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Faith

A Study Guide on Race and Faith

PART 2: MEDIA AND REPRESENTATION

The following is a work in progress document under joint development by Epic Movement and the Center for Asian American Theology and Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Initiated in Summer 2019, these materials reflect content last updated in January 2021.

If you use these studies, we welcome your feedback for incorporation into a final draft of the curriculum that will be completed in Summer 2021. Please direct all comments and inquiries to jasonchu@fuller.edu.

Grace and blessings to you.

PART 2: MEDIA AND REPRESENTATION

Study Introduction

Welcome to *Beyond Model Minority Faith*, a Bible study curriculum on race and the Gospel. Over the next weeks, you'll be exploring some of the many intersections between Asian American issues and the Christian faith.

This study touches on many topics that may be difficult, personal, or new to you. As you begin each session, it may help to go over these ground rules, or refer to them during sessions:

- **Respect** one another's stories. Don't explicitly or implicitly talk down on, judge, invalidate, or criticize someone else's lived experiences.
- Speaking is not a competition; no one member of the group should dominate the conversation. **Hold space** for each other to think and reflect. Don't interrupt, jump in, or rush to have your voice or point heard.
- **Listen well.** Some of the subject matter we'll be covering could be sensitive or trigger past pain and hurt. When the study or another group member brings up emotions or ideas you don't expect, instead of getting argumentative or defensive, treat it as an opportunity to learn more about yourself and others.
- Respect *both* **personal experience and critical history**. Our lived experiences are valuable and need to be treated with respect. But often our personal life stories only reveal a narrow portion of the bigger picture; remember that what we are learning in this study will help reveal a broader historical context that helps us understand and locate our individual experiences more accurately.

We're excited and hopeful that you and your group will find truth, depth, and community on your journey together.

The Fuller Asian American Center
January 2021

SESSION 1:

STEREOTYPES VS. GOD'S TRUTH

Some of us may have experienced hurt or bullying from racial stereotypes, while others may think that they're innocuous and even sometimes true. This week, we'll be unpacking stereotypes about Asian Americans, and exploring how God sees our truth beyond stereotypes.



You Think You Know Me But...

- People make a lot of superficial judgments that turn out to be wildly inaccurate. Go around the circle and share one thing you think people may assume about you, and what the actual truth is instead.
- For example: “because of how I dress, people assume I like the NBA. I’ve actually never watched a full basketball game in my life.”

Anti-Asian Stereotypes

There is a long history of the West portraying Asians and Asian Americans negatively. The most flagrant examples come from wartime anti-Japanese, anti-Vietnamese, and anti-Brown propaganda, but these acts of narrative violence are far from limited to such times. Mainstream American pop culture throughout the centuries has been repeatedly guilty of dressing White actors in **yellowface** and **brownface** makeup on stage and film while casting Asian bodies in exaggerated stereotypical roles.

“Stop complaining.”

“Ignore their negativity.”

“You can take away their power by just not letting them bother you.”

You might have heard well-intentioned people say things like this, trying to encourage you or help you “get over” incidents of stereotyping or silencing. But stereotypes and erasure have real consequences. In *Microaggressions and Traumatic Stress*, Filipino American psychologist, author, and activist Kevin Nadal discusses “the ways in which

microaggressions may lead to psychological trauma, notably for people who encounter discriminatory incidents regularly and intensely throughout their lives”.¹

We give you the following list of anti-Asian stereotypes not so you can start keeping a list of grudges, but so that if you are ever left uncomfortable or shaken by an exchange, you can process those feelings. Also, the better we understand the ways that racism manifests in stereotypes, the better we can care for our Asian American sisters and brothers.

- **Yellow Peril:** an Orientalist stereotype that portrays Asian cultures and people as fundamentally dangerous, regressive, and negative. This can manifest in statements like “China is a global threat to freedom”; “Asians caused COVID”; or “You have to choose: are you defined by Indian culture, or Christ and the Gospel?”
- The **Model Minority:** the idea that Asians are a “good minority” who work hard, assimilate smoothly into America, and do not cause or experience problems due to race. This idea originated in the 1970s as a way to dismiss the struggles of Black, Latino/a, and Native communities as well as to downplay the systemic injustices that confront Asian Americans.
- **Perpetual Foreigners:** the expectation that Asians can never “fully belong” in America. This is reflected in microaggressive statements like being asked “where did you come from?” or if you have an “American” (English) name. It also is expressed in direct insults, like being told that Asian cultures are weirdly exotic (references to “eating dogs”, “worshiping cows”, etc.).
- **Gendered Stereotypes:**
 - *Geisha* – Asian women are often stereotyped as cute, submissive, and demure. This can lead to sexual objectification and lack of respect in the classroom, workplace, and in public.
 - *Dragon Lady* – A second stereotype of Asian women is the “dragon lady”, who manipulates and tricks innocent men. Asian women who occupy positions of leadership or authority must often confront this bias.
 - *Emasculation* – When not actively erased or marginalized, Asian men are often presented as neutered, un-masculine, and unattractive in American media.

¹ Kevin L. Nadal, *Microaggressions and Traumatic Stress: Theory, Research, and Clinical Treatment* (American Psychological Association, 2018), 4.

- The *Tiger Parent* – the stereotype that Asian parents cruelly push their children toward success and stability without any interest in their happiness, emotional development, or friendships. While Asian Americans do often have different parenting styles than their White, Black, and other counterparts, with their own flaws and strengths, this stereotype often succeeds in fostering White normativity while causing resentment in Asian American children.

The God Who Hears Us

“God was with the boy as he grew up.”

–Genesis 21:20

In the Bible, Hagar was an Egyptian woman enslaved by an Israelite couple, Abraham and Sarai. Sarai, childless despite many attempts, told Abraham to sleep with Hagar so that they could have a child to continue their family line. Hagar did so, bearing a son; but then Sarai and Abraham miraculously conceived her own son. No longer needing Hagar’s son, Sarai convinced Abraham to abandon Hagar and her child to die in the desert...

14 Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.

15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob.

17 God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. 18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.”

19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

20 God was with the boy as he grew up.

–Genesis 21:14-20

The people around Hagar all have their own agendas for her. They refer to her in objectifying and dehumanizing ways: “my slave” (Gen. 16:2, 5), “Your slave” (Gen. 16:6), “That slave woman” (Gen. 21:10). They project their own desires and agendas onto her, then discard her and her child when they find them no longer useful or needed.

In the midst of this abuse, God hears and sees Hagar. God’s angel addresses Hagar lovingly and by her name (“What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid” - Gen. 21:17). God goes with Hagar and her son into the wasteland when they are cruelly ignored by others around them and provides for them emotionally and physically.

Hagar’s story, often overlooked by mainstream Christian theology, has been taken up by Black American womanist theologians, who highlight the healing way it can speak to women of color. In the face of “ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and social exploitation”,² God sees, knows, and names Hagar for the fullness of who she is: a human being and beloved daughter of God.

Closing Reflection

Stereotypes hurt people. Even when they are grounded in real observations, they can be oddly objectifying and presumptuous.

In particular, racial stereotypes weaponize our cultures and communities by reducing complex histories, experiences, and nuances to a single, judgmental, one-size-fits-all caricature. When someone objectifies a gender, race, body type, or other group of people, they are not only dehumanizing those people, but also committing violence against the one who created them: God.

Maybe you’ve found ways to defend yourself from stereotypes: laughing them off, replying cleverly, or simply avoiding potentially offensive situations. Or maybe you’re still wrestling with how to navigate these kinds of situations.

The good news is that you are not alone or unseen. The eternal God at the center of Creation sees and knows all of you. The same God that was in the cold desert alongside Hagar and her son is the God that sits with you when you are feeling attacked, silenced, and alone. Even if you do not know how to defend or express yourself, God hears and loves you.

² Bailey, Wilma Ann. “Black and Jewish Women Consider Hagar”, *Encounter* (Winter 2002).



Take 5-10 minutes to write, in a journal or on your Notes app.

1. Remember a time that you felt misjudged or stereotyped. How did you feel?
2. Consider that the Creator of the universe knows, proclaims, and will never forget the truth about you. What kind of comfort, support, or encouragement can this provide when you feel yourself being stereotyped or slandered?

SESSION 2:

REPRESENTATION: OUR FULL SELVES

One of the core messages of the Bible is that we are all “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14) by a good Creator God who knows and sees our full selves even when others around us don’t. This week, we’ll talk about the ways that American culture erases and silences Asian American humanity, while God embraces and honors us.



I Felt Seen When. . .

- Go around the room, taking turns sharing the first time that someone or something – a teacher, film, book, or friend – made you feel like your identity as an Asian American was seen, known, and valued.
- For example: “I love making music with my friends. When I watched *Always Be My Maybe*, I felt like Randall Park’s character [a rapper in an indie band in Oakland] was telling my story.”

Erasure vs. Plenitude

Last week, we talked about the problems associated with **stereotyping**: having our complex existence and identities reduced to singular, often ill-fitting caricatures that fail to capture the full nuance and dignity of our God-given humanity and experiences.

Sadly, even when we’re not facing active stereotyping, it’s common for Asian Americans to experience **narrative erasure**: removal from the stories and history presented as “normal”.

This often occurs in textbooks and portrayals of American history. Apart from a passing mention of Japanese American incarceration during World War II, most high school textbooks never mention the varied roles that Asian Americans have played in women’s suffrage, labor movements, Civil Rights, sports, and politics. Can you remember the first time you were taught in school about an Asian American historical figure? Can you name three Asian American historical figures prior to 2000 (other than Bruce Lee)?

The common practice of **whitewashing**, casting White actors in Asian roles, is another form of narrative erasure. In so doing, whitewashing removes authentic Asian bodies,

faces, and voices from screens and stages. For example, in the 2015 film *Aloha*, fully White actress Emma Stone was cast as “Allison Ng”, a character explicitly written as part Chinese and Native Hawaiian.



Similarly, in 2017, the Arizona Opera performed Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly*, set in Japan, with a cast that included no Asian actors.

Viet Nguyen is a Vietnamese American Pulitzer-prize winning author and scholar. In his book *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen coined the phrase **narrative plenitude**:

Narrative plenitude is when almost all the stories are about you. And that’s one of the sure signs that you are part of some kind of majority, when you can take it for granted that some fundamental part of who you are is being shown to you in the stories that you encounter. And when you live in an environment like that you totally take it for granted.

So when somebody makes a stupid Hollywood movie you can say that’s just Hollywood. That’s just a movie. That’s just a story. Most of my students say that all the time. I say you’re right. One story that’s about story is just a story. But when all the stories are saying the same thing, then it’s more than just a story. It’s actually saying something fundamental about the culture. And so again, if all the stories are about you it’s saying something about who you are as a part of this culture.

And when most of the stories are not about you or not about us, then when the one story comes out that is about you, enormous weight is put on that.”³

Narrative plenitude is the opposite of stereotyping and erasure: a range of stories that portray the diversity, nuance, and full humanity of a community. Some of those stories may appear stereotypical or mundane, while others may be unexpected and exceptional. Taken together, these diverse testimonies allow us to see Asian American persons and communities as flawed, beautiful, and fully human.

³ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Narrative Plenitude* | Talks at Google, <https://vietnguyen.info/2018/viet-thanh-nguyen-and-vu-tran-narrative-plenitude-talks-at-google>

Created in the Image of God

The following passage is taken from a letter written from Paul, an early Christian leader, to Christians in the Greek city of Corinth. Among other subjects, in this section Paul addresses issues of diversity and division in that church:

18 But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" 22 On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, 24 while our presentable parts need no special treatment.

But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, 25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

-1 Corinthians 12:21-26

In God's world, diversity is not a bug - it's a feature! The myriad experiences and cultures of our world, including the richly diverse range of Asian American experiences and communities, all have a part to play in the caring, loving community of God's family. Although flawed and often imperfect, our bodies, souls, lives, and relationships reflect the fundamental goodness of a God who created and sees all of us with love and intention.

Our Asian American identities and bodies have a role to play in God's good plan for the world. Erasing, objectifying, or exoticizing them not only hurt us, but actually dishonor our Creator. On the other hand, when we embrace and explore our place in the world with wisdom, this can actually bring glory and honor to God.

That's not to say that our culture *is* God. We're not asking you to learn an Asian language, drink more boba, or somehow "be more Asian". But are there parts of your

Asian American identity that you have been feeling ashamed of - as if they're "less honorable" or even "unpresentable", like Paul says? If so, there is healing in realizing that these components of your identity are not something to be ashamed of, but actually present opportunities to discover the love of God reflected in the image of God's Creation.

Closing Reflection

God sees, hears, and loves you. Where some would erase the value of your Asian American racial identity, God instead "gives greater honor to the parts that lacked it". The idea of "representation" for marginalized voices, including Asian Americans, is not only a contemporary cry for justice but a theological act of living out our role in the greater story of Creation.

If we can truly believe this, it can have profound effects not only on us, but on the multiracial and multicultural neighborhoods, cities, and nation that we live in. When we explore what it means to be Asian American - historically, psychologically, socially, culturally - not only do we discover something about ourselves, but we can bring those discoveries to the table for those around us.

God made Asian America to contain a narrative plenitude of healers, fighters, leaders, scientists, artists, and scholars. Our communal history, family stories, cultural legacies and even experiences of suffering, hurt, survival, and resilience are gifts that God has given us and the world around us.



Exercise: Notable Asian Americans

Let's fight the erasure of Asian American voices by uncovering some of our Asian American ancestors' stories. Over the next week, take 15-20+ minutes to Google one or more of the following groundbreaking Asian Americans and learn about the roles they played in our nation's history:

- Anna May Wong, Chinese American Hollywood star.
- Chol Soo Lee, wrongfully incarcerated Korean American man.
- Fong Lee, Hmong American youth killed by police in Minneapolis.
- Grace Lee Boggs, Chinese American social activist.
- Larry Itliong, Filipino American workers' rights leader.

- Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, women's rights activist and first Chinese American woman PhD in Economics.
- Mohini Bhardwaj, the first Indian American gymnast to medal at the Olympics.
- Sessue Hayakawa, Japanese American Hollywood star.
- Yuri Kochiyama, Japanese American civil rights leader.