What Hope? Staying with the Trouble of America's Racial Karma

Elaine Lai
Lecturer, Stanford University

ABSTRACT

This article examines "America's racial karma," a concept coined by Larry Ward, to critique the temporal logic underpinning narratives of progress in the US. Drawing from Buddhist conceptions of karma, alongside queer theory, Black studies, and postcolonial critiques, I argue that America's linear, future-oriented historical narrative functions as a political myth, obscuring racial trauma, perpetuating cycles of othering, and ultimately foreclosing possibilities for genuine healing. I propose an alternative temporal orientation rooted in Buddhist theories of samsaric time, interdependence, and narrative multiplicity—one that resists linear progress and instead embraces relational and pluralistic ways of understanding time, language, and identity. I argue that the work of juxtaposition itself is a productive exercise of estrangement; if America's progressive history forecloses alternative possibilities, then defamiliarizing this narrative through juxtaposition and multiplicity may inspire a different ethical relationship to time. My goal is not to offer a single solution, but to provide a critical and creative toolkit for rethinking how we tell our collective stories.

Keywords: Time, emplotment, race and religion, Buddhist literature, queer theory, history, ethics

I am a scholar at the nexus of two worlds—one foot steeped in the premodern Buddhist texts[1] that I read with, and one foot steeped within the United States, where I am struggling to find alternatives to

1. My primary area of focus these last several years has been early Dzogchen Heart Essence (Tib. *rdzogs chen snying thig*) texts from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries.

the narrative of liberal progressive time that constitutes my everyday reality. This article[2] emerges from an attempt to integrate these two worlds, not as an intellectual exercise, but as a confrontation between temporal frameworks that shape how we experience history, identity, and hope. It is also inspired by my time back in America these last six years, where the tension between these frameworks has felt both personal and urgent.

When I returned to the US in 2018 to begin my PhD at Stanford University, it marked the first time that I lived here since 2008. In the ten years that I had lived abroad in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Nepal, and India, I had forgotten about my race. I am not saying that there are no social inequalities in these countries, or that I was not perceived as an outsider under certain circumstances. There are certainly problems, and I was indeed treated as an outsider on occasion. However, I felt a lightness in my body that I had never felt while living in the US. In these countries, being Asian was the norm. By contrast, the moment I returned to American soil, I immediately felt the heaviness and vigilance that accompanies the trauma of being racialized. As the COVID pandemic raged on, that feeling only grew more apparent.[3]

In *What World Is This: A Pandemic Phenomenology*,[4] Judith Butler argues that the pandemic has only unveiled the problematic metrics that have always governed America's underlying values—values that

2. I presented a portion of this paper at the American Academy of Religion's Collective Karma unit, in a panel titled "Karma Cluster Concepts: Racialized Karma, Popular Sovereignty, Healing, and Ethical Formation," in San Antonio, TX, November 21, 2023. Thank you to Susanne Kerekes and Jessica Zu for organizing this panel and for my fellow panelist Kate Hartmann. I would like to thank my partner Aftab Hafeez, my friend Cahron Cross, and my colleague Nestor Silva for reading through an early draft and offering input. Thank you to Jesse Lee for inviting me to contribute to this special section of *Pacific World*, and for offering feedback as well. Thank you to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and to Natalie Quli for her copyedits. Finally, deep thanks to James Gentry and the other members of my dissertation committee—Elaine Fisher, John Kieschnick, Vesna Wallace, and Sarah Jacoby—for their input on the concluding chapter of my dissertation, which also inspired this article.

3. This article is not an autoethnography. I share the above only to be transparent about my motives for writing.

4. Judith Butler, *What World Is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (Columbia University Press, 2022).

determine what lives are worth safeguarding and what lives are not. In their chapter "Grievability for the Living," Butler critiques the American capitalist structure for having created a world in which certain lives are grievable, while others are dispensable. Here, dispensable life is disproportionately marked as Black and brown, elderly, immunocompromised, and LGBTQ+.[5] For Butler, this differential grievability is not just an ethical failure; it represents a form of institutional violence embedded in America's foundational narratives. Thus, any struggle against social inequality must also question the "values" behind the metrics that safeguard certain lives over others.

The values that Butler critiques are tied to America's metanarrative of progress and triumphalism—a story that has been endlessly reproduced through institutions, media, and America's self-presentation of history as progressive. America's temporal logic, in turn, structures how we perceive time, identity, and the possibility for change. As other scholars have argued, America's progressive history is rooted in a Christian teleology tied to colonialist and imperialist projects.[6] Over two decades ago, religious studies scholar Charles Long critiqued this guise of innocence that the American saga upholds.

> The religion of the American people centers around the telling and retelling of the mighty deeds of the white conquerors. This story hides the true experience of Americans from their very eyes. The invisibility of Indians and blacks is matched by a void or a deeper invisibility within the consciousness of white Americans. The inordinate fear they have of minorities is an expression of the fear they have

5. Ibid., 93.

6. For example, Kathryn Gin Lum writes, "Talal Asad explains how this Western self-conception developed as 'older, Christian attitudes toward historical time (salvational expectation) were combined with the newer, secular practices (rational prediction) to give us our modern idea of progress.' To 'make history' according to this progressive schema, Asad notes, 'the agent must create the future, remake herself, and help others to do so.' " Kathryn Gin Lum, "The Historyless Heathen and the Stagnating Pagan: History as a Non-Native Category?," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 28, no. 1 (2018): 53.

> when they contemplate the possibility of seeing themselves as they really are.[7]

What Dr. Long exposes is not only a kind of perpetual historical amnesia, but also a structural mechanism lurking behind the story of America[8]—the habitual guise of innocence that makes America unable to truly face its mistakes. There is an affective component to this emplotment of American history as well. That is, America's future-oriented, optimistic fiction is responsible for the subtle self-doubt and cognitive dissonance that many people of color feel when encountering everyday forms of racism and second-guessing themselves—what Cathy Park Hong calls "minor feelings."[9] More detrimental, the American saga of optimism leads to paralysis—an inability to push the story in other directions without being stigmatized as anti-American. While buying into the American saga might temporarily provide a distraction from addressing the fundamental wound at hand, ultimately, it only further decontextualizes the trauma of racialization, robbing us of any opportunity to begin the process of healing.

This article seeks alternatives to America's dominant narrative of progress. I am searching for a temporal orientation to hope that is not shackled to a progressive linear history. Larry Ward, as a student of the late Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022), came out with *America's Racial Karma* in 2020, which succinctly and eloquently discusses racialization through the Buddhist lens of karma. Ultimately, Ward presents

7. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Fortress Press, 1986), 163.

8. This is what Larry Ward calls America's "trail of blood and gold" (*America's Racial Karma: An Invitation to Heal* [Parallax Press, 2020], 70).

9. "Minor feelings occur when American optimism is enforced upon you, which contradicts your own racialized reality, creating a state of cognitive dissonance. You are told, 'Things are so much better,' while you think, Things are the same. You are told, 'Asian Americans are so successful,' while you feel like a failure.... Minor feelings are also the emotions we are accused of having when we decide to be difficult—in other words, when we decide to be honest. When minor feelings are finally externalized, they are interpreted as hostile, ungrateful, jealous, depressing, belligerent affects ascribed to racialized behavior that whites consider out of line. Our feelings are overreactions because our lived experiences of structural equality are not commensurate with their deluded reality" (Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* [One World, 2020], 56–57).

America's racial karma as an epistemological alternative to America's story of progressive futurism.

Drawing from Buddhist conceptions of karma, alongside queer theory, Black studies, and postcolonial critiques, I argue that America's linear, future-oriented historical narrative functions as a political myth, obscuring racial trauma, perpetuating cycles of othering, and ultimately foreclosing possibilities for genuine healing. I propose an alternative temporal orientation rooted in Buddhist theories of samsaric time, interdependence, and narrative multiplicity—one that resists linear progress and instead embraces relational and pluralistic ways of understanding time, language, and identity. I argue that the work of juxtaposition itself is a productive exercise of estrangement; if America's progressive history forecloses alternative possibilities, then defamiliarizing this narrative through juxtaposition and multiplicity may inspire a different ethical relationship to time. Ultimately, this article is not just about critiquing America's temporal logic. It is an invitation to imagine new temporalities, new ways of telling and possibly inhabiting our collective stories.

AMERICA'S RACIAL KARMA AS AN ORIENTATION TO TIME

> We are living with the reckoning of the racialization of humanity that paved that trail of blood and gold. It not only resides in our bodies as unprocessed biological trauma, it has also permeated our individual and social psychology, rendering the latter completely bankrupt. Americans are in social despair from the absence of genuine connection.[10]

Ward's book attempts to answer the question: Why is racialization, with white skin on the throne of the human species, so intractable? Why does it persist despite the suffering that it causes? Ward writes that for nonwhite people, racialized consciousness persists through everyday aggressions, violence, and exclusions on a macro and micro scale. Most of us are stuck in cycles of reactivity, Ward argues, with our autonomic nervous systems on high alert. This is because being

10. Ward, *America's Racial Karma*, 70.

racialized is a traumatic experience that lives in the body and is transferred intergenerationally.

The answer Ward provides is the very title of his book: America's racial karma, which he considers using a specifically Yogācāra Buddhist framework. Using a Yogācāra presentation of eight different levels of human consciousness, Ward argues that all of our karmic patterns of body, speech, and mind condition the eighth consciousness, called the all-ground (Skt. *ālayavijñāna*). This is equivalent to the deepest part of our subconscious. In Ward's understanding, the all-ground is like a storehouse that has collected all of our karmic habits throughout lifetimes. The deepest seeds of racism abide here, and depending on the particular conditions one encounters, those seeds may manifest outwardly in subtle or not so subtle ways.

Ward uses the notion of America's racial karma to push back against the misconception that colonization and racism are located in the past. The seeds of racism continue on today in the form of unprocessed trauma, systemic discrimination, and an epidemic of isolation. America has never moved on from the past because it has never healed its racial karma. Quite the opposite, Ward argues that "we have spent the last five hundred years becoming so skillful in denying our atrocities and projecting the shadows of America's racial karma onto the bodies of nonwhites that we are like people suffering from traumatic brain injuries and amnesia."[11] Ward's conclusions, though analyzed through his Yogācāra-inspired interpretation of karma, echo the contributions of many scholars working in other disciplines.

For example, Biko Mandela Gray[12] argues that America's myth of progress operates as a theodicy, justifying state violence by erasing historical consciousness. Gray begins with the poignant claim, *"I am not surprised,"* when bombarded by news reporting on Black death. Gray argues that the rhetoric of "surprise" invoked by the state as a response to anti-Black violence assumes a kind of ignorance-as-bliss stance by erasing an entire history of violence that has preceded every moment of televised anti-Black violence. Gray emphasizes: "What I

11. Ibid., 62.

12. Biko Mandela Gray, "Now It Is Always Now," *Political Theology*, June 27, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2022.2093693. I would like to thank my colleague Nicole Carroll, who brought this article to my attention during our seminar "Writing Religious History" taught by Dr. Kathryn Gin Lum in the winter of 2023. Thank you to Dr. Gin Lum for her guidance and encouragement.

want to suggest, then, is that time, the *time that 'progresses,'* the *time that allows for 'surprise' is a theodicy*. It is a justification of the goodness of the state in the face of black suffering and death."[13]

Rhetorically speaking, "surprise" functions to absolve the state and the larger collective consciousness of any responsibility to address America's deepest wounds. These wounds—rooted in a history of genocide and economic wealth derived from racialized and gendered forms of violence—form the very ground upon which the entire foundation of America stands. More perniciously, surprise reifies the collective amnesia that both Ward and Long critique. It allows the story of American progress to march forward, leaving its benighted past behind in the shadows. But lurking behind this façade of progressive linear time is the festering of America's racial karma—these continued cycles of suffering. Denial only perpetuates this suffering.

If Gray's thesis denaturalizes progressive time as a norm, it also begs the question: From where did the "*time that 'progresses*,' the *time that allows for 'surprise'*" come? Scholars of anthropology, history, religious studies, and queer theory have all contributed to this conversation in varying capacities. I briefly touch on some works below to model how I hope Buddhist studies can engage in more interdisciplinary conversations about time.

In *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (2014), Johannes Fabian argues that the field of anthropology emerged at a time when capitalism and its colonialist expansion projects were stretching into the very territories that would later become the objects of anthropological study.[14] For these expansionist projects to exercise their ideological and material agency, the West not only needed additional Space[15] or territory to conquer, but it also needed an order of "Time to accommodate the schemes of a one-way history: progress, development, modernity (and their negative mirror images: stagnation, underdevelopment, tradition). In short, geopolitics has its ideological

13. Gray, "Now It Is Always Now," 3.

14. Thank you to my fellow panelist Megan Crognale for introducing me to this source during our streamed panel "Alternative Temporal Cosmologies," annual American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) conference, Montréal, QC, March 15, 2024.

15. I am reproducing Fabian's capitalization of "Space."

foundations in chronopolitics."[16] Given anthropology's own history, Fabian contends that "it is by diagnosing anthropology's temporal discourse that one rediscovers the obvious, namely that there is no knowledge of the Other which is not also temporal, historical, a political act."[17] Importantly, Fabian points to the fact that while critiques against the imperialist claims to space have been exposed in recent years, time has not yet been decolonized.[18]

In a similar spirit, Kathryn Gin Lum argues that the academic discipline of history was a nineteenth-century invention used by the Euro-American academy to reinforce a Western assumption of forward-moving history as a universal way of measuring time.[19] The concept of "heathen" was an outgrowth of the historical enterprise, used by Euro-Americans to stigmatize peoples who were considered "historyless" and on the wrong side of religion. Ultimately, Europeans and Euro-Americans claimed to be able to tell other peoples' histories for them; simultaneously, the heathen category helped to justify the Euro-American takeover of "heathen" peoples and lands.[20] The unsettling

16. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 144.

17. Ibid., 1.

18. Fabian writes, "By and large, we remain under the spell of an equally mendacious fiction: that interpersonal, intergroup, indeed international Time is 'public Time'—there to be occupied, measured, and allotted by the powers that be" (ibid., 144).

19. Gin Lum builds from J.Z. Smith's famous critique of the category of religion a "second-order, generic concept" that established the disciplinary horizon for religious studies by positioning different world religions as derivatives of Christianity. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–284.

20. Gin Lum notes that the category "heathen" was used to mark anyone who was not a monotheist and was applied to the inhabitants of Hawai'i and China in slightly different ways: "To the extent that they were all supposed to be lost in the darkness of heathenism, the inhabitants of Hawai'i and China struck nineteenth-century Euro-Americans as similar. But their heathenism also manifested in ways that had very different implications for how Americans viewed their history and historical consciousness and, in turn, their supposed 'maturity' as a people. In short, Hawaiians seemed to be childlike while the Chinese appeared to be past their prime" (Gin Lum, "The Historyless Heathen," 56).

conclusion Gin Lum draws is that the methodological assumptions of historians—such as context, contingency, and change over time—are all rooted in colonialist thinking.

Priya Satia's work provides overwhelming evidence to support Gin Lum's conclusion—that the discipline of history itself was constructed to rationalize the violence of colonialism and imperialism. In *Time's Monster: History, Conscience and the British Empire* (2020), Satia shows how in the middle of the eighteenth century, expectations of what would constitute a historical narrative began to shift—"history came to be understood as linear and irreversible, and, especially progressive."[21] Satia's work highlights that these Enlightenment figures were theorizing history at a time when the evils of empire were being exposed and questioned. In America, the abolition movement had already gained momentum. Across the ocean, debates over the role of Britain's East India Company and its expanding empire in India had culminated with the trial and eventual impeachment of Warren Hastings, who had served as the first governor-general of the Bengal Presidency.

Despite such blatant evidence of corruption, rather than fundamentally call into question the imperial project or the racist scientific discourses that were being used to justify colonial violence, "eighteenth-century thinkers rationalized trade, driven by self-interest, productive of luxury and fraud, as a 'necessary evil' for the sake of the nation's progress."[22] Underpinning these emerging notions of progressive history were theories of God's Providence—the idea that in the long sweep of history, there would be some greater moral meaning to the evils of empire. Satia writes, "Enlightenment faith in the progressive nature of war helped normalize the violence of imperial conquest and industrial capitalism."[23] Importantly, Satia's work on eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers further reveals that these narratives

21. Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: How History Makes History* (Belknap Press, 2020), 19.
22. Ibid., 23.
23. Ibid., 28.

of progress persist today in more hidden forms, for instance, in the guise of wars on terror for the sake of democracy.[24]

Finally, the work of queer theorists like Halberstam, Muñoz, and Edelman[25] suggests that the same temporal logic that has justified imperial violence has also marginalized the queer. Just as stigmatization arises if one does not subscribe to the politics of hope, similarly, if one's life strays from the prescribed script of reproduction and productivity for a capitalist system, exclusion is the result. For Edelman, queerness—an epistemological challenge to progressive time—represents a total negation of the Symbolic order represented by the Child and the narrative of futurity: "the sacralization of the Child...necessitates the sacrifice of the queer."[26]

Edelman argues that queerness is also a structural position that shifts depending on how quickly those marked as queer can assimilate to the Symbolic[27] order. In other words, queerness holds the burden of always needing to be fulfilled by some marginalized other. Edelman writes, "Those of us inhabiting the place of the queer may be able to cast off that queerness and enter the properly political sphere, but only by shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else."[28] Said in an-

24. She writes: "Technical euphemisms like 'security' obscure the political and historical character of conflicts in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, allowing them to go on as if inevitable, without accountability; their continual damage to human lives in those places is like the routine and unavoidable damage of terrible storms" (ibid., 28–29).

25. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th Anniversary ed., Sexual Cultures (New York University Press, 2019); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004).

26. Edelman, *No Future*, 28. The "Child," for Edelman, does not represent actual children; rather, the image of the Child, invoked by politics, is "the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value" (ibid., 4). Moreover, the image of the Child functions as a telos to reaffirm the Symbolic order, to "affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (ibid., 3). This Symbolic order requires the ontological disqualification of the queer.

27. I am maintaining Edelman's capitalization of "Symbolic" here.

28. Ibid., 27.

other way, to create a center (i.e., normalcy) requires the designation of a periphery—an aberration, or that which is "not normal." This construction of queerness as a perpetually marginal space is resonant with Long's critique that whiteness requires the designation of a lesser other to bring its identity, and its supremacy, into being.

To summarize the above, the belief in linear progress—whether framed through imperial conquests, national identity, or historical development—rests on the assumption that time moves in a forward direction, towards a future where past injustices are resolved, where redemption lies in sight.[29] The providential positioning of history as inevitable is the very logic that allows for America to express "surprise" when faced with instances of racialized violence that assault contemporary sentiments of having moved beyond the time of racism. "Surprise" is further enabled by what Calvin Warren calls the "politics of hope," which wholesale bypasses entertaining the possibility that America would intentionally commit any true evil in the first place.[30] The politics of hope[31] functions through the "trick of time,"

29. For an excellent study historicizing the concept of redemptive hope in theistic and European intellectual traditions, see Akiba J. Lerner, *Redemptive Hope: From the Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Obama* (Fordham University Press, 2015). Thank you to my colleague Courtney Blair Hodrick for bringing my attention to Lerner's work.

30. Warren positions Black nihilism as a philosophical posture that can potentially expose the faulty logic of the Political, which he defines as "linear temporality, bio-political futurity, perfection, betterment, and redress—[which] sustains black suffering. Progress and perfection are worked through the pained black body and any recourse to the Political and its discourse of hope will ultimately reproduce the very metaphysical structures of violence that pulverize black being." He argues that Black nihilism is a "'demythifying' practice...that uncovers the subjugating strategies of political hope and de-idealizes its fantastical object" (Calvin Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," *The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 1 [2015]: 221).

31. For Warren, through the practice of Black nihilism, or a total abandonment of the politics of hope, one comes to recognize that the myth of hope operates through certain deceptive strategies that not only negate but also demonize alternative possibilities. "Once we denude political hope of its axiological and ethical veneer, we see that it operates through certain strategies: 1) positing itself as the only alternative to the problem of anti-blackness, 2) shielding this alternative from rigorous historical/philosophical critique by placing it in an unknown future, 3) delimiting the field of action to include only activity

which "offers a promise of possibility that can only be realized in an indefinite future, and this promise is a bond of uncertainty that can never be redeemed, only imagined."[32] Time itself becomes a tool for erasure, burying any ruptures that demand immediate reparations in the present.

Given the work of the above scholars and more, it seems that any narrative dispensation that moves forward in a linear fashion, or upwards in an arc towards a progressive future, requires the epistemological and ontological disqualification of some category of "other" to fulfill its symbolic emplotment. Progress, in this sense, produces the very conditions that perpetuate exclusion. Thus, any project that seeks to trouble the progressive narrative, or to decolonize time in the way that the above scholars call for, must also resist the exclusionary politics that (re)produce hierarchy and pathologize difference.

Like Gray, I, too, am not surprised when I witness another instance of anti-Black violence reported over the news. I am also not surprised when the US provides billions of dollars of weapons to back another invasion in the Middle East in the name of "security." Far from surprised, the reaction I feel is despair, sometimes submerged beneath a layer of numbness. Even though I am not surprised, a part of me still yearns for a different story. This yearning pulls at me every time I myself become the sudden target of bigotry or misplaced anger, sometimes by other people of color. And I feel this yearning even more when I witness those patterns of harm repeating everywhere around me, and I am reminded again that America's "normal" is actually fundamentally dysfunctional.[33] The story I have been told my whole life harms us all, regardless of whether or not we are aware of the full range of its violent effects. What story of hope can I rely on ethically? What story

recognized and legitimated by the Political, and 4) demonizing critiques or different philosophical perspectives" (Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," 221–222).

32. Ibid., 223. Although Warren's Black nihilism insists on refusal as a form of resistance, I do not believe his position falls into the paralysis of total pessimism either, what we might call a resignation to things as they are. Instead, Black nihilism's very refusal is meant to create the space for alternative possibilities to breathe.

33. I am inspired directly from Sonya Renee Taylor's post during the COVID pandemic. Sonya Renee Taylor, *Instagram* (blog), April 2, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B-fc3ejAlvd/?hl=en.

won't consign me to the kind of self-deception implicit in America's fiction of progressive time?

On the other hand, for those who have and continue to experience violence at the hands of the state, or everyday forms of micro and macro aggressions, the narrative that America's racial karma will continue—just because it is the nature of America's particular form of samsara—is not only wholly unsatisfactory: it enrages. Or, I should specify, it enrages me. What about the time of joy, of freedom, of play? Or is freedom only to be tasted outside of samsara, and in the tradition that I study and practice, after one has attained the exceptional state of *parinirvāṇa* like the historical Buddha Śākyamuni?

While not discounting or disavowing the pervasive forms of suffering in the world, is there a mode of expression that might allow for a more life-giving, dare I wish for, more hopeful way of understanding one's own emplacement within these repeated cycles of violence? Not an empty hope that induces amnesia, but a courageous hope grounded in compassion and a willingness to touch into suffering? Can Buddhist literature offer us a more compassionate relationship to time—one that avoids the hierarchies of othering inherent in binary systems and center-periphery relations?

STAYING WITH THE TROUBLE OF AMERICA'S RACIAL KARMA

Ward depicts America's racial karma through the metaphor of an ever-turning wheel consisting of five spokes: intention, manifestation, transmission, retribution, and continuation. Because racial karma perpetuates through habit, Ward suggests that the first step towards healing requires an awareness of how the seeds of racialized consciousness were planted in each of us. Building upon Ward's wheel metaphor, I would now like to consider the potential benefits of samsara—this wheel of karma—as an alternative temporal paradigm to progressive time.

Above, I had expressed some of the frustrating limits of the paradigm of samsara; to say that ignorance or othering is just the way samsara is and always will be feels like a cowardly cop-out that does nothing more than reinforce the current social order in the same way that the politics of hope does. Both orientations—a resignation to America's samsara, as well as the uncritical consumption of the narrative of progress—reinscribe the status quo as the norm. However, a

deep awareness of samsara's defects—these patterns of suffering—is different from a resignation to that suffering, or total despair.

If an adamant refusal to participate in the logic of progressive time is a viable option for resisting the politics of hope as Warren has argued for, a complimentary alternative might be to "stay with the trouble." According to Haraway, staying with the trouble of our deep entwinement as "moral critters" connected to multiple "unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings"[34] serves as an alternative to the narrative of making an imagined future safe. Although writing from the perspective of ecological disaster and a critique of the Anthropocene, Haraway's posture strikes me as similar to Warren's politics of refusal and to Ward's call for cultivating an awareness of the seeds of America's racial karma within one's own mind-stream.

What can refusing the "trick of time" and "staying with the trouble" mean in the context of decolonizing time and the stories we use to talk about America? Recalling Lee Edelman's challenge to the reader, what might it mean to perpetually occupy the space of the queer, without being reabsorbed into a Symbolic system that reproduces a center and a periphery, a hierarchy? Buddhist theories of time and interdependence are a rich testing ground for just how far we can go with theories of the fluidity of identity, of what it might mean to "stay with the trouble" of our complex web of relationality.

Two decades ago, Jonathan S. Walters had already argued for a nuanced understanding of sociokarma—the fact that karma is always social and never individual. In Walters's breakdown of the seven different aspects of sociokarma, he analyzes, "it will be clear that there is room to conceive of literally all society, like its homologue the *Jātaka*,

34. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Experimental Futures Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices (Duke University Press, 2016), 1. Haraway proposes "staying with the trouble" as a counter to two common and problematic responses to the horrors of the Anthropocene. The first response adopts a comic fix in technology as the new God who will eventually find a solution to save us all—this could be construed as an extension of the politics of hope—not in America's providential good, but in science and technology as the ultimate good. The second most common response to the Anthropocene is a destructive attitude of bitter cynicism—this could be construed as another form of a passive resignation to samsara and the way things are or always have been.

as one big web of co-transmigrating social units."[35] Continuing from Walters's thread, if we take the idea of reincarnation to its fullest theoretical extent, there is no "other" which we have never been. The line, "all mother sentient beings," which is found everywhere in Buddhist texts and prayers, is a poignant illustration of this concept. There is no sentient being who has not been our mother at some point in samsaric time, whether we consider sentient beings to be people of diverse races, ethnicities, embodiments, and histories, or if we consider sentient beings to be mammals, reptiles, insects, bacteria, or perhaps even a hybrid of these forms. And if we consider plants or other forms of nature as sentient too, our relationality penetrates even deeper. I would argue that this is very much the case; we cannot breathe or live without the many complex ecosystems that co-constitute our shared earth. Our very lives are not just entwined with nature, they are dependent on it.

Setting aside the problematic Buddhist assumption that the narrative framing "all mother sentient beings" would naturally give rise to compassion because all mothers have been kind mothers,[36] the idea that all sentient beings have been our mothers still holds far reaching consequences worthy of deeper contemplation. What Buddhism is trying to get at with such a provocation is that there is no sentient being, big or small, powerful or not, who we are not intimately related to, from a past life, a current one, or a future life. Buddhist cosmologies of samsara thus invite an infinitely expansive ethics of relationality, and consequently, of co-responsibility.[37]

Beyond the notion that we have all taken on different life forms, or that we are all ancestors and relatives of one another, what I find

35. Jonathan S. Walters, "Communal Karma and Karmic Community in Theravāda Buddhist History," in *Constituting Communities: Theravāda Buddhism and the Religious Cultures of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. John Holt, Jacob N. Kinnard, and Jonathan S. Walters, SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies (State University of New York Press, 2003), 21.

36. I have heard on multiple occasions Buddhists themselves express how challenging it is to connect with *bodhicitta* prayers, for example, because the metaphor of the mother is invoked and they had mothers who were neglectful, narcissistic, or sometimes completely absent.

37. At the end of *Time's Monster*, Satia weighs in on the constructive possibilities of samsara as well. She writes, "The minute we accommodate as historical actors humans who believe in rebirth, we are forced to accommodate a world-

productive about the theory of samsaric time is the way that history, or the past, then collapses into the present. Because of time's cyclical nature, samsara collapses past objects into present subjects. If we are to truly implicate ourselves in the framework of samsara, there is no way to "other" past historical actors as being ultimately separate from us. Likewise, if time is not linear, there is no way for us to completely disentangle ourselves from the past in any way whatsoever. Every one of us is capable of, and in many ways already reproducing, the same harmful tendencies that History[38] has already looked down upon and tried to separate from the present. I will add a cautious caveat that we are doing some good things, too. But the point is, none of it is new. Everything and everyone are a mirror for what we could become, if not what we already are.

The paradigm of samsara, rather than resign us to cycles of suffering, is meant to inspire us to renounce these old stories and negative patterns that do not lead towards liberation. In the preliminary practices (Tib. *sngon 'gro*) common to Vajrayāna Buddhism with which I am most familiar, the very first practice one undertakes is to contemplate the defects of samsara until one comes to a felt realization of samsara's unsatisfactoriness. And the first vow one makes after this contemplation is to renounce our non-volitional cycling in samsara—to promise to abstain from reproducing the insidious othering that has led to so much ongoing violence and ignorance in the first place. From this perspective, to practice Buddhism is to vow to have a different

view in which humans can morph into other forms: a monkey this life, human in the next; a human in this life, a snake in the next. This world-view is no longer human-centric; it is one in which the story of man [*sic*] cannot but blur into the story of other species, where all life is truly interrelated" (Satia, *Time's Monster*, 290–291). Similarly, the various *jātaka* tales which relate how the Buddha Śākyamuni had taken many different human and non-human forms in past lives instructs on this same point—a radical ethics of interrelationality that endures through life after life.

38. I use History in the sense that Ashon Crawley has described it—the nomination of certain events of import at the expense of renouncing other possibilities and worlds. See Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, 1st ed., Commonalities (Fordham University Press, 2017).

relationship with time. It is a politics of refusal that creates agency in samsara, disrupting the flow of cyclic time.

REFUSING THE COMPULSION TO OTHER

I would like to add something to Ward's argument that I think warrants being made more explicit. There is a common misconception that the closer one is aligned with whiteness as privilege, the less one suffers, or the safer one is. What is often forgotten, however, is that white bodies are racialized too, but in a negative sense, by what they are not. To become white in America means a violent severing of all ties to any other group, to forcefully forget one's interconnection with others, which is antithetical to a Buddhist cosmology of interdependence—that none of us exist as discrete beings. It is the fundamental delusion that allows othering, and by extension, America's racial karma, to proliferate. As Rhonda Magee writes, whiteness is "*the invisible racial experience*, the one racial experience defined primarily, and perhaps until quite recently, by one's experience of never having to think about race."[39] This invisibility makes whiteness that much more difficult to see, and thus to demythologize.[40]

Ultimately, the myth of whiteness harms everyone, regardless of whether one consciously aligns with its myth or not. As Ward writes, "The mana of racism is characterized by haughtiness, self-praise, greed dissociated from needs, being driven by self-promoting opinions, and exhibiting the constant need for self-referencing to validate its being."[41] Regardless of whether one is white-passing or not, we all suffer from and are capable of perpetuating the mana of racism that Ward writes of. This is both a terrifying idea and a freeing one, as it forces all of us to confront the mana of othering that may be present within ourselves. None of us are exempt from this labor. Similarly,

39. Rhonda V. Magee, "Taking and Making Refuge in Racial [Whiteness] Awareness and Racial Justice Work," in *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, ed. George Yancy and Emily McRae, Philosophy of Race (Lexington Books, 2019), 258.

40. America's myth of progress mirrors the myth of whiteness: imagining that its good intentions make it immune to ever committing any true act of evil. This obsession with its own progressive history, as Satia and Gin Lum have argued, is rooted in a Christian teleology.

41. Ward, *America's Racial Karma*, 92.

while the myth of whiteness is the fruition of America's particular racial karma, as Resma Menakem has demonstrated, these same violent practices of othering began long before white Europeans settled in America—first, between white bodied peoples.

> Throughout the United States's history as a nation, white bodies have colonized, brutalized, and murdered Black and Native ones. But well before the United States began, powerful white bodies colonized, oppressed, brutalized and murdered other, less powerful white ones. The carnage perpetrated on Blacks and Native Americans in the New World began, on the same soil, as an adaptation of longstanding white-on-white practices. This brutalization created trauma that has yet to be healed among white bodies today.[42]

The illusion of whiteness was created to induce an imagined safety for those who aligned with its myth, when in truth, no one is truly safe in a world governed by a logic of domination and othering. Truly understanding the nature of interdependence precludes the dualistic division of "oppressor" and "oppressed," instead recognizing that everyone suffers under these violent logics. However, the brunt of the felt suffering is still disproportionately and unjustly experienced by certain groups over others, whether we are considering factors like material dispossession, economic disenfranchisement, or physical and psychological harm.

How do we reconcile interdependency with differential power, and thus, responsibility? Is it possible to do this without falling into a binary "us/them" system that keeps us all in a cycle of perpetual othering? I have found many parallels between interdependency, as discussed in Buddhism, and in the work of writer-activist Adrienne Maree Brown. In their book, *Emergent Strategy*, Maree Brown lists four ingredients for transformative justice:

1. Acknowledges the reality of state harm.
2. Looks for alternative ways to address/interrupt harm that do not rely on the state.
3. Relies on organic, creative strategies that are community created and sustained.
4. Transforms the root causes of violence, not only the individual experience.

---

42. Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Central Recovery Press, 2017), 63.

Maree Brown emphasizes the idea that "nothing is disposable, yet we have the right to make boundaries."[43] If we are truly interdependent, no one is disposable, and yet, we have the right to walk away from people and institutions that harm us. The work of healing can only take place when a community has come to common agreements about its collective intentions and boundaries. Transforming karma is hard, but there is wiggle room, albeit on a small scale.

Maree Brown's cautious optimism reminds me of the *Lonaphala sutta*, where the Buddha emphasizes that cultivating an ethical spiritual life is the key to transforming karma and eventually attaining liberation.[44] In the sutta, the Buddha uses the analogy of dropping a salt crystal (committing a moral transgression) into a cup of water and then compares it with dropping the very same salt crystal into the Ganges River to illustrate how the same transgression committed by two different people—one who has cultivated an ethical/religious life and one who has not—leads to two radically different outcomes. The cup of water, here representing the person who has not cultivated awareness, would immediately become salty and tainted, whereas for the practitioner who has committed to Buddhist ethics, represented by the Ganges, the single salt crystal would have negligible effects. The Buddha concludes:

> Monks, for anyone who says, "In whatever way a person makes *kamma*, that is how it is experienced," there is no living of the holy life, there is no opportunity for the right ending of stress. But for anyone who says, "When a person makes *kamma* to be felt in such & such a way, that is how its result is experienced," there is the living of the holy life, there is the opportunity for the right ending of stress.[45]

The takeaway from this early Buddhist scripture is that karma is never deterministic. Just because we have caused harm in the past does not

43. Adrienne Maree Brown, *Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Emergent Strategy Series (AK Press, 2017), 58.

44. Y. Karunadassa has discussed this *sutta* to show how the Buddha rejected karmic determinism in favor of karmic conditionality, which is based on dependent origination. Y. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings: The Middle Position in Theory and Practice* (Centre of Buddhist Studies University of Hong Kong, 2015), 86.

45. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans., "Lonaphala Sutta: The Salt Crystal" (AN 3.99), Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), November 30, 2013, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.099.than.html.

mean we need to repeat this pattern of harm again or to suffer its myriad consequences forever. It takes a diligent commitment to ethics and discernment based in insight to swim against these negative habitual patterns, but transformation is indeed possible. The story is not set in stone.

Although Ward does not explicitly discuss this in his book, I would like to add a caveat to the law of karma as well. Karma is not the only factor that conditions possible outcomes. In another scripture, *The Eight Causes of Illness from the Discourse to Sīvaka*, a wanderer named Sīvaka asks the Buddha whether it is true that every good and bad thing a person experiences can be attributed to past karma.

> "Mr. Gotama, there are some ascetics and Brahmanas who hold the following belief, who hold the following view: 'Whatever an individual person experiences, whether pleasant or painful or neither pleasant nor painful, all that is because of what was done in the past.' What does Mr. Gotama say about this?"
>
> [The Buddha responds:] "As to this, Sīvaka, certain experiences arise because of *semha*...certain experiences arise because of *vāta*...certain experiences arise because of the combination [of the preceding three]...certain experiences arise because of the change of season... certain experiences arise because of improper care...certain experiences arise because of assault...certain experiences arise because of what was done in the past."[46]

The Buddha unequivocally answers that whoever holds such a view of karmic determinism is categorically wrong. In his example, the ripening of karma is only one out of eight possible factors that condition someone's present experience. Other factors include the balance of internal health states (*pitta*, *semha*, *vāta*), the environment, improper care, and assault. Given the multiplicity of causes that condition various experiences, the Buddha concludes that ascetics who attribute

46. Dhivan Thomas Jones, "Illness, Cure, and Care: Selections from the Pali Canon," in *Buddhism and Healing: An Anthology of Premodern Sources*, ed. C. Pierce Salguero (Columbia University Press, 2017), 5–6. Karunadasa mentions that in the Abhidhamma, karma is listed as one of twenty-four different conditions that influence our life experience as well. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings*, 86.

everything to past karma are wrong—"they exceed what one knows for oneself, and they exceed what is universally accepted as the truth."[47]

Understanding karma as conditioned and working in conjunction with many other possible factors has far-reaching implications; instead of suffering endlessly in samsara to repay karmic debts as an eye for an eye, humans are presented with an opportunity to free themselves of karma altogether. Karma can be transformed. Finally, if the nature of all karma is dependently conditioned and ultimately unfathomable, speculations like who deserves what kind of karmic retribution become a moot point since karma itself is also a conditioned determinant that cannot be traced back to a single origin or perpetrator.[48]

I mention these citations to dispel the misconception that karma is solely inherited from an individual's past actions. This view is sometimes misused by Buddhists themselves to blame others for the suffering they experience by saying it is due to their past misdeeds.[49] Such an individualized view of karma ignores the larger systemic forms of discrimination at play. As Jonathan S. Watts writes, "This in turn legitimates structural violence.... This ultimately leads to the condition for direct violence when governments are seen as legitimate in violently oppressing those who reject their marginalized situation."[50] Such a simplistic vision of karma also exacerbates the "minor feelings" that Cathy Park Hong wrote of, gaslighting racialized minorities for feeling a disconnect between America's promised dream and their everyday realities.

In my humble experience, being educated about these issues is not enough. At worst, intellectual understanding may be weaponized in the form of virtue signaling or self-righteous speech, often to further one's own career or status ambitions, without any actual care for the well-being of the groups most affected by structural inequalities.

---

47. Jones, "Illness, Cure, and Care," 6.

48. This notion of the opacity of karma has previously been discussed by other scholars. See Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life: Some Evidence from Theravāda Buddhism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, no. 2 (1996): 305–327. See also Cathering Hartmann, "Karmic Opacity and Ethical Formation in a Tibetan Pilgrim's Diary," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 51, no. 3 (2023): 496–516, https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12435.

49. See Jonathan S. Watts, ed., *Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice* (Silkworm Books, 2009).

50. Ibid., 16.

Equally harmful and even more deceptive is the position of neutrality—hiding behind the cloak of Buddhist teachings on non-duality and equanimity to avoid the discomfort that arises when faced with grave injustices. Spiritual bypassing,[51] whether one self-identifies as white or not, partakes in what Emily McRae calls "white delusion…a failure or refusal to recognize certain cause and effect relationships."[52]

In summation, just as none of us are immune to internalizing white-bodied supremacy or subscribing to the politics of hope, similarly, white delusion is not just limited to white-bodied peoples either. This article will not delve into the various practices to unlearn white-body supremacy or to heal racialized trauma. For that, the reader may consult the work of Ward, Menakem, and others.[53] As educators, scholars, and practitioners, I merely wish to draw attention to the fact that knowledge is not enough. As such, it would behoove us to consider what other alternative methods are available to help us come to a more embodied awareness of how America's racialized karma manifests in our everyday lives. For me, it is in the stories we tell and the language we use to tell those stories that a subtle shift in consciousness may

51. "Spiritual bypassing" was coined by John Welwood in 1984 (Robert Augustus Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters* [North Atlantic Books, 2010], 1). In a more recent online interview, Welwood described spiritual bypassing as "a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished development tasks." John Welwood, "Human Nature, Buddha Nature: An Interview with John Welwood," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Spring 2011, https://tricycle.org/magazine/human-nature-buddha-nature/.

52. Emily McRae, "White Delusion and *Avidyā*: A Buddhist Approach to Understanding and Deconstructing White Ignorance," in *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, ed. George Yancy and Emily McRae, Philosophy of Race (Lexington Books, 2019), 52.

53. For that, one could consult Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*. See also Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality, and Gender* (Wisdom Publications, 2015).

begin to take shape. Stories are not the only solution, but they are a beginning.

BUDDHISM'S NARRATIVE PLURALISM AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE IMAGINATION[54]

In this section, I would like to take up Ward's challenge and warning set at the beginning of his book: "Storytelling is an ancient means of creating individual and collective identity, but stories are not innocent; they provide language and leave footprints in the cave of the heart that reveal how to be human."[55] Similarly, Francesca Cho has argued that the Buddhist notion of karma is fundamentally tied to the imagination and thus to storytelling: "Whether or not karma and rebirth become tropes of western culture, it is worth considering the self-conscious practice and appreciation of the imagination embedded in these concepts."[56]

In the rich and growing body of Buddhist literature, imagination is deployed in a number of skillful ways that might help us think through the relationship between language, time, and alternatives to America's progressive story. Anyone who has read Buddhist literature throughout time will have noted that the protagonists and locations

54. Part of this section is reproduced from chap. 9, the conclusion of my dissertation. See Elaine Lai, "Heart Essence Literature Through Time: A Close Study of the *Secret Tantra of the Sun: Blazing Luminous Matrix of Samantabhadrī*" (Stanford University, 2024), https://purl.stanford.edu/kq771cq1455. I previously workshopped a portion of this conclusion at the 2024 American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) conference for a stream called "Alternative Cosmologies of Time." Thank you to Ben Van Overmeire and Kedar Kulkarni for organizing the three panels for this stream.

55. Ward, *America's Racial Karma*, 15.

56. Francisca Cho, "Buddhism, Science, and the Truth About Karma," *Religion Compass* 8, no. 4 (2014): 125. Several decades earlier, Hallisey and Hansen also argued for the importance of the Buddhist ethics in narrative. They write, "While Buddhist story literature has been analyzed sociologically, often with great sensitivity and insight, rarely has any serious attention been given to the ethical significance of either the form or the content of the stories themselves" (Hallisey and Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life," 309).

of Buddhist scriptures encompass a multiplicity of spaces, characters, and times, often reworking the past and writing outside of linear time.

Even in the Pāli Nikāyas, where the Buddha is often depicted as a historical-realist person delivering sermons to his disciples in India 2500 years ago, there was already evidence that Buddhism was wary of binding its teachings to a single founder figure. Rather, seeing the Buddha was equated to seeing dependent origination. By so doing, Buddhism opened the door to narrative pluralism—the possibility for infinite iterations and expressions of the Dharma. For example, in the *Vakkali sutta* found in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, it says,

> One who sees the Dhamma sees me;
> one who sees me sees the Dhamma.
> For in seeing the Dhamma, Vakkali, one sees me;
> and in seeing me, one sees the Dhamma.[57]

Similarly, the famous line in the *Mahāhatthipadopama sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* reads,

> One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma.
> One who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination.[58]

In Mahāyāna sutras, our reference points multiply even more and start to deviate dramatically from the historical-realist depictions of the Buddha. A characteristic feature of many Mahāyāna sutras is that they read like magnificent stage plays, filled with multiple buddhas endowed with extraordinary qualities and features that are unfathomable for the ordinary mind. Rather than denigrate imagination as a delusion or a fabrication, these texts embrace the potential for words to train the imagination, to consider the impossible possible. For example, in *The Perfection of Wisdom in One Hundred Thousand Lines*,[59] an element of what we might call magical realism begins to take shape. Even though the scripture begins like earlier scriptures, "Thus have I heard at one

57. Bhikkhu Bodhi, "Vakkalisutta," Sutta Central: Early Buddhist Texts, Translations, and Parallels, 2000, https://suttacentral.net/sn22.87/en/bodhi?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false.
58. Bhikkhu Bodhi, "Mahāhatthipadopamasutta," Sutta Central: Early Buddhist Texts, Translations, and Parallels, 2009, https://suttacentral.net/mn28/en/bodhi?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false.
59. Gareth Sparham, "The Perfection of Wisdom in One Hundred Thousand Lines," 84000, 2024, https://read.84000.co/translation/toh8.html.

time," indicating a teaching directly heard from the historical Buddha, the Buddha is no longer the same character we knew from before.

The Buddha in this scripture emits sixty hundred thousand ten million billion rays of light from all parts of his body—from his toes and ankles to each of his teeth, filling the entire universe with this light. The Buddha then seems to expand exponentially in size; he covers the entire universe with his tongue, causing light to issue forth yet again. This light gives rise to lotuses, gems, and multiple buddhas who teach the Dharma to different beings in the six realms of cyclic existence. Then, by engaging in a meditation practice called *lion's play*, the Buddha causes the world realms to shake in six ways, disrupting the normal flow of time for beings in the six realms. This particular text goes on for pages and pages more, but the main point I would like to make is that while the sutra attempts to replicate the opening line of the earlier Buddhist scriptures by purporting to be the reported speech of the historical Buddha, the historical Buddha is no longer the human figure we last remembered. His teaching, too, is no longer preached through words, but derives its efficacy through meditative absorption and other superpowers—superpowers that have the potential to disrupt time, even in other realms of existence.

Whether we consult the historical-realist depictions of the Buddha in the Tipiṭaka, or the magical realist depictions of the Buddha in their *dharmakāya* forms in Mahāyāna literature, or various tantras where buddhas take on a multiplicity of forms and genders playing with genre-bending conventions even more,[60] I would argue that there appears to be an animating force in Buddhism that resists being pinned down to a single origin in time or space, one that resists reification altogether. And it does so by continually subverting our expectations of language, for instance, the presumption that the word *Buddha* would contain a single referent at all. Within Buddhist literature, then, there exists an ethos of time and embodiment that is fundamentally queer.

Here, I use "queer" partly in the sense that Sara Ahmed has proposed in *Queer Phenomenology*, where "becoming queer" signifies the

60. See David Gray, "Disclosing the Empty Secret: Textuality and Embodiment in the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*," *Numen* 52, no. 4 (2005): 417–444. See also Elaine Lai, "An Uncommon Narrative Opening: Five Perfections in Tantra of the Sun," *Pacific World Journal* 4, no. 4 (2023): 61–109. Here, I discuss *nidāna*s, especially in tantra, and in Dzogchen tantra, with greater detail.

process by which objects that were once familiar become oblique.[61] In their concluding chapter, Ahmed argues that *Nausea* (1965) by Jean-Paul Sartre is a queer novel because the protagonist falls into disorientation when the objects around him, like the doorknob, are felt to be something other than what they were presumed to be. For Ahmed, phenomenology is full of such moments of disorientation. These moments of disorientation are critical because they highlight

> how such experiences can impact on the orientation of bodies and spaces, which is after all about how the things are "directed" and shaped by the lines they follow. The point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do—whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope.[62]

Moments of disorientation, what Ahmed calls queer phenomenology, offer us a critical opportunity to denaturalize what is taken to be a given and thus to imagine alternatives, to access hope in the space of uncertainty. I am also inspired by Lee Edelman's definition of queer theory as something that "curves endlessly toward a realization that its realization remains impossible."[63] And finally, I would like to cite the prolific Martinique-born poet and theorist Édouard Glissant for his "poetics of relation,"[64] which has inspired another layer of the potential resonances with queer, though Glissant never explicitly used the word "queer" in his own writings. Glissant's poetics of relation gesture towards an ethics of interdependence and fluidity of identity that challenge the narrative of progress, filiation, and the fixedness of

61. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 162.
62. Ibid., 157–158.
63. Lee Edelman, "Queer Theory: Unstating Desire," *GLQ* 2, no. 4 (1995): 346.
64. Édouard Glissant and Betsy Wing, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997). In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant theorizes that Buddhist thought, which aims to dissolve the individual and the ego, embraces diversity. By contrast, Glissant argues that Western systems of thought that seem on the surface to value individualism actually force generalization in the form of history, whether it is natural history or the history of humanity.

identity. His poetics of relation also remind me of Buddhist theories of interdependence.[65]

Inspired by these two definitions of queer and by Glissant's poetics of relation, I would argue that a queer disorientation occurs in the process of engaging with Buddhist literature throughout time, because what the reader conceives as a buddha, or a Buddhist teaching, fails to cohere to a single reference point or storyline. As Francisca Cho and Richard Squier argue, because Buddhists recognize that language partakes in the realm of the "relative truth," and thus there is no absolute correspondence between language and reality, Buddhist literature is "more apt to practice narrative pluralism...accepting different and even mutually contradictory accounts without any compulsion to reconcile them."[66] Elsewhere, they write that although Buddhists recognize that all conceptual systems are ultimately illusions, these constructs can prove to be beneficial depending on the circumstances. Rather than a hermeneutics of suspicion, Buddhists emphasize a hermeneutics of skillful means:

> This includes the recognition—consonant with the postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion—that some narratives are highly detrimental because their internal logic compels social disease and strife.... But Buddhist hermeneutics is centered more on skillfulness than on suspicion because it embraces a multiplicity of discourses based on their fruits instead of rejecting all narratives as false.[67]

Buddhists' creative leveraging of language to produce multiple, seemingly contradictory narrative worlds is not limited to a conceptual play on words either. These narrative worlds inform the kinds of practices that Buddhists take up to access reality proper—a reality that Buddhists have long argued is completely entangled with other life forms, matter, and time in ways that are not immediately perceptible

65. Glissant writes, "The poetics of relation remains forever conjectural and presupposes no ideological stability. It is against the comfortable assurances linked to the supposed excellence of a language. A poetics that is latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible. Theoretician thought, focused on the basic and fundamental, and allying these with what is true, shies away from these uncertain paths" (Glissant and Wing, *Poetics of Relation*, 32).

66. Francisca Cho and Richard K. Squier, *Religion and Science in the Mirror of Buddhism* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 2.

67. Ibid., 4.

to the ordinary mind. At the heart of these different Buddhist practices is an engagement with reality as fluid and dynamic. This openness to multiplicity challenges frameworks that assume reality must be rooted in either coherence or fragmentation.

For example, in *Ritual and Its Consequences*, Seligman and others argue for a definition of ritual as "one possible orientation to action, rather than as a set of meanings," and that "ritual creates a subjunctive, an 'as if' or 'could be,' universe. It is this very creative act that makes our shared world possible."[68] The authors attempt to disrupt the reading of ritual as "a vision of system, of totality, and of harmony."[69] Instead, they begin with the assumption that the world is fundamentally tragic—fractured and fragmented. Ritual's efficacy "in part arises from the sense that one never creates a full unity, but one can, through ritual, develop more productive ways of connecting with other people and with the larger world."[70]

I empathize with the aims of *Ritual and Its Consequences*.[71] However, I would like to propose that Buddhist literature might provide a productive challenge to these theorists in their fundamental assumption that the tragic or the fragmented constitutes reality proper. Is this not just another choice of emplotment?[72] Buddhists would not deny the existence of the tragic in the form of samsara. But samsara and the Buddhist rituals of practice that aim to transcend samsara are both equally illusory in nature. Rather than limit the realm of ritual to the "as if" subjunctive world of "what if" possibilities, Buddhists might

68. Adam B. Seligman, ed., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.
69. Ibid., 42.
70. Ibid., 42.
71. In particular, I empathize with its project of searching for alternative intellectual resources to draw from in order to renegotiate identity boundaries in our current age. The book attempts to resist the one extreme of asserting identities as unassailable and the other extreme of destroying all the particularities of identities in order to universalize liberal political agendas.
72. I am using "emplotment" in the way that Hayden White has famously discussed. See Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 40th anniversary ed. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014). See also Hayden V. White and Robert Doran, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

say that the world of chaos and fragmentation taken to be a given by Seligman et al. is equally an "as if" subjunctive world. For Buddhists, the moment that one touches into this fragmentation is the opportune time to renounce the story of samsara and to engage in another kind of construction—to create an illusion upon an illusion, but one that will eventually lead to a full liberation from all illusions.

Buddhist practices like chanting scripted liturgies, physically prostrating, generation and perfection practices involving simple and complex visualizations, as well as training to see all appearances as the five perfections or the five perfect conditions[73] are all rituals that create "as if" subjunctive worlds. But they are conscious and self-reflexive uses of the imagination that take as their basic premise the notion that the world we co-inhabit is not set in stone. It is not tragic in an absolutist sense, nor is it romantic, nor any other form of emplotment we might choose to impute it with. All of these emplotments of reality are subjunctive "as ifs." But this does not mean that all emplotments are equal, or that they should be arbitrarily assigned. As Cho and Squier imply, if the particular mode of emplotment amplifies ignorance and harm, as I would argue is very much the case with America's progressive story, Buddhism urges that there are better stories we could be telling—stories that would lead to a radical reorientation, or rather, a disorientation of all centers in the first place. This disorientation is intimately bound to conceptions of time.

In the tradition of Buddhism that I specialize in called the Great Perfection or Dzogchen (Tib. *rdzogs chen*), there is a ground, but it is different from the all-ground of Yogācāra Buddhism. In Dzogchen's ground, there are no karmic seeds and there is no storehouse. Instead, the ground abides in a time-space that is outside of karma. The ground is imbued with the dynamic energy of gnoses (Tib. *ye shes*), a kind of wisdom that spontaneously expresses itself in diversity. To oversimplify: When the expressions of the ground's diversity are recognized as part of the ground's very own nature, there is liberation. However, the moment the ground's diversity is misrecognized as "other," dualism arises, and so too do worlds, sentient beings, and karma. From the Dzogchen perspective then, othering is the fundamental ignorance

73. See Lai, "An Uncommon Narrative Opening."

that leads to the suffering of samsara, the suffering of being trapped in time, by time.

Despite Dzogchen's vision of an ever-present ground of gnoses, othering is always occurring. What Dzogchen literature seems to imply is that there is an innate tendency built into sentient beings to misperceive the ground's diversity as other than itself, to forget one's deep interconnection with others. The path of practice then requires the practitioner to continually re-remember that one's entire psychophysical continuum is no different than the ground, that all perceptions of other are delusions. To engage in the practice of Dzogchen requires a brutal self-honesty that the compulsion to other—to stray into delusion—is baked into one's epistemic make-up. To borrow Haraway's term again, self-honesty requires "staying with the trouble" of our total entanglement—the fact that despite the appearance of diversity, there is ultimately no other. In the context of America, this may mean constantly attuning to the subtle cognitive obscurations of America's racial karma ever-present in one's mind-stream, however uncomfortable that practice may be.

Dzogchen has inspired me to rethink America's challenge and the challenge presented by the authors of *Ritual and Its Consequences*—a challenge that is particularly pressing today: Is it possible to perceive diversity without othering? It has made me think of fractals: complex structures and patterns of life forms that repeat at all scales. What I like about fractals is that they allow for an appreciation of diversity's intelligence without othering or absolute hierarchy. What subjunctive possibilities arise when we relinquish the hierarchy implicit within a capitalist system that tells us there must be someone who is less fortunate for others to be on top? A hierarchy that, as Butler writes, makes some lives grievable and others disposable? What if we refuse participation in such a system altogether? It is to this last point I would like to turn now: the potential political consequences for construing language, and thus identity, as fluid.

In Glissant's *Poetics of Relation,* he criticizes Western philosophy for its preoccupation with filiation, origins, and legitimation. As an alternative, Glissant proposes a theory of identity called "la Relation," or "la Créolisation," which is connected to errantry and rootlessness. Importantly, "relation" for Glissant is an aesthetic and political concept that emerges from encounters with others. These encounters, Glissant contends, are vital to the transformation of language and the

emergence of ethical modalities beyond the classical Western logic of totality, assimilation, and nationhood—concepts that largely discard and denigrate others.

Similarly, Creolization for Glissant is a critique of pure origins, the notion that there would be any concrete or substantive "being" to constitute identity in the first place. In one of his recorded conversations found in *L'imaginaire des langues*, he says:

> For me, Creoleness is another interpretation of Creolization. Creolization is a perpetual movement of cultural and linguistic impenetrability that makes it so that one cannot arrive at a definition of being.... I think that there is no longer any being. "Being" is a grand, noble, and incommensurable invention of the West, and in particular of Greek philosophy.... The world is creolizing, all cultures are creolizing the precise moment that there is contact between them.[74]

While Glissant's immediate site of inspiration was the Caribbean and the Creolization that resulted from a legacy of French colonialism, I reference his theories of relationality because I feel this ethos is very much present within the Buddhist languages and scriptures that I read with. Glissant's poetics of relation and his theory of creolization remind me of the estranging effect that reading Buddhist literature can have when attempting to search for any kind of origin related to Buddhist teachings and the places, times, and humans/non-humans implicated within these stories. Both practice an epistemic of waywardness, continually subverting reader expectations of what words mean, ultimately resisting easy signification altogether.

If, for Glissant, it is through contact with the other that the poetics of relation manifests in and through language, I think we can extend his conclusions to appreciate the inherent value of comparative work. By juxtaposing different Buddhist scriptures with one another, the notion of who a buddha is and what they ultimately taught begins to blur. And

74. My translation. The original French: «Pour moi, la Créolité est une autre interpretation de la Créolisation. La Créolisation est un mouvement perpetual d'interpenetrabilité culturelle et linguistique qui fait qu'on ne débouche pas sur une définition de l'être.... Je crois qu'il n'y a plus d'« être ». L'être, c'est une grande, noble et incommensurable invention de l'Occident, et en particulier de la philosophie grecque.... Le monde se créolise, toutes les cultures se créolisent a l'heure actuelle dans leurs contacts entre elles» (Édouard Glissant and Lise Gauvin, *L'imaginaire des langues: Entretiens avec Lise Gauvin* [1991–2009] [Gallimard, 2010], 31–32).

by juxtaposing Glissant with Buddhist literature, we engage in another kind of defamiliarization, such that when we read Buddhist literature we sense Glissant's relationality, and when we read Glissant's writings we connect it to Buddhism's ethos of narrative pluralism. Importantly, in figuring language and identity as fluid in nature, both Glissant and Buddhist literature implicitly question political exclusion based on the purity of origins argument—whether those origins are national, racial, or religious ones.

The queer disorientation of the Buddha's speech, *buddhavacana*, makes certain individuals who are searching for a single origin, or a straight path to follow, extremely uncomfortable. But I would argue, like Glissant, that there have never been straight lines (to borrow from Ahmed again) for any of our life-trajectories, histories, or our present, whether those lines correspond to filiation, national origins, or narratives of reproduction and futurism.

Beginning from the multiple—whether we call this multiplicity the ground of Dzogchen that expresses itself in infinite diversity, or we call it Glissant's poetics of relation—is a productive starting point for comparison because it resists the tendencies of filiation and hierarchy that inevitably lead to the pitfalls of universalism or intellectual imperialism. It is only when we begin with the fluidity of the multiple as a starting point that alternative relationships to time, to each other, and to ourselves have the possibility to self-express in multiple, contradictory ways, just like the Buddha has shape-shifted and moved through time, and sometimes outside of time itself. If we begin with this multiplicity, then even the term "alternative" becomes obsolete, for what is there to be "alternative to" if there is no longer a fixed center to begin with?

I am not making the case that Glissant and Buddhist texts are saying the same thing. Rather, I am pleading for the importance of connecting with different language-worlds that will open us to the poetics of relation, whatever that may mean in the context of our own work. For me, the work of comparison is a kind of poetics itself, one that defamiliarizes and disorients through adjacency and allows for a refraction of fluidities and possibilities, which we sorely need in this moment. The question then is not so much what can Buddhism offer us in its temporal plays and manipulations, but rather, how can we defamiliarize Buddhism and Glissant, or Buddhism and other domains of knowledge, through their juxtaposition? Read in a constructive sense, the work

of defamiliarization is one possible way to actively live out our messy entanglements, to resist an easy center.

AWARENESS OF OTHERING IN *RETURNING TO HAIFA*

To ground the work of juxtaposition in a final concrete example, I would like to consider how the language of othering might be ruptured through art. Specifically, I turn to my experience of witnessing a theatre piece that is set outside of America, but closely tied to her in terms of geopolitical stakes. In May of 2024, I saw a production of the play *Returning to Haifa*, originally written by Palestinian novelist and playwright Ghassan Kanafani, and then adapted for the stage by Naomi Wallace and Ismail Khalidi.[75] Kanafani's work creates an "as if" subjunctive world that inspires multiple layers of critical self-reflection. In my interpretation of the play, *Returning to Haifa* skillfully uses the imagination to invite the audience to "stay with the trouble" of what our interdependency means, and to highlight the moral costs of violently severing our relationality. Its cautionary tale on othering made me reflect not only on the patterns of othering endemic to America's racial karma, but also on our shared global karma and the way that certain lives are continually portrayed as less grievable than others. I cite this play in the same spirit of citing Glissant—not to make a direct connection to Buddhism or Buddhist social movements, but as a powerful example of how stories hold the potential to expose and rupture the myth of progressive time.

The play takes place in the wake of the 1967 Six-Day War when the borders open for the first time since the Nakba in 1948. A middle-aged Palestinian couple—Said and Safiyya—return to their previous home in Haifa where they were forced to flee two decades earlier. When Said and Safiyya arrive in Haifa, they find their home occupied by a Polish Jew named Miriam who reveals that the son she has adopted is actually Said and Safiyya's first son, Khaldun, whom they had to leave behind. Khaldun, now renamed Dov, enters the home wearing an Israeli military uniform. A tense reunion ensues. When Miriam informs Dov/Khaldun that Said and Safiyya are his biological parents, Dov refuses to acknowledge them as such and spitefully accuses them of weakness

75. The production was staged at Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco and directed by Dr. Samer al-Saber.

for having abandoned him years earlier. His insults quickly turn towards all Palestinians when he says, "You're weak. All of you. Bound by chains of backwardness, of paralysis...."[76] In the following scene, Said accuses Dov of hypocrisy and attempts to expose the faulty logic of othering at play in his son's hateful speech.

> **Said (to Dov)**: What about what happened to Iphrat and Miriam? And the people in Auschwitz or the other camps? Because they died or lost everything does that make them cowards too? And if so, does that make it right?
> **Dov**: Of course not.
> **Said**: First you say that our mistakes and our weakness justifies your mistakes and your crimes; then you say that one wrong doesn't absolve another. You use the first logic to justify your presence and our absence, and the second to avoid the punishment your actions deserve.[77]

In the very next moment, Said and Dov inadvertently finish each other's sentences, making the scene even more poignant. Their verbal and physical mirroring shows us that on some deep level, the two men are the same, and yet Dov refuses to acknowledge the ties that bind them. To acknowledge his father would require shattering the entire worldview he has held onto up to then. Forcefully severing his ties with his parents and with all Palestinians is what has allowed Dov to live on in his new identity as an Israeli soldier who hates Palestinians for their weakness. Said and Saffiya know this, but they manage to say their piece before bidding their son and their old home farewell, likely forever.

> **Said:** No. In the end you're a human being, Jewish or whatever the hell you want. But one day you'll realize that the greatest crime any human being can commit is to believe, even for one moment, that the

76. *Returning to Haifa*, adapted by Ismail Khalidi and Naomi Wallace (Abram Artists Agency, 2018), 60.
77. Ibid., 60.

> weakness or mistakes of others give him the right to exist at their expense.
>
> *Said stands closer to Dov now and looks him in the eye.*
>
> **Said**: And you, do you believe we'll continue making mistakes? If we should stop making mistakes one day, what would be left for you then?[78]

When I first watched this scene, I was at the edge of my seat along with the rest of the audience. I wished for the wall of ice in Dov's heart to melt away, even as I suspected it wouldn't. During the talk back after the performance, audience members reflected on the nuance with which Kanafani was able to portray the different cycles of historical trauma, and how those historical traumas were being rectified by the current protests on college campuses all throughout America. What struck me the most was Said's haunting line "the greatest crime any human being can commit is to believe, even for one moment, that the weakness or mistakes of others give him the right to exist at their expense." Read through the lens of critical disability theory, one might argue that Dov's attitude mimics the faulty logic of ableism—where discrimination on the basis of perceived "ability" aims to systematically exclude and pathologize those who are seen as "weak" and thus "not normal."[79]

From a Buddhist lens, Dov embodies the ultimate tragedy that occurs when one denies their fundamental interconnection with others. Even though Dov himself is Palestinian, he dehumanizes all Palestinians,

78. *Returning to Haifa*, 61–62.

79. I would like to thank Cahron Cross for bringing my attention to this deeper comparison. Quoting from another source, "Ableism is: 'a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human'" (Fiona A.K. Campbell, "Inciting Legal Fictions: 'Disability's' Date with Ontology and the Ableist Body of the Law," *Griffith Law Review* 10, no. 1 [2001]: 44). Melinda C. Hall, "Critical Disability Theory," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (The Metaphysics Research Lab, 2019), 10, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/disability-critical/. Moreover, by extending the stigmatization of "weakness" to all Palestinians, Dov pathologizes an entire race of people, demonstrating that the language of ableism often holds racist connotations as well—something that the growing field of DisCrit or Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory has emphasized.

including his own parents, by claiming moral supremacy over them. And yet, he refuses to consider that this same moral supremacy had previously been weaponized against his adopted Jewish parents and all the Jews who had suffered the Holocaust. While Dov condemns the bigotry and historical circumstances that led to the Holocaust, he cannot forgive his parents for fleeing during the Nakba under similar circumstances. Dov's scorn for his parents is thus not only dehumanizing to himself as a Palestinian, but doubly dehumanizing to his adopted parents who had themselves been driven from their own homes by the same twisted logic of supremacy. And yet, as an audience member, I understand why Dov has turned to hatred. What identity would Dov, as an Israeli soldier, have if he did not despise the Palestinians for their weakness? What would justify his choices in life, his aversion towards his own ancestors? From a Buddhist lens, Dov's rejection of his interdependence with his parents and other Palestinians is the very motor that has allowed this saga of suffering to reproduce and amplify, both on a familial level and a global one.

At the beginning of this article, I cited Long's quote about the mighty saga of America: "The inordinate fear [white Americans] have of minorities is an expression of the fear they have when they contemplate the possibility of seeing themselves as they really are."[80] Said's question, "If we should stop making mistakes one day, what would be left for you then?," reminds me of Long's previous insights. What would whiteness be if there were no racialized other to justify whiteness's supremacy? In short, whiteness would no longer exist. Would something else take its place, as Edelman might argue? Who is the next queer to be marginalized? It is hard, if not impossible, to imagine a future where the logic of domination—these center-periphery relations that rely on some marginalized other—no longer exist. As *Returning to Haifa* shows, the pattern of othering reproduces endlessly. To imagine a world in which this othering ceases is nothing short of imagining a full liberation from samsara. Ghassan Kanafani seemed to understand this impossibility, and yet his writing still sought to disrupt these patterns of othering.

Kanafani was assassinated by a car bomb alongside his seventeen-year-old niece, Lamees Najim, when he was just thirty-six. Although he was murdered by the same forces of violence that he had long critiqued, his story-turned-play continues to live on. And while I personally do

80. Long, *Significations*, 163.

not see an end to the vicious cycle of othering in my lifetime, while watching *Returning to Haifa*, time was momentarily suspended. The play itself skillfully engages in temporal manipulations. Interspersed throughout the main storyline of Said and Saffiya returning to Haifa are memories of a younger Said and Saffiya from before Khaldun was born, before they lost their home. In the last scene of the play, just after Saffiya sings a mournful song of farewell to Dov, we move back in time for the last time. The younger Said and Saffiya return to the stage. The couple are in the home that the audience now knows will never be their home again. Saffiya is pregnant and tells Said that she thinks it will be a boy. They decide to name him Khaldun. Just then, the sound of rumbling, likely of bombs, is heard in the distance.

After having seen the outcome of the couple's return to Haifa in the scenes just before, memories of "what ifs" permeate their former home in this last scene. These memories become tinged with melancholy as we imagine Said and Saffiya forever estranged from their first son Khaldun. But the young couple does not yet know that all of this will happen. The yearning for a homeland soon to be lost is palpable for the audience. The imaginary space of their home in Haifa, displayed for us on a bare stage, exudes a longing that collapses into me, as an audience member who is physically and temporally removed from the entire setting of the play. Although there is no hope of rectifying the damage already done and yet to be done, something lives on through the art of this performance. Samsara is ruptured. Time is stilled as we linger on the expressions of hope and wonder etched on this young Palestinian couple's faces. A part of me wonders if staying with the trouble of the impossibility of Said and Saffiya ever returning to Haifa is all that Kanafani could hope for. To me, this impossibility feels like a metaphor for the impossible task of ending othering—our shared samsara—once and for all.

Staying with the trouble is also what this work of art requires of its viewer. Even though Dov has made his choice, the fact that I, as a viewer, am mourning the results of this choice proves to me that the play has succeeded. Awareness of Said and Saffiya's story, their interconnectedness with Dov, Miriam, and the larger histories of violence that have ruptured all their lives, stirs something within me. I wonder if this stirring is the spark of compassion, of *bodhicitta*. I wonder if my two friends who are sitting at the edge of their seats are feeling this same spark. A glimmer of hope arises. Perhaps in this shared moment with members of the audience, staying with the trouble has given rise

to genuine compassion, an embodied sense of interconnectedness that will endure beyond the conclusion of this play.

CONCLUSION

I began this article searching for stories of hope I could conscionably turn to. While America provides a story of hope, it is not one that I wish to rely on. America's progressive futurism refuses to stay with the trouble of its own racial karma—acknowledging and *feeling* how its past wounds continually color its present. As Ward and others have shown, this racial karma lives not only in our bodies and our institutions, but also in our collective sense of time through the stories we have learned to tell. While scholars in various disciplines have attempted to rupture this progressive narrative by deconstructing its mythology and origins, Buddhist literature ruptures the myth of progressive time through its narrative multiplicity. In the second half of this article, I argued that the queer emplotment of Buddhist time creates moments of disorientation that unsettle our assumption that the story of awakening is ever finished—that a buddha is ever solely associated with one figure, space, or time. In so doing, Buddhist stories hold far-reaching political consequences. Awakened forms multiply. Story patterns are made and unmade. Agency becomes possible.

The challenge, I think, is how to rupture America's samsara while staying rooted in our relationality. *Returning to Haifa* provides us one model for how stories can do this. Unlike the myth of progressive time critiqued by the scholars cited in this article, Kanafani's work does not reify an implicit center or negate alternative possibilities. Instead, the play highlights the stakes of buying into the fiction of supremacy of any kind. Beyond its critical voice, at least for me, the play leaves an aftertaste—not of false hope, nor of despair—but of tenderness, longing, and empathy. The very same questions that I am asking now, through this article, and through my engagement with Buddhist texts, have been asked by others who are also searching for some sense of agency in samsara—a way to live, and hopefully to die, with dignity. This dignity is rooted in our ability to imagine new stories and new ways of being that refuse the compulsion to other. This is where compassion must enter—not as a sentimental gesture, but as a courageous and uncomfortable epistemic shift that leads to actionable change. Compassion invites us to stay with the trouble of our interdependence—the unfinished and never-ending work of justice—of imagining and ultimately inhabiting alternative stories. In this, I have hope.