

Why Ferguson Matters for Asian Americans

—Kwok Pui-lan

The deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, and others highlighted the issues of racial profiling and police brutality and showed that the U.S. is far from being a “post-racial” society. Although these issues were not new, they captured the national limelight because of massive protests in Ferguson, New York, Baltimore, and other American cities. On college campuses, black students and their allies held demonstrations to demand full inclusion and administration responsiveness. If democracy is premised upon everyone having equal rights, Ferguson and its aftermath points to how flawed the system is, when colored bodies are treated as less than equal to white bodies. In his award-winning book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates offers a searing personal account of living as a black man in the U.S. In a visceral way, he shows how the white supremacist society breaks black bodies and minds.² In an op-ed column in the *New York Times*, Charles Blow writes, “Black bodies are a battlefield: black folks fight to defend them as external forces fight to destroy them.”³

The racialized bodies of Asians and Asian Americans have also been the battlefield and excluded from the nation’s body politic. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 stipulated the most significant restrictions on free immigration in U.S. history. Since the 1920s, Asians had been restricted because of the national origin quota system in the immigration policy, until the system was abolished in 1965. There are also parallels between Michael Brown’s death and incidents in Asian-American history. The most prominent one is the story of Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American man beaten to death by two white men in Detroit, both uncharged in a racially motivated murder. There were also incidents of police shooting and killing of Asian Americans, but none of these resulted in criminal charges against the police or in a public outcry for justice.

After Ferguson, there were Asian American individuals and groups that have protested the injustice and demanded social change, but to a large extent Asian Americans have not been very vocal. Liz Lin attributed this to the contradictory positions of Asian Americans in the U.S. racial politics. On the one hand, Asian Americans are disadvantaged in many ways. They are the perpetual foreigners and often reduced to stereotypes, such as the hypersexualized females and emasculated males. On the other hand, Asian Americans are labeled as the model minority and perceived as hardworking and good at math and science. Lin said, “We don’t have quite the same disadvantages or quite the same history of oppression as black people, but we aren’t fully ac-

1 Paper presented on the Panel “Race, Ferguson, and the Future of American Democracy” at the annual meeting for the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, Georgia, November 21, 2016.

2 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015).

3 Charles M. Blow, “Race, College and Safe Space,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/16/opinion/race-college-and-safe-space.html?_r=0



cepted like white people, either.”⁴ Asian Americans find it difficult to engage when conversations about race have so often been framed in black and white.

However, Ferguson isn’t simply black versus white; it has another racial divide. On the day that Michael Brown was killed by Officer Darren Wilson, Brown allegedly stole cigars from a store. The storeowner is an Asian. After the grand jury decided not to indict Officer Wilson, protesters broke windows and stole merchandises from businesses, including the exact store that Ferguson police alleged that Brown had shoplifted. A video showed the storeowner standing at his looted store looking helpless and frustrated.⁵

In Baltimore, after Freddie Gray’s funeral service, spontaneous protests broke out. The civil unrest turned violent as some people set fires to vehicles and buildings, looted stores, and ransacked businesses. Among some 380 businesses looted and damaged in the April riot, many were owned by Asian Americans, including some 100 Korean owned businesses.⁶ Baltimore’s riot occurred just several days prior to the anniversary of the outbreak of the Los Angeles riot, bringing back painful memories to the Korean community of the looting and attack of Koreatown in Los Angeles in 1992.

It is important for different racial and ethnic minority groups in the U.S. to develop greater mutual understanding and to work toward racial healing. We should guard against the divide and conquer strategy used so often by the white dominant society. A good way to begin is to recall the legacies of past common struggles. *Time* reporter Jack Linshi writes:

As with Ferguson, it’s easy to say the Civil Rights movement was entirely black and white, when in reality there were many moments of interplay between African-American and Asian-American activism. Japanese-American activist Yuri Kochiyama worked alongside Malcolm X until he was assassinated in front of her. Groups protesting America’s involvement in the Vietnam War, like the student-run Third World Liberation Front, united resisters across racial lines under a collective radical political identity. W.E.B. DuBois called on African Americans to support the 1920s Indian anti-colonial resistance, which he compared to whites’ oppression of blacks. Chinese-American activist Grace Lee Boggs, who struggled as a female scholar of color, found passion in fighting similar injustices against African-Americans alongside C.L.R. James in the 1950s.⁷

Asian American and Hispanic/Latino groups have worked together for immigration reform. They marched together at rallies organized to support the Dream Act and other policies that would legalize undocumented immigrants. One out of every eleven undocumented immigrants is Asian. One of out every ten DREAMers is Asian. These examples highlight the power of cross-racial resistance and the difference such solidarity can make to American democracy.

Religious discourse and religious organizations and networks are crucial in promoting racial empowerment and solidarity. Many Asian immigrants have come after the 1965 immigration act and they have tried hard to survive in this country. The label “model minority” easily covers up the fact that a large sector of the Asian

4 Liz Lin, “Why Asian Americans Might Not Talk about Ferguson,” The Salt Collective, <http://thesaltcollective.org/asian-americans-might-talk-ferguson/>.

5 Yesha Callahan, “Ferguson Rioters Loot Store that Michael Brown Allegedly Robbed,” The Root, November 26, 2014, http://www.theroot.com/blogs/the_grapevine/2014/11/ferguson_rioters_loot_store_michael_brown_allegedly_robbed.html

6 Jean Marbella, “Korean-American Merchants Face Hurdles in Rebuilding after Baltimore Riot,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 13, 2015, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/business/bs-md-korean-stores-freddie-gray-20150613-story.html>.

7 Jack Linshi, “Why Ferguson Should Matter to Asian Americans,” *Time*, November 26, 2014, <http://time.com/3606900/ferguson-asian-americans/>.



and Asian American communities is struggling and living below the poverty line, especially those who come from Cambodia, Laos, and Hmong communities. As immigrants to the new land, they often do not know how to fight for themselves and when they face blatant racism, they suffer silently and accept that this is their fate. Religious discourses sometimes encourage them to have this fatalistic outlook. In Buddhism, one can work to accumulate merits in this life so that in the next reincarnation, one will lead a better life. In Christianity, there is the projection of the eternal life in heaven, a place without suffering and tears. It is against such a cultural background that Rita Nakashima Brock's theological work must be placed. She has argued that innocent suffering cannot save us and the good news is not about suffering silently with Christ and waiting for the world to come to an end. Instead, the good news is about paradise on earth and creating a justice-loving community to struggle for the common good.⁸ She challenges Asian and Asian Americans to move beyond their isolation and to work with other racial groups for empowerment and justice.

In the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots and discrimination of immigrants, Korean American theologian Andrew Sung Park wrote *Racial Conflict and Healing: An Asian American Theological Perspective* and hoped to transform a society of oppression and violence into a community of fairness and mutual consideration.⁹ He points out that such a transformation cannot come about by having good intentions alone. Instead, we must attend to the sociopolitical and cultural issues that undergird racial division and tension. In addition to analyzing how race, class, gender, sexuality, and culture shape racial discrimination, he attends to the psychological wounds that such oppression inflicts on the person. Racism operates on a much more intimate level that affects a person's psyche and outlook on life, as Franz Fanon has pointed out.¹⁰ Without understanding this deeper level of psycho-dynamics and how this is manifested in different cultures, it is difficult to begin a conversation on racial tension and healing. Park uses the Korean terms *han* and *jeong* to describe the deep-seated suffering of racial oppression and suggests resources for understanding and healing in both Christian and Asian traditions. As a Christian theologian, he urges us to reach out to our neighbors and to work together for the Kingdom of God to come.

In the U.S. presidential primary in 2015, politicians competed with each other to see who was tougher on immigrants and who would build the strongest wall on the border. In November 2015, the U.S. Congress voted not to admit Syrian refugees. It is important for religious organizations and networks to work together to reimagine what a true democratic society would look like in our globalized world. Democracy was developed in the West as white men's way to handle conflicts: conflict between the individual and society and conflict between groups of competing interests. Democracy as a system was meant to protect the interests of propertied men. The idea of democracy developed in Greece excluded women, slaves, and racial and ethnic minorities. When such a model was challenged, the white dominant society did not talk about the sharing of political power, but "multiculturalism." Willie James Jennings has said, "Multiculturalism means putting persons of color in white spaces." Since these allotted spaces are limited, people of color are made to compete with one another in a battle of survival of the fittest. Asian American scholar Kevin Park calls this "ornamental multiculturalism."¹¹ Facing 2040 when there will be no majority race in the U.S., we should not be content with serving as ornaments in schools, institutions, and political life. Instead we need to rethink and

8 Rita Nakashima Brock, "Dusting the Bible on the Floor: A Hermeneutics of Wisdom," in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 1, *A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad Press, 1993), 64-73. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon, 2008).

9 Andrew Sung Park, *Racial Conflict and Healing: An Asian-American Theological Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

10 Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

11 Kevin Park told what Willie James Jennings has said about multiculturalism and called it "ornamental multiculturalism" in his presentation at the meeting of the Association of Asian/North American Theological Educators in Atlanta, Georgia, November 20, 2015.



reassess the legacy of democracy and to point to new possibilities of sharing power. In the U.S., we are doing this in solidarity with people in the Global South, because in the name of promoting democracy, some of these countries were bombed, harassed, and coerced into following a so-called civilized democratic system. In the sixteenth century, these people were considered inferior because they had no texts, then they were found without history, and in the twentieth century, without development. In the twenty-first century, they are without democracy. This is why we must see the intersectionality between Ferguson, immigrant reform, the treatment of refugees, and the demand for a truly just and democratic human political society. The global networks of neocolonialism are strong. Transnational religious organizations and networks and other NGOs have significant roles to play in offering an alternative vision for our common democratic future.



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