

*Theologies of the Multitude
for the Multitudes*

The Legacy of Kwok Pui-lan

*Edited by
Rita Nakashima Brock and Tat-siong Benny Liew*

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The Souls of Yellow Folk:
*Moving from a Racially Segregated Nineteenth-Century
Train toward an Inclusive Twenty-First Century Asian
American Christian Witness*

William Yoo

Introduction

In 1896, the US Supreme Court affirmed the legality of racial segregation in the landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In a seven-to-one decision, the court ruled against Homer Plessy, a multiracial person of French and Haitian descent arrested for sitting in a train car reserved for white passengers in Louisiana, and upheld segregated seating. In his dissent, Associate Justice John Marshall Harlan argued to strike laws treating African Americans as unequal to whites. But Harlan also found it absurd that Chinese Americans, who belonged to “a race so different from our own” and who contributed far less in civic virtue than African Americans, were permitted to sit with white passengers.¹

Thirty-one years later, the US Supreme Court in 1927 again ruled in favor of racial segregation. What was different in this case was the plaintiff was Jeu Gong Lum, the father of a native-born Chinese American girl, Martha Lum. Jeu Gong Lum and his spouse, Katherine, were both Chinese American immigrants and they sent their eight-year-old daughter Martha to the local public school for white students. After one year of learning at the school, the principal informed Martha that the school board had expelled her because she was not white and assigned her to the “colored school.” The Lum family appealed the decision and the case made its way to the highest judicatory body in the nation. The US Supreme Court acknowledged in *Gong Lum v. Rice* that Mississippi did not have a precise definition for the “colored race” but maintained the term was

¹ *U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 561.

to be understood in its broadest sense, meaning the school board was right in sending Martha Lum to the “colored school” because she was a non-white student, as the law was constructed to serve “the broad dominant purpose of preserving the purity and integrity of the white race.”² Unlike *Plessy v. Ferguson*, there was no dissenting opinion as the court ruled unanimously against *Jeu Gong Lum*.

Both cases reveal how Asian Americans have existed in the interstices of an unjust society privileging white persons and discriminating against Black persons. My essay utilizes Kwok Pui-lan’s postcolonial prescriptions for a historical imagination and W. E. B. Du Bois’s theory of double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* to trace a racial history that interrogates Asian American interaction between white and Black cultures to uncover tensions and illumine possibilities for social justice. Just as Kwok resists binary constructs portraying Asian women as either “victims” or “heroines” and challenges romanticized notions of historical progress, I find the ambiguities and complexities of history warrant reexaminations of both the narrative of ascension from “yellow peril” to “model minority” and the notion of Asian Americans as quintessential kindred partners with African Americans in dismantling oppressive systems. I contend the diversity and fluidity of the Asian American experience—representing many diasporic cultures and entailing different and sometimes contradictory encounters with white communities and other communities of color—constitute critical components in our ongoing theological enterprise to express and enact a more honest and inclusive Asian American Christian witness today.

The Cracks and Fissures on a Racially Segregated Nineteenth-Century Train

In *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Kwok identifies the “struggle to know” as a crucial component in one’s long intellectual journey. Kwok explains it is a struggle for two reasons. The first is because the process demands that one devote years learning what others deem “important to know” in order to earn the credentials to share what one believes is important. The

² Louis Menand, “The Supreme Court Case that Enshrined White Supremacy in Law: How *Plessy v. Ferguson* Shaped the History of Racial Discrimination in America,” *New Yorker*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/02/04>. See also *U.S. Reports: Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78 (1927), 78–87.

second is because one must affirm for oneself “that you have something important to say and that your experience counts.” As an Asian feminist postcolonial theologian, Kwok finds imagination as a key step in the process of decolonization because “to imagine means to discern something that is not fitting, to search for new images, and to arrive at new patterns of meaning and interpretation.” Kwok also argues this process must empathize with (rather than simply include) “the cracks, the fissures, and the openings, which refuse to be shaped into any framework, and which are often consigned to the periphery.”³

The cases of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Gong Lum v. Rice* illustrate the ways in which Asian Americans were in the cracks and fissures of unjust yet lawful policies of racial segregation. In 1892, Plessy agreed to be arrested on the East Louisiana Railroad’s train for his act of civil disobedience. As with other pivotal moments from Black organizers in the pursuit of civil rights, such as Rosa Parks’s refusal in 1955 to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, Plessy’s solitary action was a part of a larger campaign orchestrated after months of meticulous and shrewd planning, with the precise intent of criminal arrest and judicial appeal. Plessy was a light-skinned man belonging to the French-speaking Creole community in New Orleans, with a racially diverse family tree counting grandparents and parents of French and Haitian descent. His interest in local politics led him to join the *Comité des Citoyens* (Citizens’ Committee) alongside other leaders in the Creole community and volunteer to be arrested for sitting in the whites-only train car. In addition to his respectable position as a married, 30-year-old shoemaker, Plessy’s racial identity proved strategic to the committee. Plessy’s petition identified him as a person of “mixed descent, in the proportion of seven eighths Caucasian and one eighth African blood.” As part of Plessy’s defense, his attorney highlighted that Louisiana lacked precise definitions for race and asked whether the court would allow “a single drop of African blood . . . to color a whole ocean of Caucasian whiteness.”⁴

³ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 29–30.

⁴ *U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 538 and Steve Luxenberg, *Separate: The Story of Plessy v. Ferguson, and America’s Journey from Slavery to Segregation* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 482.

The Supreme Court's majority opinion denied Plessy's claim because the train in question provided separate but equal accommodations for white and colored passengers. The ruling did not dwell on Plessy's claims as a multiracial person and avoided placing him in the category of colored. Rather, the ruling focused on whether racial segregation was a "reasonable regulation" and concluded it was "in reference to the established usages, customs and traditions of the people, and with a view to the promotion of their comfort, and the preservation of the public peace and good order." In the minds of the seven justices in the majority, they imagined Plessy was asking the court to change the hearts and minds of white Americans through legislative means. White Americans believed in the superiority of the white race and wanted segregationist laws to avoid social contact with Black Americans. The justices delineated two different notions of equality, legal and social, and found the provision of separate but equal accommodations preserved legal equality and summarily rejected the proposition that they were empowered to enforce social equality. "If the two races are to meet upon terms of social equality," the ruling stated, "It must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other's merits and a voluntary consent of individuals."⁵

In 1896, it was unclear how Asian Americans fit within legal and social understandings of equality designed for just two races, white and Black. In Erika Lee's history of Asian Americans, Lee traces one of the earliest documented settlements of Asian Americans in the southern US to Louisiana, the state where Plessy sought to overturn racial segregation. In the 1840s, Filipinos established the fishing village of St. Malo, near Lake Borgne, and sent fish and shrimp to New Orleans for export. A larger Filipino community made roots in New Orleans between 1850 and 1870.⁶ Chinese immigrants also came to southern states like Louisiana and Mississippi in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The editor of the *Vicksburg Times*, a local newspaper in Mississippi, observed some postbellum white planters welcomed Chinese Americans as better laborers than African Americans on their fields precisely because they were in the cracks and fissures of a *Weltanschauung* defined and

⁵ U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 550-551.

⁶ Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 33.

divided by the two (white and Black) races. Chinese Americans lacked voting rights and were not, in the minds of white planters, like Plessy and other Black Americans who were seeking all the rights and promises of emancipation. The *Vicksburg Times* thus favored the introduction of Asian Americans as a third race to maintain an economic, political, and social order upholding white supremacy: “Our prosperity depends entirely upon the recovery of lost ground, and we therefore say let the Coolies come, and we will take the chance of Christianizing them.”⁷ “Coolies” was a racially derogatory term for Chinese Americans and despite the religious claims of evangelization, it was clear Asian Americans in the southern states were consigned to the periphery as economic competition to the Black and white working classes.

Where then did Asian Americans sit on trains in Louisiana designed for two races, white and Black? Unlike Plessy, whose identity was both white and Black, Asian Americans were neither and did not fit the regnant framework. In his memoir from 1914, Wu Tingfang, a Chinese diplomat who visited the US on several occasions, divulged his discomfort when riding on trains through the southern states. Wu recounted an indelible moment at a railroad station when he encountered two waiting rooms, one for white persons and one for colored persons: “The railway porter took my portmanteau to the room for the white, but my conscience soon whispered I had come to the wrong place, as neither of the two rooms was intended for people of my complexion.”⁸ The yellow race was not the same as the white race, but it appears at least some Asian Americans, perhaps based on class or professional status, sat with white passengers.

The lone dissenter in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, John Marshall Harlan, noted the presence of Asian Americans in the whites-only train cars. The most cited sections of Harlan’s famous dissent—which is remembered as the “Great Dissent” for establishing legal precedent for future civil rights cases, including the landmark decision in 1954 desegregating public schools, *Brown v. Board of Education*—revolve around his legal argument of the US Constitution as “color-blind,” guaranteeing “all citizens are equal before the law,” and his racial

⁷ James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White, Second Edition* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1988), 22.

⁸ Wu Tingfang, *America through the Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1914), 85.

argument connecting Black and white Americans as “indissolubly linked together” with a shared destiny requiring the eradication of segregation for both races to flourish in peace and prosperity.⁹ A lesser-known passage from Harlan’s “Great Dissent” addresses Asian Americans. The associate justice devoted one paragraph to criticizing how Chinese Americans, under Harlan’s reading of the law, could “ride in the same passenger coach with white citizens of the United States,” whereas “citizens of the black race in Louisiana, many of whom perhaps risked their lives for the preservation of the Union,” were relegated to seats for colored persons.¹⁰ Asian Americans remained in the cracks and fissures of Harlan’s imagination. Harlan thought it was absurd and unjust for Asian Americans to receive rights and privileges denied to African Americans. There was no place for Asian Americans in Harlan’s vision of a nation purified in the war for Black emancipation, with its painful memory of sacrifice and bloodshed from both white and Black Americans.

Two years later, Harlan would again insist Chinese Americans remain in the cracks and fissures rather than the mainstreams of life in the US. In *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, the Supreme Court ruled on the issue of birthright citizenship through the specific case of Wong Kim Ark, a man born in San Francisco in 1873 to Chinese immigrants who themselves were ineligible to become US citizens. In 1895, Wong Kim Ark was denied re-entry into the US after a visit to China because his rightful claim as a US citizen was rejected. Before reaching the Supreme Court, lower courts ruled in favor of Wong Kim Ark, affirming both his citizenship status and the broader principle of birthright citizenship. The highest court in the land agreed in a six to two decision. The majority opinion explained that the case boiled down to the straightforward question of “whether a child born in the United States, of parents of Chinese descent, who, at the time of his birth, are subjects of the Emperor of China, but have a permanent domicil and residence in the United States” is at the time of birth a citizen.¹¹ But Harlan, along with the Chief Justice Melville Weston Fuller, disagreed in a dissenting opinion that Fuller authored and Harlan joined. In their view, the US Constitution, which Harlan had argued was “color-blind” in ruling for Plessy,

⁹ *U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 559–60.

¹⁰ *U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 561.

¹¹ *U.S. Reports: United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, 169 U.S. 649 (1898), 705.

“was not designed to accord citizenship” to persons of Chinese descent because of their irreconcilably foreign identities, which were illustrated in their seemingly ineradicable fidelities to the “ancient [Chinese] Empire” and inability to assimilate, remaining “pilgrims and sojourners as their fathers” in the US.¹²

In a lecture to law students two months before the case involving Wong Kim Ark, Harlan explained his interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed in the Constitution citizenship to all persons born and naturalized in the US. Harlan expanded on his vision of white and Black Americans linked together in seeking a rebirth of a nation torn asunder in a vicious war resulting in the victory of Black emancipation. Harlan believed protecting citizenship and civil rights for Black Americans was central to the nation’s destiny at the dawn of the twentieth century. A student asked, “Would a Chinaman born in this country be a citizen?” Harlan demurred from answering, divulging he could not because of an impending case, but the associate justice expressed his viewpoint agreeing with legislation that excluded the Chinese “upon the idea that this is a race utterly foreign to us and never will assimilate with us.” Harlan criticized the religious beliefs and practices of Chinese Americans as pagan and observed that “no matter how long they have been here,” they were buried in China after death.¹³ One biographer of Harlan connects Harlan’s opinions in the two cases involving Homer Plessy and Wong Kim Ark as illustrative of his racial vision for the US: “Black Louisianans perhaps had risked their lives to preserve the Union, whereas Chinese Americans had no role in his version of the country’s history.”¹⁴ Without questioning the role of white Americans in an oppressive, colonial, and racist history, Harlan compared Chinese Americans unfavorably with Black Americans and sought to consign Chinese Americans to the peripheries of the nation’s future.

Harlan was neither the first nor the last white American in the halls of governmental power to juxtapose African Americans and Asian Americans. In 1882, the US Congress passed a bill to exclude Chinese immigrants from the country. John Franklin Miller, a senator from California, introduced the bill in a two-hour

¹² *U.S. Reports*: United States v. Wong Kim Ark, 169 U.S. 649 (1898), 725–26.

¹³ Linda Przybyszewski, *The Republic according to John Marshall Harlan* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 120.

¹⁴ Przybyszewski, *The Republic according to John Marshall Harlan*, 121.

presentation before his senate colleagues, laying out the cultural and economic dangers of “yellow peril” if Chinese immigration were to continue. Miller declared Chinese immigrants came from a “degraded and inferior race.” His colleagues did not hesitate to confirm Miller’s assessment with their own views comparing the Chinese to “rats,” “beasts,” and “swine.”¹⁵ One senator from Massachusetts, George Frisbie Hoar, decried the bill as a new manifestation of “the old race prejudice” and compared anti-Chinese legislation to anti-Black racism. Hoar evoked the enslavement of millions of African Americans in stating “our own Republic and our own generation have yielded to this delusion and have paid the terrible penalty.” He also asked, “What argument can be urged against the Chinese which was not heard against the negro within living memory?”¹⁶ White Americans had once defended Black enslavement with racist ideologies that derided African Americans as “savages,” “heathens,” and “wild beasts” unfit for emancipation and were now repeating the same mistake with Chinese Americans. Despite Hoar’s appeals to the “immortal truths” of the US Declaration of Independence, which the senator found “came from the same source with the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount” in the New Testament, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first law to restrict immigration based on race, passed with little opposition.¹⁷

A Triply Inscribed Process in a Twentieth-Century School District Constructed for Two Races

After the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, immigration from China to the US was severely constrained but not entirely eradicated. Jeu Gong Lum was one of approximately 17,000 Chinese immigrants who entered the US by crossing Canadian and Mexican borders between 1882 and 1920. Lum made his way from Canada to Mississippi, married a Chinese American woman, Katherine Wong, and together they opened a family grocery store serving a mostly Black clientele.¹⁸ When the time came for their daughter, Martha, to

¹⁵ Lee, *The Making of Asian America*, 89.

¹⁶ George Frisbie Hoar, *Chinese Immigration Speech of Hon. Geo. F. Hoar of Massachusetts: Delivered in the Senate of the United States, Wednesday, March 1, 1882* (Washington, D.C.: Government Publishing Office, 1882), 14.

¹⁷ Hoar, *Chinese Immigration Speech*, 14 and 28.

¹⁸ Adrienne Berard, *Water Tossing Boulders: How a Family of Chinese Immigrants Led*

attend public school, they had two choices: the school for white students and the school for colored students. In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the majority opinion upholding racial segregation gave the example of “separate schools for white and colored children” as the most ubiquitous demonstration of the effectiveness of existing laws providing separate but equal accommodations.¹⁹ Yet in Mississippi, the Lum family did not fit in a racial binary that defined “colored” as Black. They understood, like nearly all Black and white Mississippians, the legal principle of “separate but equal” was a lie and in practice, every accommodation designated to white persons, including schools, was vastly superior to provisions for Black persons. The Lum family enrolled their daughter in the school for white students.

In James W. Loewen’s history of Chinese Americans in Mississippi, Loewen traces the unjust economic and racial structures that the Lum family experienced. White Mississippians initially recruited Chinese immigrants during Reconstruction (1865–1876) as laborers to compete with and replace Black Mississippians on white-owned plantations. After federal officials departed the southern states in 1877, effectively ending Reconstruction, the same white Mississippians once again preferred Black laborers because steps to racial equality had been halted with the restoration of white supremacy. Black persons were easier to exploit in unfair sharecropping arrangements. Chinese immigrants in Mississippi did not have many resources, but some came with enough to open a small grocery instead of sharecropping. Others worked in these groceries until they accrued the necessary capital to open their own store.²⁰ Neither Chinese nor Black Mississippians had access to loans from white-owned banks, but Chinese immigrants utilized an informal network of transnational relationships to start and sustain small businesses.

How were Chinese Americans able to succeed in an economy controlled and dominated by white persons and institutions? Their hard-earned capital surely paled in comparison to white entrepreneurs, especially when considering the access and advantages the latter group held across real estate and banking

the First Fight to Desegregate Schools in the Jim Crow South (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 14.

¹⁹ *U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 544.

²⁰ Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 26–31.

resources. Loewen explains Chinese Mississippians found cracks and fissures within a social system “reinforced by caste patterns between white and black” and established groceries where white entrepreneurs would not, in Black neighborhoods.²¹ White entrepreneurs did not want to interact with Black customers and the few who did found their status in their white communities imperiled. Loewen imagines what it looked like inside a Chinese-owned grocery store in Mississippi at the turn of the twentieth century:

The clientele consisted almost entirely of poor Negroes who worked on the nearby plantations or at menial jobs in town. The situation was in some ways incredible: Delta Negroes, many of whom had never been farther from home than the nearest town, encountering a visitor of strange appearance and customs, from across the globe, speaking no English. In some stores a pointer stick was positioned at the counter, and the customer could point to the items he wanted, the grocer’s English being limited to the price. When the wholesaler came around at month’s end, he found that the merchant had without fail saved the last package of each item he sold, so that he could present it to demonstrate to the salesman what he wanted to reorder.²²

Kwok defines “postcolonial imagination” as “a desire, a determination, and a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and guises,” and engages Stuart Hall’s observation that delineates the colonial process as “doubly inscribed, affecting both the metropolis and the colonies.”²³ For the Lum family and other Chinese Mississippians, the racial syndrome and racist processes were triply inscribed, affecting white, Black, and Chinese Americans. And the attempt to enroll Martha Lum in the whites-only school first challenged and then reinforced racist systems, pitting the two colored races against one another.

As Lum’s case made its way up the judicial courts, from county to state to federal levels, Lum’s lawyers argued that Lum’s dismissal from the whites-only school was unjust discrimination. As the law-making race, white Americans construed and enforced segregation

²¹ Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 49.

²² Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 33.

²³ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 2-3.

to maintain the purity of each of the two races, white and Black, and to prevent “the mingling of the children in the school room,” which would result in “social intercourse and social equality.” As “a child of Chinese blood, born in, and a citizen of the United States,” Lum’s rights included the commensurate protection from Black children: “The white race may not legally expose the yellow race to a danger that the dominant race recognizes and, by the same laws, guards itself against.”²⁴ Lum’s lawyers did not claim Lum was white, but they insisted colored was a category applicable to only one race, Black.

Lum’s initial victory in the local court was overturned by the state’s Supreme Court in 1925 and then upheld in the US Supreme Court two years later. Chief Justice William Howard Taft penned the unanimous decision in 1927. Taft recognized Jeu Gong Lum as a taxpaying resident of Mississippi and Martha Lum as a legal US citizen, but denied Martha Lum’s enrollment in the whites-only school because of the existence of a colored school. Segregated schools “furnished facilities for education equal to that offered to all, whether white, brown, yellow or black.” Taft conceded most of the judicial precedents, including *Plessy v. Ferguson*, were doubly inscribed, affecting Black and white citizens, but the chief justice did not view this case regarding “pupils of the yellow races” as requiring any deviation from existing state laws and affirmed the rights of school districts in Mississippi to classify Chinese Americans as colored.²⁵

One historian’s account of the Lum family’s struggle notes the complexity of their legacy in fighting racial segregation. Adrienne Berard argues that the Lum family should be remembered as pioneers as one of the first families of color who dared to challenge racist educational policies. But Berard also observes that the Lum family was not engaged in an inclusive and fully righteous struggle for all races. Berard assesses Jeu Gong and Katherine Lum as making a “decision for their children” that was also a “racist decision”: “Whether it’s part of what was considered normal at the time or not, I don’t think you can let them off the hook for that very obvious fact that they did not want their daughters going to school with black children.”²⁶ At one level, the story of the Lums entails the journey of

²⁴ *U.S. Reports: Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78 (1927), 78–79.

²⁵ *U.S. Reports: Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78 (1927), 79–87.

²⁶ Sarah Begley, “How a Chinese Family’s 1927 Lawsuit Set a Precedent for School

how their specific family unit navigated racist systems in their racially segregated town of white students and Black customers. At another level, the Lum family's complicated journey in Mississippi represents the multifarious ambiguities and challenges of being "yellow" in a sinful world of anti-Black prejudice and white supremacy.

Double-Consciousness or Triple-Consciousness?

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois began *The Souls of Black Folk* with the thesis observing "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." With penetrating interrogation of anti-Black prejudice and white supremacy, Du Bois recast the history of the US with Black Americans both at the center alongside white Americans and as a people of uniquely important insight, "gifted with second-sight in this American world" borne of their hard and righteous struggle for equality. He traced how African American folk and gospel songs, which were "the rhythmic cry of the slave," served as foundational components for many popular musical compositions from Black and white artists, and argued these songs emerging from the soul of the Black experience comprised "the most beautiful expression of human experience." Du Bois noted Black Americans fought in battles and shared in sorrows, and therefore he urged white Americans to more fully enact the principles of justice and truth enshrined in the Bible and US Constitution: "Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?"²⁷

Du Bois also developed the notion of double-consciousness to explain the Black American experience. Black Americans occupied two identities, Black and American. In their Blackness, they found their beauty and dignity as well as abundant resources to strengthen their resolve. Yet, their travails as Black persons in a white-dominated nation created a "double-consciousness" in which Black persons saw themselves "through the revelation of the other world," which Du Bois vividly described as a "peculiar sensation" and "this

Segregation," *TIME*, October 18, 2016, https://time.com/45334_76/lum-v-rice-water-tossing-boulders/.

²⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: McClurg & Co., 1903), vii, 3, and 251-263.

sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."²⁸ Though the challenge of carrying two selves was arduous and painful, Du Bois acknowledged these racialized struggles were real and prescribed the only way forward was to directly confront, rather than ignore, the problem of the color line.

Kwok's scholarship on imagination informs the need for Asian American Christians to similarly confront at least three pervasive realities: anti-Asian racism, anti-Black racism, and white supremacy. In *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, Kwok draws parallels between Katie Geneva Cannon's incisive analysis of white Christian complicity in the sins of Black enslavement and the "burning questions" Chinese students raised in the early twentieth century challenging white Christian involvement in Western imperialism. Kwok subsequently argues that biblical interpretation in Asia requires "a powerful act of imagination" entailing processes of "a consciousness of conflict (something not fitting), a pause, the finding of a new image, the repatterning of reality, and interpretation."²⁹ Just as Kwok criticizes Christian approaches to the Bible in Asia that mimic evangelical teachings from the West and therefore do not resonate with Asian contexts and realities, Asian American Christians must also fully engage history with theological approaches that affirm their dignity, assert that the Black and white racial binary insufficiently captures what it means to be an American, and acknowledge the strivings of Black Americans in their righteous struggle for racial justice.

The cases of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Gong Lum v. Rice* simultaneously illustrate the insufficiency and power of the Black and white racial binary. The increasing presence of Asian Americans riding segregated trains and attending segregated schools designed for two races disrupted the social order and forced a rethinking of unjust laws that ultimately maintained white supremacy by expanding the lesser category of colored to include Asian Americans alongside Black, Indigenous, and other persons of color. Asian Americans like the Lum family did not construct this racial and racist binary, but they traversed the binary. Any approach to finding new theological images that hastily moves past the binary skips over

²⁸ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

²⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 12-13.

the necessary process of confronting a consciousness of conflict. Asian Americans like Grace Lee Boggs, in her activism alongside Black Americans in Detroit's Black Power movement in the 1950s, and Syngman Rhee, in his joining Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Black leaders for civil rights as a campus minister at the University of Louisville in the 1960s, connected the yearnings for justice in their Asian American souls with the Black folk and gospel songs that conveyed sorrow, breathed hope, and inspired faith. Yet, other Asian Americans thought their yellow skin was a lighter shade closer to white than black. In an absurd but very real world where white-skinned people were treated better than black-skinned people, even a multiracial person with "a single drop of African blood" like Homer Plessy, some Asian Americans endeavored to be identified as close as possible to the white race.

Does Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness also help to explain the Asian American experience? Asian American theologians and biblical interpreters have observed the phenomenon of constantly shifting identities between "Asian" and "American." Peter C. Phan observes Asian Americans are received neither as fully American in the US because of their Asian appearance nor authentically Asian in the nations where they trace their family origins because of their American residence. Like Du Bois, Phan acknowledges both the deleterious aspects of these racialized realities and the creative possibilities of being between two worlds. Phan posits Asian Americans embrace opportunities to combine this duality and cultivate resources from both worlds to "fashion a new, different world, so that persons at the margins stand not only between these two worlds and cultures but also beyond them."³⁰ But the Lum family's journey in Mississippi illustrates how many Asian Americans found themselves in the cracks and fissures of at least three worlds: the world of Asian America, the world of Black America, and the world of white America.

Therefore, it may be more accurate to frame the Asian American experience as one of triple-consciousness with three different lenses illumining different and sometimes contradictory revelations. The history of the US contains many more racial and

³⁰ Peter C. Phan, "Betwixt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, eds. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 113.

ethnic perspectives beyond Asian, Black, and white, such as Indigenous, Hispanic, and Latina/o, but I focus on the enduring Black and white racial binary because of its pervasive ubiquity and unjust authority in this nation's civic life. Frank H. Wu, the first Asian American to teach as a law professor at Howard University, a historically Black institution in Washington, DC, finds Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* a worthy guide for Asian American interpretation. Wu calls upon Asian Americans to be "conscious of black and white" and "acquire such a consciousness" that seeks to supplement other perspectives rather than replace them.³¹

Du Bois's explication of double-consciousness balances a clear-eyed presentation of the deadly ramifications of white supremacy on the everyday lives of Black Americans with a steadfast refusal to allow these racist perspectives to define what it meant to be Black. Du Bois criticized attempts to "bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism" because Black Americans had a unique and distinctive message to share with the world.³² Applying a triple-consciousness deepens Asian American approaches to theology because it simultaneously confronts the complexities of encountering the Black and white racial binary and constructs new interpretations expressing the beauty, dignity, and creative wisdom of being Asian American.

Toward an Inclusive Twenty-First Century Asian American Christian Witness

Two historians of Asian America point to what possibilities lie when engaging triple-consciousness. In *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*, Sucheng Chan delineates four analytical perspectives in studies of Asian Americans and other minoritized groups in the US: (1) An assimilationist approach that "implies members of minority groups are deviant or deficient" and must therefore adopt and integrate white and Western cultural norms to flourish; (2) A celebratory approach emphasizing the accomplishments of racially minoritized individuals without examining racist systems; (3) A systemic approach focusing primarily on the collective behavior of minoritized groups and the discriminatory obstacles they face in society; and (4) An inclusive

³¹ Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 27.

³² Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 4.

approach that “sees members of minority groups as agents of history – men and women who make choices that shape their lives, even when these may be severely limited by conditions beyond their control.”³³ Chan utilizes the fourth approach to recount a history of Asian Americans as both immigrants and people of color. As immigrants, Chan argues that Asian Americans encountered some of the same barriers as European immigrants, but as people of color, they were treated and mistreated as “perpetual foreigners,” denied access to the rights European immigrants possessed.

Chan delineates the “acculturation process” of Asian Americans as multivalent. Many early Asian American immigrants were poor and came from the middling classes. Thus, they were familiar with class distinctions and economic discriminations. But with some exceptions, such as the Hakka among Chinese immigrants, they had not experienced systemic prejudice on account of their race.³⁴ In the US, Asian Americans learned how to survive in a brutal maze of anti-Black racism and white supremacy. Harlan’s ranking of Chinese Americans in *Plessy v. Ferguson* as a foreign race undeserving of the rights and privileges Black Americans had earned, from centuries of toil in agricultural fields as enslaved laborers and on bloody battlefields as combatants in the Civil War, demonstrates one interpretation of this nation’s racial hierarchy. Insistence from the Lum family’s attorneys that Martha Lum belonged in the school for white students rather than the school for Black students on grounds the colored race only referred to African Americans illustrates an attempt to reposition Asian Americans as above African Americans.

In *The Making of Asian America: A History*, Erika Lee presents a rich and complex narrative in which Lee wrestles with whether a solitary notion of “Asian America” and one “Asian American history” are even possible when accounting for a “staggering diversity of people that represent twenty-four distinct groups” from different national origins and differences in immigrant and generational status. Lee holds in productive tension the presence of both many individual stories and the collective threads connecting these manifold experiences when contending that “Asian Americans occupy unique and constantly shifting positions between black and

³³ Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (New York: Twayne, 1991), xii.

³⁴ Chan, *Asian Americans*, 187.

white, foreign and American, privilege and poverty.”³⁵ Anti-Asian racism manifested such that Asian Americans were regarded as yellow savages, perpetual foreigners, and probationary citizens. Exclusionary immigration laws and the forced incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Second World War are but two episodes of a long, racist, and oppressive history. Yet, Lee finds any serious analysis of race across Asian American history must delve into the ways Asian Americans navigated the enduring Black and white racial binary.

Approaches to Asian American theology must also grapple with a diversity of experiences traversing the Black and white racial binary. In doing so, there likely exists a temptation to apply binary interpretations with overly simplistic analysis that flattens rather than deepens. One unhelpful example is a dissection between “good immigrants” who worked hard, devoted their energies and finances to establish new congregations, and partnered with other persons of color for racial justice, and “bad immigrants” who economically exploited Black communities, participated in unhealthy congregations with generational tensions, and copied the theologies of a white evangelicalism that touted commercialism, individualism, and other Western cultural priorities.

Kwok’s theology simultaneously prevents such binary thinking and presents a generative way forward. In Kwok’s assessment of Asian feminist theology, Kwok warns against impulses that oversimplify the diverse experiences, multiple interests, and varied social locations of Asian women. Kwok resists approaches employing the binary constructs of “victim” and “heroine” to depict Asian women as either victims of oppression or as heroines fighting for freedom. Instead, Kwok argues for culturally and historically specific analysis that treats the experiences of Korean women who lived through Japanese colonialism and militarized division differently from the experiences of Indian women negotiating caste, dowry, and Hindu nationalism.³⁶

An examination of another interpreter of Asian America illumines creative possibilities and ambiguous complexities for more culturally and historically specific approaches to Asian American theology. In *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American*

³⁵ Lee, *The Making of Asian America*, 3–8.

³⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 35.

History and Culture, Gary Y. Okihiro advances the thesis that Asian Americans and African Americans are a “kindred people” who share a history of colonization, migration, oppression, and resistance “forged in the fire of white supremacy and struggle.”³⁷ In answering the ever-present question of whether yellow is black or white, Okihiro argues the query is both a false dichotomy, since the US is a nation of many (not two) colors, and a necessary reality, because “America’s two-tiered racial order forces Asians and all people of color, including those who are bi-racial, to choose between black and white.”³⁸ Therefore, Okihiro posits yellow is neither black nor white but a shade of black because Asian Americans have closer affinities and common experiences with African Americans. Okihiro identifies African American support for Chinese American immigration in the late nineteenth century, such as Frederick Douglass’s criticism of white southern planters seeking to exploit Asian American laborers with the same unjust economic and racist policies at the foundations of Black enslavement, and the vote of Blanche K. Bruce, the lone Black senator in the US, that was against the Chinese Exclusion Act, to demonstrate “the extent and degree of solidarity felt by African Americans toward Asian Americans.”³⁹ Okihiro connects the verbal and written protests from African American political leaders who opposed anti-Asian racism with the actions of Asian American small business owners who defied segregationist laws and violent white mobs to hire Black employees, offer lodging to Black travelers, and welcome Black diners. African Americans and Asian Americans utilized different tools to fight a common foe in white supremacy.

There is much in Okihiro’s vision of African Americans and Asian Americans as a kindred people for theological approaches engaging the three worlds of Asian America, Black America, and white America. Rather than a generic call to Christian discipleship and unity absent any cultural or historical context, the notion of kinship between African Americans and Asian Americans is grounded in a specific history of struggle and resistance. Okihiro acknowledges some Asian Americans disagree with him. In his

³⁷ Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994), 34.

³⁸ Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, xi–xii.

³⁹ Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 49–55. Bruce opposed the Chinese Exclusion Act during his term as a senator from 1875 to 1881.

college classrooms from the early 1990s, Okihiro asked his Asian American students whether they felt a closer kinship to Black or white Americans and found there was no discernable pattern. In one class, nearly all claimed affinity with white persons. In another class, nearly all expressed solidarity with Black persons.⁴⁰ In Asian American congregations today, the answers will likewise vary. But we must press forward and demand a specific answer. One instinct will be to respond with a deflection stating a color-blindness based on scriptural principles. Though answers appealing to God's universal love are not necessarily untrue, Asian American Christians are better served with theologies confronting, rather than avoiding, the Black and white racial binary. Just as Okihiro detects and names the economic forces obscuring the kinship ties between African Americans and Asian Americans, Asian American Christians must identify and deconstruct spiritual teachings that fail to substantively address the multiple layers of racism in this nation's past, present, and future.

Here, too, the wisdom of Kwok's Asian, feminist, and postcolonial theology offers depth and nuance to Okihiro's vision of kinship between African Americans and Asian Americans. Kwok insists on studying Asian women as agents of history rather than solely as objects of multiple oppressions. Just as Kwok cautions against approaches that define and delimit Asian women to the colonial structures and discriminatory forces in their lives, Asian Americans must be interpreted as actors, with historical agency, who made their own difficult choices in a nation in which those in power, all the way up to the highest levels of judicial authority, endeavored to sustain white supremacy.

Developments of kinship theologies must therefore recognize African Americans and Asian Americans as different peoples with different histories. The forced trans-Atlantic migration of enslaved Africans is distinct from the trans-Pacific migration of impoverished Asians. Another historian of Asian America, Ellen D. Wu, rightly observes that Asian Americans were "profoundly shaped by understandings of blackness and whiteness" but not as "silent and aloof" bystanders.⁴¹ Asian Americans actively participated in and shaped the racial discourse of the US. Some made courageous

⁴⁰ Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 60.

⁴¹ Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 7.

decisions and walked alongside African Americans in liberation movements for equal rights. Others resisted the ways white Americans sought to weaponize the notion of Asian Americans as a “model minority” to impugn Black Americans for their comparative lack of economic wealth and question the veracity of institutional racism. Yet, some made choices that reinforced the enduring injustices of white supremacy and anti-Black prejudice. And others practiced narrow and myopic interpretations of Christianity that emphasized congregational piety at the expense of civic participation.

Conclusion

In 1998, US President Bill Clinton awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Fred Korematsu. Korematsu, along with other Japanese Americans, resisted the US government’s forced imprisonment and relocation during the Second World War and challenged the constitutionality of Executive Order 9066 in the courts. Approximately 40 years after his conviction, Korematsu reopened the case after previously hidden documents revealed a suppression of evidence proving the military’s claims of Japanese American espionage were false. Korematsu argued his appeal was important because it would entail more than a personal victory, but also stand as a resounding message to ensure all Americans be treated justly and equally. “As long as my record stands in federal court,” Korematsu explained, “any American citizen can be held in prison or concentration camps without a trial or a hearing.”⁴² Clinton presented Korematsu with the highest civilian honor and recognized him along with other “ordinary citizens,” including Homer Plessy and Rosa Parks, who each stood for “millions of souls” in the “long history of our country’s constant search for justice.”⁴³

In 2001, another Asian American, Syngman Rhee, recalled his years serving as a campus minister at the University of Louisville in the 1960s. Rhee joined Black students from the university and other Black activists in the city in their movement for equal access to public facilities. When a group of African American university students decided to form a Black Student Union, they approached Rhee in

⁴² Lee, *The Making of Asian America*, 395.

⁴³ Akil Vohra, “Honoring Fred Korematsu,” *The United States White House*, February 1, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/02/01/honoring-fred-korematsu>.

their search for a faculty advisor. Rhee initially responded, "Why are you asking me to be your faculty advisor? You know I am not black." The students said, "Yes, we know you are not black, but we saw you out on the street demonstrating together with us for our civil rights."⁴⁴ Rhee then agreed to be the first faculty advisor for the Black Student Union at the University of Louisville. The fires of white supremacy, anti-Asian racism, anti-Black racism, and other discriminatory evils continue to rage. Where will we find the souls of yellow folk? If we yearn for Asian American Christians to be on the streets actively participating in Black Lives Matter and other movements for police reform, voting rights, and racial equality alongside African Americans, approaches to Asian American theology that are grounded in historical context and inspired by postcolonial imagination are necessary in our unrelenting pursuit for justice and a more inclusive Asian American Christian witness.

⁴⁴ Syngman Rhee, "Reconciliation: A Vision of Christian Mission," in *Teaching Mission in a Global Context*, eds. Patricia Lloyd-Sidle and Bonnie Sue Lewis (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001), 73.