwamura has analyzed in the Oriental Monk figure and the narrative of the white Western convert as disciple, successor, and ideological caregiver of Buddhism in its modernized form.

52. Vesley-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, 54.

with African Americans during the 2020 George Floyd Rebellion,[53] in which some Asian Americans publicly declared their support for Black Lives Matter, while others remained silent or disaffected. This notion of agential "speaking for" as indicative of solidarity plays into the rhetoric of the inscrutable Asian American. Insofar as their speech-act is highly visible as well as understood (presupposing a rhetoric and media of communication that is recognizable and valid), the Asian American may potentially be read as in solidarity. Insofar as a speech-act is either misinterpreted or illegible, the "silent" Asian American subject is perceived as apolitical and subsequently aiding and abetting anti-Blackness.

Vesley-Flad also underscores how Black Buddhists recently have begun "an emerging conversation about practicing Buddhism without appropriation; acknowledging racism broadly—from whites as well as Asians—while seeking to remain inclusive."[54] It is interesting to note that in the previous quote anti-Blackness is understood as reflecting both structural racism and civil racism (private, attitudinal prejudice), while violence against Asians is constructed as a cultural/ethnic issue. Returning to Itagaki's racial pyramidization framework, this reveals how triangulation trivializes anti-Asian violence

53. I deliberately use the term *rebellion* rather than *riot* or *protest* to honor the language of Black and POC radicals who were leading the protests in Minneapolis, New York City, and many other major cities in the United States. *Rebellion* signifies an act of reclaiming the simultaneous uprisings that were not geographically limited to the events unfolding in Minneapolis or emerging due to the extrajudicial murders of George Floyd, but to anti-Black violence and murders occurring throughout the United States. Far from the commodification of #BlackLivesMatter by multinational corporations and centrist politicians, those who were on the ground during the rebellion were not only demanding justice for the lives that were taken but for the dismantling of the anti-Black social structures of which most poignant are the carceral system and militarized police forces. Furthermore, identifying the event as a rebellion connects it with past Black liberationist struggles and the Black Radical Tradition that is not grounded in the politics of neoliberal multiculturalism and commodified racialized difference, but on labor struggle aiming to dismantle racial capitalism itself. For more, see Jason E. Smith, "The American Revolution: The George Floyd Rebellion, One Year Out," *The Brooklyn Rail* 200 (July–August 2021), https://brooklynrail.org/2021/07/field-notes/The-American-Revolution-The-George-Floyd-Rebellion-One-Year-Out/.

54. Vesley-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, 60.

as being epiphenomenal to structural racism and white supremacy. Here, Asians cannot be imagined as victims of structural racism, only harmed in terms of cultural appropriation or theft. Neoliberal multiculturalism racializes Asianness as ethnic culture, the property that circulates freely in its commodified form so long as it is deemed authentic. Asianness is permanently affixed to the interpellative scene of the Korean-American shopkeeper brandishing a firearm against the perceived Black thief. Asians are imagined to be both justified in defending their stock from the phobogenic object of this scene, but also culpable in perpetuating anti-Black violence. Yet, Asians are imagined as proxy agents of whiteness that perform anti-Black violence against Black Buddhist practitioners. Asian cultural objects nonetheless are commodified to freely circulate. No harm commences from consuming their wares voluntarily hawked on digital storefronts and by spiritual gurus alike. Racism is analyzed solely through the lens of the white–Black racial binary, while Asians are imagined as the third "other" whose difference cannot be interpellated within the US racial hierarchy except as junior partners of whiteness upholding anti-Blackness or as Model Minorities. Asian American racialization is ignored, and Vesley-Flad figures Asianness through the lens of cultural/ethnic difference that reifies neoliberal multiculturalism's understanding of difference among non-Black POC. Rather than offering an analysis framed on comparative racialization that complicates the oft-critiqued triangulation model, Vesley-Flad positions Asianness as an inscrutable third party that is on neither side of the color line, save when they align with whiteness. Asianness is recognized only in the performance of aspirational whiteness.

On the only imagined intersection point for cross-racial solidarity amongst POC Buddhists, Vesley-Flad notes that both Black and Asian American Buddhists are socially engaged and honor ancestors. But unfortunately, these points of intersection are insufficient to motivate Black Buddhists to affiliate with Asian sanghas. Furthermore, these semblances are only surface-level commonalities rather than departure points for investigating a deep polyculturalism. Asianness thus is interpellated here in terms of (1) a repository of *buddhdharma*, which addresses Black suffering, as potentially liberative for Blackness; (2) a junior partner of whiteness that perpetuates anti-Black violence; (3) a cultural/ethnic "other" who may be the victim of appropriation/theft and whose loss is addressed through the language of neoliberal

multiculturalism (a deserved loss should Asians be perceived to be voluntarily exploiting their own cultural property). The logics of neoliberal multiculturalism dictates that cultural appropriation charges can be resolved by participating in a discourse of authenticity, respect, and proper attribution of credit without the need for actual engagement or solidarity with the "other." Engagement with Asianness can never be horizontal, but only vertical in this frame.

Vesley-Flad frames Black–Asian relations through the question of "why the majority of Black Buddhists are affiliated with predominantly white sanghas rather than Asian Buddhist communities."[55] While Black–Asian relationality is not the primary subject of this text, this section helps elucidate how her interlocutors and Black Buddhists imagine Asianness. Vesley-Flad's question centers Larry Yang's speculation that Asian Buddhist communities in the US retain patriarchal hierarchies and cultures incompatible with US liberalism. Asianness here is interpellated as misogynistic, culturally backwards, and hierarchical. It also positions Asianness temporally as pre-modern and unenlightened for not sharing liberal values. Yang also suggests that the Insight tradition appeals to African Americans due to their interpretations of Buddhist teachings through a Western psychological lens. Such approach appeals to Vesley-Flad, who argues that "Buddhist teachings and practices liberate Black people from psychological suffering."[56] As discussed earlier, Yang's speculation highlights the givenness of Western epistemology in African American receptions of Buddhism. A hermeneutic that expunges Buddhism of various "cultural accretions" that offend secular liberalism while emphasizing aspects that are compatible with modernity and scientific rationality appeals to Black Buddhist converts. Such reconstructions of Buddhism that demythologize and detraditionalize places African American receptions of Buddhism within Buddhist modernism.[57]

Her central thesis is that the Black Radical Tradition and Black Buddhism intersect in their commitment to psychological liberation.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid., 1.

57. In *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2008), David McMahan notes three general tendencies in Buddhist modernism that differentiate it from traditional Buddhism: detraditionalization, demythologization, and psychologization (42). Detraditionalization refers to the privatization of religion whereby individual choice in adopting

Psychological liberation interpellates two distinctive, perhaps sometimes perceived as antithetical, expressions of Blackness. Whereas the Black Radical Tradition is often associated with militant nationalism, masculinity, and continuous resistance to whiteness (in its ideological, cultural, and racial forms), Buddhism in the United States as we outlined earlier is perceived as a tradition received from an Oriental "other," one that evolved and developed through a comparative discourse that centers white epistemologies and hermeneutics. Buddhism as imagined and represented in the US (1) is nonviolent, (2) promotes psychological healing/wellness, (3) is antithetical to mental distinctions and discrimination, and (4) is feminine to the extent passivity is gendered. Interpellated through this representation of Buddhism, Black converts potentially become disconnected from Blackness as militant, masculine, nationalistic, and violent. Evacuated of its radical politics, the Black Radical Tradition as a vehicle of psychological liberation becomes less alienating to American Buddhists uncomfortable with more confrontational strategies for addressing racial capitalism such as calls to "defund the police" and for "boycott, divestment, and sanctions." Vesley-Flad notes Buddhist teachings "[give] people a framework for naming the conditions of externally wrought suffering ... [and] teachings that help Black people create inner spaciousness and change habitual patterns ... [to] compassionately see their conditioning and the ways that they continue to hurt themselves or inflict suffering on those around them ... then practitioners have capacity to step back and to shift those instinctive habits."[58] For Vesley-Flad, healing intergenerational trauma and embodying joy and loving-kindness

and rejecting various aspects of different religious traditions supersedes traditional institutions of authority. Second, demythologization extracts and reconstructs meaning from Buddhist teaching to match contemporary realities. Aspects that are incompatible with a modern worldview are either rejected, allegorized, or reinterpreted thematically to address contemporary issues and needs. Constructing a socially engaged form of Buddhism reflects this demythologization process. Lastly, psychologization refers to the reduction of Buddhist teaching as discourse compatible with Western psychology and psychotherapy. Clinical psychological language is used to describe and interpret Buddhist concepts and practices, giving it the sense that Buddhism has empirical and rational grounds as a science of the mind, rather than a world-rejecting escapism replete with superstitious elements.

58. Vesley-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, 271–272.

comes prior to the material struggle against anti-Blackness and racial capitalism. Here, she departs from the historicist school of the Black Radical Tradition, which has prioritized confronting and transforming anti-Black social structures and institutions over the resolution of the divided consciousness in colonized and racialized subjects.

Returning to Vesley-Flad's discussion of representations of Asianness: If Yang's speculation is correct—that Black Americans engage with convert rather than Asian Buddhist communities in the US because the latter includes patriarchal hierarchies and cultures incompatible with US liberalism—it presses several issues. First, the notion that Asian Buddhists have cultural baggage that is incompatible with US liberalism reifies the "two Buddhisms" typologies critiqued in an earlier section of the chapter. In "Buddhism, Culture, and Race in the United States," Vesely-Flad reviews inherent problems in American Buddhism and the two Buddhisms typology proposed by white Buddhist scholars. This reifies white supremacy by privileging elements of Buddhism sanctioned by and practiced by white Buddhists. She relies on Hickey's and Cheah's call to both disaggregate Asian and Asian Americans and to reject the normalization of white Buddhist practice as authentic and American over and against the racialized "other." In a subsequent section, Vesley-Flad introduces Funie Hsu's observation that cultural appropriation of Buddhism is not just a phenomenon that white converts need to reckon with, but also POC Buddhists.[59] Hsu's critical remark, while elucidating the potential epistemic violence occurring within POC communities, nevertheless conforms to Gilroy's note of how neoliberal multiculturalism and the color line creates the notion of culture as property. This interpellation of culture forecloses the possibility of polycultural entanglements amongst POC that involve not only Buddhism, but a plurality of cultures and discourses that circulate, exchange, and are remixed by POC in ways that defy the logics of commodification. Polyculturalism defies the logics of commodification because it functions differently from multiculturalism. "Multiculturalism emerged as a liberal doctrine to undercut the radicalism of antiracism."[60] While multiculturalism celebrates cultural pluralism, it does so without the radical anticolonial and antiracist political commitments of Black and Asian American radicals.

59. Ibid., 58.
60. Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*, 63.

Furthermore, polyculturalism eschews the discourse of authenticity that multiculturalism "undermines our ability to articulate the intertwined cultural histories and struggles"[61] across cultural boundaries. For Prashad, the Caribbean adaptation of hosay into carnival culture was a polycutural performance across Afro-Caribbean and South Asian Muslim and Hindu workers that facilitated workers strikes and rebellion against the white colonial class.[62]

Black Buddhist aversion to Asian and Asian American Buddhism could originate not only from the observation that Asian collectivities seem to internalize anti-Blackness, but also from a form of anti-Asian feeling rooted in interpellating the Asian through the overdetermined types of Yellow Peril and Model Minority. The doubleness of the anti-Asian feeling places it both within white supremacy (as an agent or junior partner to whiteness) and outside of it (as illiberal, backwards, and premodern). Furthermore, Yang's speculation inadvertently places Asian and Asian American Buddhism outside of the acceptable norms of American Buddhism as (1) socially engaged, (2) modern, and (3) spiritual practice validated by empirical research. Consequently, Black and Asian American Buddhists cannot inhabit the same sangha if it is an Asian Buddhist one. But they potentially may be found in the same space if it is a predominantly white or convert sangha. Whiteness again mediates Black and Asian relationality, whether in its negative or positive instantiations.

Nonetheless, Vesley-Flad is quick to note that both Black and Asian American Buddhists experience various degrees of violence by inhabiting predominantly white sanghas. POC affinity sanghas become a potential ideal to aspire for, and much of the text highlights Black Buddhists' engagement with Asian Buddhist lineages and monks. Black–Asian solidarity is narrated through unilateral causal chains where one party intervenes on behalf of another without reference to mutual struggle that becomes the occasion for coalition building. In the early twentieth century and during the civil rights movement, it was African Americans advocating on behalf of Asian immigrant rights. In the twenty-first century, it is Asian American youth rejecting anti-Blackness circulating in their communities to be in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. What is missing again are the

61. Ibid., 64.
62. Ibid., 79-87.

Black–Asian entanglements in radical political movements of the twentieth century. Du Bois's Afro-Orientalism and turn towards Japan and China as anticolonial figures of the "colored world" to rise up against Euro-American imperialist hegemony was critical to his transition from Black Nationalism to Internationalism. Chapter 4 in Vesley-Flad's book recounting the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party omits the influence of Maoism on Black Marxism and how the Black Power movement intimately shaped the radical Asian American movement in the San Francisco Bay Area through organizations such as the Red Guard Party. Richard Aoki's relationship with Huey Newton and Bobby Seale and his membership in the Black Panther Party is also not explored. Furthermore, the legacies of Grace and James Lee Boggs's relationship with CLR James and its centrality to Black and Asian radical movements in Detroit also did not appear.[63] In all these instances of Black–Asian solidarity and expressions of Black–Asian radicalism, liberation is not merely or primarily figured through psychological liberation as Vesley-Flad characterizes Black Buddhism to offer. There is a historical-materialist analysis and praxis present in the narratives that is omitted, one that is often interpellated as masculine, militant, and secular.

Black Internationalism and Black Power movements are functionally foils to the genealogy of white convert Buddhism outlined by Jane Iwamura in *Virtual Orientalism*.[64] Whereas Black Power and Black Radicalism are imagined as masculine, militant, culturally nationalistic, and devoid of horizontal relationality with non-Black POC, white convert genealogy is imagined through real and imagined relations with an Asian Oriental Monk figure. The Beats and Squares of the 1950s as well as the hippies and anti-war countercultural movement of the 1960s are seen as esoteric, individualistic, and above all non-violent in contrast to Black radicals. Hannah Arendt[65] accuses Black radicals of

63.See Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

64. Jane N. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

65. See Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970). Arendt notes the influence of Fanon on 1960s student movements, identifying Black Power movement as being particularly violent. "In America, the student movement has been seriously radicalized wherever police and police brutality intervened in essentially nonviolent demonstrations.... Serious violence

misogyny, extremism, and endorsing irrationally violent methods for liberation:

> The case is different with the Black Power movement; its ideological commitment to the nonexistent "Unity of the Third World" is not sheer romantic nonsense. They have an obvious interest in a black-white dichotomy; this too is of course mere escapism—an escape into a dream world in which Negroes would constitute an overwhelming majority of the world's population.[66]

Arendt's accusation of the Black Power movement is of co-opting the language of the New Left to serve Black cultural nationalist interests. In later sections of the text, Arendt dismisses the notion of collective white guilt or culpability for Black grievances by suggesting such accusations promote a form of "reverse racism."[67] Such pronunciations according to Arendt fuel an "irrational 'Black rage'"[68] that manifests only as reactions reinforcing racist ideology rather than dismantling it. Black radicals actualize their affective rage through violent "black racism" against whites, in the self-interested action of Black college students that according to Arendt is not grounded in the struggle of the Black working class outside the university. Their violence is non-productive, senseless, and ineffective in bringing about social change that dismantles racism. It only further exacerbates racism. Thus, characterizing Black radicals as inherently violent sharply contrasts with white convert Buddhist genealogy as initially experimental rejection of conventional American values and society influenced by the countercultural generation and their absorption into mainstream American culture.

In contrast, white convert Buddhist history narratively features figures that break social norms and conventions while appearing to endorse peaceful means of individual and collective change. Iwamura reads the influence of Beat poet Jack Kerouac and Allan Watts in the mainstreaming of Zen spirituality and aesthetics in US society. Notable

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entered the scene only with the appearance of the Black Power movement on the campuses. Negro students, the majority of them admitted without academic qualification, regarded and organized themselves as an interest group, the representatives of the black community. Their interest was to lower academic standards" (18).

66. Arendt, *On Violence*, 37n37.

67. Ibid., 65.

68. Ibid.

in both of their narratives is the hegemonic consolidation of Zen in the United States without any semblance of radical social disruption or violence. Vesley-Flad's Black Buddhist interlocutors do not invoke the same historic figures in interpellating their Blackness.[69] They invoke civil rights figures and Black ancestors like African American Yoruba practitioners. The appeal to the rhetoric of peace, psychological liberation, and scientific utility mirrors the rhetoric that appeals to white converts. In addition, we see white convert Buddhists often invoke an Oriental Monk figure in the discourse of legitimizing their claim to authentic Buddhism. The imagined and real relationships that white Buddhists forged with Oriental Monk figures justifies their claims to authenticity and the right to modernize and alter Buddhist practices and beliefs. Black Buddhists in Vesley-Flad's text also engage in a similar discourse of justification and authenticity. Likewise, they invoke Oriental Monk figures such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh in their conversion narratives.[70] Vesley-Flad also invokes the two figures as promoting Socially Engaged Buddhism that promotes peacemaking and ecological consciousness. For both white and Black convert Buddhisms, the Oriental Monk potentially leads to the spiritual bypassing of Asian American Buddhist practitioners and communities. Because Black Buddhist narratives and discourse share features with white Buddhist narratives (except for the centrality of suffering interpreted through violence inflicted by both systemic racism and cis-heterosexist patriarchy), Vesley-Flad invokes a different definition of Black radicalism that bypasses the male-centric Black Internationalism

69. In chap. 4 of *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, Vesley-Flad does trace Black Radicalism from Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Black Power Movement. However, in Vesley-Flad's narrative, the radicalism of the BPP was defeated by US intelligence agencies and absorbed by the Black Church and Black Liberation Theology. Black Buddhists are adjacent to the liberationist strand of the Black Church, but are critical of its misogyny, homophobia, and cis-heteronormative patriarchy (153–154). Thus, Black Buddhists steer away from the masculinist strand of the Black Radical Tradition and the Black Church towards Black Feminist voices.

70. This includes Pamela Ayo Yetunde (ibid., 36; 171), Devin Berry (113), and Larry Ward (128).

and Black Power movements where Black–Asian horizontal interpellations are most visible.

Vesley-Flad centers Black feminist radicals whose writings and praxis contrasts sharply with the militant, masculine, and potentially violent Black radicalism of the twentieth century. In such a genealogy, it may be difficult to conceive of Black and Asian solidarities interpellated through secular radical movements that primarily figure male subjects and horizontal peer relations across male figures. Specifically, she draws on the writings of Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, the Combahee River Collective, bell hooks, and Alice Walker as Black feminist and womanist thinkers that Black Buddhists are indebted to in constructing an antiracist, antisexist, and liberatory Black Buddhism, one that affirms Black women's subjectivity and affective spiritual practices that address trauma while critiquing structural violence. In other words, Vesley-Flad notes Black Feminist writing is relevant for Black Buddhists whose spiritual practice of "contemplation fuels their capacity for confronting oppression without succumbing to the ravages of trauma."[71] This is especially relevant for Black Buddhist feminist and queer subjectivities due to Black radicalism's complicity with Black men's violence and white feminism's silence on systemic racism.

Interpellating Black Buddhist Dharma as embodied practices of care, healing, and liberation through Black feminism in relation to the Black Freedom movement and in tension with both Black male patriarchy and systemic racism embodied by both white men and women, Vesley-Flad's vision of Black Buddhism moves away from tracing the radicalism of Black Internationalism, the Black Power movement, and more broadly Black Leftists who imagined and realized solidarities with Asian and Asian American radicals in the twentieth century. In a sense, Black Buddhist narratives highlighted by Vesley-Flad exhibit ideological commitments to progressive liberalism and multiculturalism despite tracing their indebtedness to radical Black feminists and Black Power. That is to say, Black Buddhists like the Black Church tradition envision a liberatory embodied spirituality that is conducive to both psychological wellness and physical/material flourishing that is primarily concerned with the question Michelle Wright poses in her text, namely how to interpellate Blackness amidst its multiplicity without either trivializing Blackness as an indexical concept or

71. Ibid., 158.

constructing a narrow monolithic sense of Blackness that creates a false test of authenticity and excludes Black subjectivities that are otherwise. In a sense, while noting the problem of vertical interpellations of Blackness that center Black male subjectivity, it nonetheless relies on interpellating Blackness through what Wright refers to as "Middle Passage epistemology":

> By Middle Passage epistemology, Wright is referring to the narrative of Black presence in the Western hemisphere, the ideology of white supremacy and anti-Blackness that informs a racial hierarchy grounded in assertions of Black inferiority and white superiority, and attendant forms of double or divided consciousness. Middle Passage Blackness often invokes a narrative of linear progress and Black uplift from chattel slavery to emancipation, from reconstruction to civil rights, and from desegregation to Black excellence and exceptionalism in our contemporary multicultural society. Blackness is defined "through an unbroken chain of ancestors" from chattel slavery to the present, failing to account for the multiplicity of Blackness that is not rooted in such a genealogy. By centering narratives of Black men, it inadvertently becomes essentialist, reductive, and hierarchical.[72]

Such an epistemology inadvertently excludes African diasporic subjectivities with different trajectories from African Americans, making it difficult to construct horizontal peer relations with both African diasporic subjectivities outside of the Western Hemisphere and with non-Black POC subjectivities. To be clear, Vesley-Flad's project of tracing Black Buddhism alongside the Black Radical Tradition (in the US) is not organized around Black–Asian relationalities. However, it is important to note that her limited treatment of this question in chapter 1 of her book concludes with historical and contemporary precedents for Black–Asian solidarities that do not translate to Black and Asian American Buddhists.

HAN

If Vesley-Flad centers the question of Black–Asian Buddhist solidarities through their potentiality but omission in practice, Han grapples more firmly with the problem of Asian American erasure in religious

72. Girim Jung, "Black and Asian American Diasporic Return Narratives and the Unsettling of Linear Progressive Temporality," Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association, Montreal, Canada, March 17, 2024.

studies broadly, and Buddhism in the United States more narrowly. Following Cheah's call to disaggregate Asian and Asian American Buddhists, Han also considers the experiences of second-generation Asian American Buddhists "who don't feel a sense of belonging in their parents' temples—or in majority-white sanghas."[73] The second-generation Asian American Buddhists Han interviewed sought to interpellate themselves through experiences venturing out from their families and the temples in which they grew up. This correlates with experiences of second-generation Korean American Christians who Helen Lee first tracked as a "silent exodus," an idea later expanded on by Russell Jeung and Sharon Kim through studying Asian American evangelical churches.[74] Similar to Han's observation of eventual alienation that Asian American Buddhists faced in the majority-white sanghas they attended after their initial "exodus" from their parents' temples, Asian American evangelical Christians likewise were influenced by white Protestant Christianity but also distanced themselves from it by constructing their own multicultural church communities. Unlike Asian American evangelicals, Asian American Buddhists formed virtual communities on social media rather than forming majority Asian American sanghas or temples. Han asks, "*Where are all the young adult Asian American Buddhists?*"[75] Unlike Asian American Christians, it is difficult to identify physical sites where Asian American Buddhists could be found congregated in large groups. In addition, Asian American Buddhist converts complicate the picture of Asian American Buddhists as being merely inheritors of the religious cultures of their family, with many of the participants, convert or otherwise, participating in different ethnic Buddhist communities across denominational and sectarian lines. Some Asian American Buddhists also interpellated themselves

73. Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* (North Atlantic Books, 2021), 28.
74. See Helen Lee, "Silent Exodus" *Christianity Today*, August 12, 1996, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1996/august12/6t9050.html; Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (Rutgers University Press, 2004); Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches* (Rutgers University Press, 2010).
75. Han, *Be the Refuge*, introduction.

through their non-Buddhist counterparts in interfaith and Christian spaces.

Han also relays sentiments similar to those expressed in Vesley-Flad's text about internalized anti-Blackness amongst Asian and Asian American Buddhists. "The model minority trope that renders Asian Americans white-adjacent can interfere with our desire to express solidarity with non-Asian people of color."[76] Reflecting on her study, Han notes that many of her subjects "had never before pondered the intersection of their racial and religious identities" prior to the research.[77] Even nearly a decade ago, Han and her interviewees were aware of systemic racism and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Asian American Buddhists, like African American Buddhists, expressed their frustration with their experiences with racism at predominantly white sanghas. The racism that Asian American Buddhists have experienced gets recounted through her interviewee's reflections, and particularly the voice of late Angry Asian Buddhist Aaron Lee. Han's question of "Where are all the Asian American Buddhists?" haunts the text as Asian American collectivities, representation, and the violence of #AAPIHate. Han recognizes Black writers who shaped her "understanding of race in American Buddhism" when reflecting on how white privilege and overrepresentation is unavoidable when reflecting on Asian American Buddhist subjectivity. In her chapter on privilege, Han lists "Faithe Adiele, bell hooks, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, Charles Johnson, and Alice Walker" among the Black Buddhist writers that shaped her "understanding of race in American Buddhism."[78] However, she does not unpack further by stating what ideas from these authors influenced her understanding of race. In the introduction, Han cites bell hooks' article in the "1994 Tricycle special issue on 'Dharma, Diversity, & Race'" to critique how white Buddhists in the United States "claim ownership and control over what constitutes 'authentic' American Buddhism."[79]

Privilege based on race, class, and gender affects the politics of representation in American Buddhism. Han and her Asian American interviewees reflect on the invisibility of Asian American Buddhists in relationship to the overrepresentation of white convert Buddhists in

76. Ibid., 72.
77. Ibid., 12.
78. Ibid., 199.
79. Ibid., introduction.

American Buddhist publications, spaces, and mainstream consciousness. Han's engagement with Larry Yang exemplifies the relative erasure of Asian American Buddhists even among Asian Americans. In the opening paragraphs of chapter 11, Han recounts a moment in the 2014 Buddhist Peace Fellowship National Gathering held at East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) when participants were asked about famous Buddhists. After the question shifted to Asian American Buddhists, there was silence. Later, Larry Yang and Anushka Fernandopulle are mentioned. The unease of identifying these two Asian American Buddhists as examples may be because they both practiced and taught at EBMC. Han cites Yang's writing when discussing her participants' reflection on the invisibility of Asian Americans in American Buddhist publications and the alienation that Asian American Buddhists experience in a majority white space. According to Yang, "deep distress and anguish" and "a sense of isolation" trigger hurtful memories among Asian Americans as well as POC Buddhists. But unlike their Black Buddhist counterparts, Asian American Buddhists feel an additional layer of dread as the presence of white Buddhists at retreats and meditation halls, which makes them recall their experiences of exclusion. Buddhist spaces may be altered to be "most comfortable for and or accessible to only or mostly European Americans" despite historical origins on the Asian continent. Asian Americans are in a double bind as they find themselves alienated in both these predominantly white spaces and the Buddhist temples frequented by Asian American immigrants, where language and cultural fluency are assumed.[80] Black Buddhists who also might lack language and cultural fluency may find these Asian American immigrant-serving temples to be likewise alienating. Asian American Buddhists have an ambiguous relation to the religious and cultural resources of their family and ancestors that is exacerbated by white Buddhists becoming representative of American Buddhism more broadly. Furthermore, they note the class implications of whitening American Buddhism. "I worry about American Buddhism turning into an Upper Middle Class Way.'"[81] Such a statement denotes that Han's interviewees challenge the hegemonic representation of Asian American as socially upward mobile junior partners of whiteness or Model Minorities. There are also working-class Asian

80. Ibid., chap. 11.
81. Ibid.

Americans who are being erased by both the Model Minority myth and the overrepresentation of whiteness in American Buddhism.

Han's interviewees also point out that the fixation on the Black–white dichotomy in US racial discourse also may contribute to the ambiguity of Asian Americans. This ambiguity may not only be perpetuated through the racialization of Asian Americans by mainstream society, but by the conscious activity of Asian Americans themselves. In chapter 11, Han recounts an email thread that was sent out by Aaron Lee to her and several others in January 2015. Lee was reflecting on the erasure of Asian Americans in Buddhist publications, coining the hashtag #AsianBuddhistsMatter. Lee sought feedback from his peers on this tag. Andy replied to the email by arguing that it felt inappropriate, sounding like #BlackLivesMatter while being unrelated to it. The email notes that the hashtag "decenters the critique on anti-Black violence" and as such is an appropriative move. Another response from Dolma stated that "I don't want to put my Asian/American Buddhism at odds with my solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter—especially when in my mind the two are very much aligned."[82] Dolma's sentiments are interesting in that (1) she finds her practice of Asian American Buddhism to be in solidarity with Black Lives Matter while (2) seeing the potential new hashtag as appropriative and potentially jeopardizing this solidarity. Such sensitivities may be warranted as anti-Black reactions to #BlackLivesMatter included the creation and usage of hashtags such as #AllLivesMatter and #WhiteLivesMatter to decenter the critique of anti-Black violence in the United States. Han concludes this section by rejecting the idea of Oppression Olympics and commenting that Asian American voices are needed in American Buddhism. However, as discussed earlier, Han frames the hesitation in relationship to Asian Americans' perceived status in US society through the Model Minority trope as "white-adjacent."[83] There is no indication if another hashtag was developed by this group to highlight the invisibility of Asian American Buddhist writers in mainstream US consciousness. At this juncture of the text, it appears that the Asian American Buddhists were unable to articulate how erasure was a form of epistemic violence against Asianness that relates to our post-COVID awareness of anti-Asian racism. Blackness and Asianness need not be antithetical

82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.

in Dolma's understanding of the connection between Asian Americans and African Americans. However, it is not fully articulated or thought out. As it has been articulated in Han's book, Black–Asian solidarity is tenuous at best and in conflict at worst. Acknowledging anti-Blackness in the Asian American community is an easy admission for Han and her interviewees. However, there is trepidation in articulating the harms that Asian and Asian Americans experience on different levels as an instantiation of structural racism against Asians. Are Asian Americans whiteness's junior partners? Or are they also victims of white supremacy? Can Black and Asian solidarities be imagined horizontally without references to whiteness? In Han's text, it is unclear whether Black and Asian relationalities can be articulated without referencing racism and white privilege.

Vesley-Flad in turn cites Duncan Williams on Asian American presence at Black Lives Matter protests during the George Floyd Rebellion. But even as these moments of horizontal interpellation are recounted, antithetical Black–Asian tensions symbolized by the alien Asian shopkeeper and the wrongfully accused Black shopper continue to repeat. The cultural memory of Black–Asian solidarity in the mid-twentieth century, as well as the recognition of Black–Asian polyculturalism in popular culture, seems to be easily lost. So long as Black–Asian relationalities are imagined through notions of absolute difference where opacity is not a shared strategic right or there is a refusal to consent to being a single group (as Glissant offers), Black and Asian American subjectivities will be imagined as being on opposing sides of both the color line and the culture line, unable to meaningfully interact except when mediated by the vertical racial hierarchy structured by white supremacy and racial capitalism. This may not have been Han's intent when writing about her indebtedness to Black writers in understanding herself in the US racial hierarchy, or when citing her Asian American interviewees' positions on #BlackLivesMatter. However, the language of appropriation and authenticity emerge amongst the speakers when discussing Black–Asian relationality. Black–Asian solidarity is imagined as tenuous and potentially broken should Asian Americans seek to articulate the harms of anti-Asian racism. Any rhetoric that appears to "decenter" Blackness in conversations on US racial hierarchy and structural racism seems to be a nonstarter.

CONCLUSION

When placing Vesley-Flad's discussion of the genealogy of Black Buddhism alongside accounts of Asian American Buddhist converts in Han's *Be the Refuge*, we see an interesting parallel. Many Black and Asian American Buddhists have been formed in predominantly white sanghas and influenced by the writings of white convert Buddhists. In both cases, there is a hesitation to engage with Asian immigrant temples that is intimately related to a rejection of superstitious or hierarchical modalities of Buddhist praxis, presumably which were less present in white Buddhist praxis. Black and Asian American Buddhists therefore share in an aversion to aspects of Asian immigrant Buddhism that is perceived to be antithetical to modernity, whether expressed in terms of internalized anti-Blackness, misogyny, homophobia, or the supernatural.

While it may be possible to imagine and recount Black–Asian solidarities and instances of horizontal relationships between Black and Asian American Buddhist practitioners, the vertical US racial hierarchy and whiteness triangulates Black–Asian relationality and persistently redirects energy towards questions of appropriation, theft, and injury. This stymies efforts to imagine Black and Asian collectivities through peer relationality that are not predicated on white agency. POC sanghas and affinity groups that form as safe spaces of practice away from whiteness become reactionary effects to initial white injury. Amidst these gaps, I recognize the need for further examination of Black and Asian American peer relations both realized in the world and imagined in literary forms. Rather than continual energy expended on critiquing structural racism and white supremacy, perhaps the study of American Buddhism should follow the lead of Afro-Asian studies' exploration of horizontal peer relations through polyculturalism, anticolonialism, and internationalism rather than neoliberal multiculturalism's directive towards diversity, equity, and inclusion through rendering racialized "others" as minor transparent subjects.

I implore scholars of American religion and Buddhism to take seriously polycultural relationalities and interactions outside of the disciplinary borders of what constitutes Buddhist subjectivities to unearth complex Black and Asian American entanglements that Vesley-Flad and Larry Yang point to as the gap between Black and Asian American Buddhist communities. Moving outside the recognizable American sanghas, the well-policed borders partitioning ethnic studies into an

infinitely fragmenting set of racialized and gendered "others," and comparative religious studies' continual insistence on gazing at Asia both for its edification and dismissal, resistant solidarities amongst Buddhists of color (and more broadly POC) may be tenuously formed and experienced in the subterranean, underground spaces of contemporary hip hop and, more broadly, the Asian media and visual cultures challenging hegemonic white masculinity that emerged first in the 1970s through kung fu films, and now in the shared media landscapes of Asian and Asian American media productions broadly. Asian media aesthetics continue to inform hip-hop culture and Black music broadly, from Kendrick Lamar's Kung Fu Kenny character to rappers',[84] producers',[85] and jazz musicians'[86] embrace and shout outs to Japanese visual culture. Many 1960s avant-garde jazz musicians served during the Korean War. While in Korea, the multi-instrumentalist Bilal Abdurrahman was given a woodwind instrument called a *p'iri* by a Korean farmer, which Abdurrahman then used in developing his signature jazz/Middle Eastern compositions.[87] Experiences of the war catalyzed the internationalism of the cultural radicalism emerging in the Black Arts movement of the 1960s.

Such references and orientations towards Asia in horizontal interpellations of Blackness that resist the monolithic linear spacetime of Middle Passage Blackness are hardly something new. With respect to jazz, Fred Ho's Afro Asian Music Ensemble of the 1980s imagined peer relationality across Black and Asian America. As Ho and Mullen write,

84. Texas-born Megan Thee Stallion also integrates Japanese animation motifs into her aesthetic and creative production. Like other contemporary African American musicians influenced by Japanese visual culture, she grew up watching anime on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim programming. See Kyrie Blackman, "Megan Thee Stallion: Rap, Anime, and the Imagined West," *Autry Museum of the American West*, September 10, 2020, https://theautry.org/explore/blog/megan-thee-stallion-rap-anime-and-imagined-west.

85. Flying Lotus produced and created the soundtrack to the anime series *Yasuke* recounting the first African samurai.

86. Thundercat and Kamasi Washington are some notable examples of twenty-first century African American jazz musicians who draw from Asian media aesthetics.

87. Daniel Widener, "Seoul City Sue and the Bugout Blues: Black American Narratives of the Forgotten War," in *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections*, ed. Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen (Duke University Press, 2008), 77.

"Afro Asia is a strategic intersection for thinking through an internationalist, global paradigm that joins the world's two largest continents and populations, as well as an anti-imperialist, insurgent identity that is no longer majority white in orientation."[88] Ho interpellated his Asian Americanness through a Blackness that evidences polyculturalism:

> I had begun my ensemble to express musically a vision of unity between the cultural-socio-political struggles of African Americans (the originators and innovators of "jazz") and Asian Americans. Since my teen-age years, the Black Power movement (particularly the leading ideas of Malcolm X) and the Black Arts movement (especially the poetry of Baraka, Sanchez, Scott-Heron, and the Last Poets, and the music of Mingus, Coltrane, Shepp, Parker, Ellington, and Cal Massey) greatly inspired my social consciousness and identity as a Chinese American (to understand that I, as an Asian in America, suffered as victim of white racism and the need to wage a comprehensive struggle to end this systematic oppression).[89]

Unlike Han and her interviewees in *Be the Refuge*, Ho emphasizes the possibility of forming horizontal peer relations in a shared epiphenomenal now marked by shared struggle against white supremacy and systematic oppression. Black and Asian American struggles are united rather than distinct. This interconnectedness also appears in Black radical internationalisms preceding Ho. Bill V. Mullen notes in *Afro Orientalism* how W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Robert F. Williams, and James Boggs were informed by gazes towards Asia in the formation of radical internationalisms, anticolonial Black nationalism, and New Left Third Worldism.[90] Sherman A. Jackson discusses the role of Black Orientalism in discursive formation of African American Islams.[91]

88. Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen, "Introduction," in *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections*, ed. Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen (Duke University Press, 2008), 2–3.
89. Ibid., 21.
90. Ibid., xli.
91. See Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford University Press, 2005). Jackson characterizes Black Orientalism as "an attempt to undermine the authority of Islam in the black community by casting the Arab/Muslim world as precursors and imitators of the West in the latter's antiblackness" (18–19). African American Muslims developed an "alternative modality of American blackness" that deviated from a normative monolithic understanding of Black religion, cultural politics,

Jacob S. Dorman notes the proliferation of Orientalist aesthetics during the Harlem Renaissance, and how founding African American Muslims such as Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad saw Islam as pivotal in forming a global antiracist movement to counter European imperialism.[92] Helen H. Jun's analysis of Black Orientalism in nineteenth-century Black press that deployed anti-Chinese sentiment and Asian alterity "facilitated the assimilation of black Americans to ideologies of political modernity and consolidated black identification as U.S. national subjects."[93] While the three authors diverge on the subject matter of their analysis of Black Orientalism, all three agree on the importance of Asia, the Orient, and the "other" in contesting interpellations of Blackness in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. Likewise, they mirror how contemporary African American culture also interpellates Blackness with Asia/the Orient as a mediating object. Asia and Asianness have an integral role in interpellating Blackness in the various forms of Black Orientalism. Strategies of policing the color line on appeals to authenticity only reify the impermeability of Blackness and Asianness, stymying comparative analysis

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and secular movements by aligning more closely with Muslim immigrant modalities; such African American Muslims were accused of "cultural apostasy" (18). This policing of the borders of Blackness and pseudo-Blackness is applied to Black Orientalist discourse against African American Muslims in which their sense of Blackness (both in terms of religious/spiritual and cultural/political) is being challenged. As a reactionary discourse, it seeks to disidentify with those who deviate from vertical interpellations of Blackness that rely on linear progressive spacetime, one in which US Blackness is mediated through a Middle Passage epistemology of religious/spiritual/cultural loss, consolidation of Black religion into Christianity, and educated/enlightened Black subjects becoming secular political subjects involved in thoroughly non-religious liberative movements. Black conversion to a third cultural group outside the racial hierarchy thus is assessed through its triangulation, that African American Muslims are disavowing their Blackness to align themselves with Arab/Muslimness, which is an inauthentic performance of Blackness. Such similar rhetorical strategies are also impressed on contemporary Black Buddhists.

92. Jacob S. Dorman, *The Princess and the Prophet: The Secret History of Magic, Race, and Moorish Muslims in America* (Beacon Press, 2020).

93. Helen H. Jun, "Black Orientalism: Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Race and U.S. Citizenship," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2006): 1048, https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2007.0010.

of Black–Asian polycultural relationalities. In the case of American Buddhism, policing Black–Asian borders is what generates confounded reactions to Black Buddhists and Asian American presence/contribution in the construction of Black expressive cultures such as hip hop.

Such an effort begins by recognizing the undertheorization and trivialization of Asian American religion and religious subjectivities in the discipline of religious studies, and the marginal position that scholars of Asian American religions occupy in ethnic studies. This present special section, a collection of papers from a panel presented at the American Academy of Religion in 2023,[94] addresses the question of how Buddhists of color navigate the racial karma of the United States. While many of the contributors interact with Black Buddhists and/or reference Black Buddhist scholarship, noticeably absent in our panel and the resulting special section is a contribution by a Black scholar. Such an omission, while potentially benign, may inadvertently affect the reception of these essays as being the issue focusing on "Asian American perspectives" on the question of racial karma in the United States. As such, it may further intensify the policing and reinforcement of color/culture lines that I critiqued earlier as existing in religious studies and that comparative ethnic studies, literature, and cultural studies seem to actively seek to deconstruct in emergent Afro-Asian studies. Creating more spaces where Black and Asian religious practitioners and scholars commit to examining Black–Asian polycultural entanglements deviating from normative interpellations of Blackness and Asian Americanness will help us further unpack Yang's question and complexify it beyond the simple answer that Black Buddhists avoid Asian and Asian American sanghas because of the same perception of cultural backwardness that white Buddhists interpellate on Asian American Buddhists. Deeper engagement with Black religious scholarly treatments of Asian religious traditions and Asian American scholarly contributions to both Black studies and African American/Africana religious studies will move us closer from imaginations of Black–Asian solidarity to its realization.

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