

"*The Minority Experience* is a helpful addition for organizational leaders to grow and deepen their cultural intelligence to include race and ethnicity. Author Adrian Pei draws from his own ethnic identity journey, which pushes his understanding of leadership and faith, and graciously tells the story of organizational failures and opportunities."

**Kathy Khang**, author of *Raise Your Voice*

"Adrian Pei wonderfully expounds, via stories and quantitative data, a missing piece of the conversation in today's tense national racial divide. This is absolutely necessary reading for those in the majority who may not understand what it's like to be a minority as well as for minorities who have struggled to put into words what they've been feeling. It is for leaders of organizations and for anyone who calls themselves a Christian. This is a book I wish I had written! Not only do we share the Asian American experience, but I am a Cru alum as well. Pei blends faith, practice, and theory together into a beautiful, eye-opening tapestry."

**Allen Yeh**, associate professor of intercultural studies and missiology at Biola University

"Without oversimplification, Adrian Pei articulates much-needed clarity, framing, and direction for those seeking to lead organizations with cultural intelligence. Adrian's vulnerability in his self-reflection captures the minority experience in a way that few other books are able to do. *The Minority Experience* is honest with its reflections, thoughtful in its approach, and filled with practical hope for shaping a new tomorrow."

**Charles Lee**, CEO at Ideation, author of *Good Idea. Now What?*

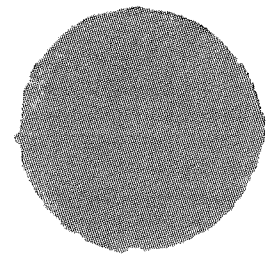
"Even well-intentioned efforts to build more diverse organizations will fail unless we address the realities of pain, power, and the past. With clarity and honesty, Adrian Pei shows how facing these realities can lead to compassion, advocacy, and wisdom for a better future. This book is a valuable resource for anyone who wants to see genuinely multicultural organizations thrive."

**Andy Crouch**, author of *Culture Making* and *Strong and Weak*, and partner for theology and culture at Praxis

# THE MINORITY EXPERIENCE

Navigating Emotional  
and Organizational Realities

ADRIAN PEI



**IVP Books**

An imprint of InterVarsity Press  
Downers Grove, Illinois

Latino, and Native American history with fresh eyes. I thought I was well adjusted to living in the United States, but I learned how much had been suppressed and buried under the surface.

My journey in understanding the minority experience had just begun.



## Chapter Two

# PAIN, POWER, AND THE PAST

## Three Distinctives of the Minority Experience

Since our new staff training experience, I've had a number of conversations with Cru leaders who have thoughts about how to make the training a better experience for minorities. And there is a lot of interest and energy organizationally (and in the United States) to change things and "fix" the diversity issue.

However, in my organizational development work in both corporate and ministry settings, I frequently see diversity treated as a depersonalized strategy or tactic. Leaders identify a benchmark for how many ethnic minority leaders they want to fill "X" positions, or they just want to see some improvement in demographic numbers from the previous year. These approaches fall short of truly improving the organization, because they don't connect with the meaning of *why* diversity is important. Do we value diversity simply because we feel like it's the politically correct thing to do, or so that our organization looks better?

Do we pursue diversity simply because our president or CEO told us we need to focus on it?

Ultimately, diversity is about the value and dignity of people—ethnic minorities—whose unique voices have been overlooked or even silenced. It is about restoring beautiful missing pieces of the canvas of history that can enrich our view of the world, and of God. It is about acknowledging pains and injustices of power from the past.

It may feel a bit heavy to address those topics, which may be why so many organizations find it easier to stay at “safe” and superficial “tactical” levels that don’t require as much from them.

For instance, we might focus on implementing a cultural competency training class for our organization. Frequently, these programs focus on giving people tools to navigate differences in language, customs, values, time perception, and many other categories. While there is value in this, competency training programs frequently fall short of acknowledging issues of justice and power—which are the heartbeat behind why diversity matters, and what drives nearly every current debate about race. These trainings tend to focus on ethnicity rather than on race. They put the onus of cultural growth equally on everyone rather than acknowledging existing structures that favor the majority culture.

Or we might look only skin-deep in filling leadership roles. If a person has an ethnic minority “sounding” name or appearance, we may be content to simply check the box of diversity—regardless of his or her ability to represent the

uniqueness of their culture in the workplace. When I talked to Dr. Daniel Lee, director of Fuller Theological Seminary’s Asian American Studies Center,<sup>1</sup> he described this practice as “cosmetic diversity.”<sup>2</sup> He told me that this approach backfires because the minority leaders who rise up the ranks are often those who have learned to “act more white” in order to fit in with the dominant culture. So in the end, we’re not diversifying our organizations as much as we think we are.

When we approach diversity in this pragmatic way, we make the mistake of treating minorities as a means to an end. They help us achieve our goals and visions instead of shaping the vision and process themselves.

But when we treat minorities as having inherent value, we will take a different approach. We will seek to listen and learn about how we can better serve and represent minorities and their deepest needs. We will ask them, “What perspectives and contributions are we missing?” We will give minorities authority to shape and influence the diversification process. And we will look deeper than cosmetic diversity into realities of pain, power, and the past.

To transform our organizations, we must understand the minority experience.

### **PAIN, POWER, AND THE PAST**

These three *categories* can help us differentiate the minority experience—pain, power, and the past.

When I think about my new staff training experience, I experienced something that couldn’t be fixed by mere cultural

knowledge. For instance, if one of my white coworkers had known more about Asian American traditions or values (e.g., “Asian Americans can be more indirect in their communication style”), I doubt it would have helped them address the emotional realities of my self-doubt, paranoia, and depression.

It certainly would *not* have helped if someone had told me during the training, “Hey, I get it. I’m white and I have an ethnicity too. You’re trying to be yourself, and I’m trying to be myself. We’re just different and have to listen to and respect each other.”

No . . . I experienced a very *real* difference from my majority culture peers that I couldn’t deny or minimize. They didn’t have to think about and worry about the same things I did. I had a burden they didn’t, and they experienced a comfort I didn’t and couldn’t experience.

What was this all about?

It wasn’t primarily about ethnicity. It was about the realities and dynamics of what it means to be a minority amidst the majority culture.

It was a difference in the *pain* that surfaced from the unique doubts, challenges, and struggles I faced as a minority.

It was a difference in our place in this country, as majority and minorities. It was a difference in *power*.

It was a difference in our *past*. It tapped into something deep that was inside me, but was also far deeper and beyond me. My history wasn’t just about me, but about my family and the previous generations of my ethnic heritage.

## PAIN

“You weren’t born by the river!”

My wife shouted at our television screen indignantly as we watched the auditions for *American Idol*. The contestant, a young white male in khakis, had just delivered an over-the-top rendition of Sam Cooke’s “A Change Is Gonna Come,” a song about racial injustice that begins with the line “I was born by the river, in a little tent . . .”

I had to chuckle. I admired the sincerity of the contestant, who probably loved the song and wanted to perform it well in front of judge Simon Cowell’s glaring gaze. But beyond this young man’s sincerity and behind our amusement, there was a real disconnect that my wife and I were feeling. Here are some of the lyrics to the song:

I go to the movie and I go downtown

Somebody keep telling me don’t hang around<sup>3</sup>

“A Change Is Gonna Come” describes the painful realities of segregation, discrimination, and racially motivated violence for African Americans. This song resonated powerfully with their community and became a kind of anthem of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s because it captured a pain that was unique to African Americans’ history as minorities in the United States. It was inspired by a harrowing experience that singer Sam Cooke had at a motel when he was denied a room because he was African American. As he protested, Cooke’s wife pleaded with him to stop, saying, “They’ll kill you.”<sup>4</sup> Although he did

eventually relent, Cooke was later tragically shot and killed at a motel in Los Angeles—only two weeks before “A Change Is Gonna Come” was released.

There’s a history of minority pain in this song. How could this wealthy, suburban white man on *American Idol* understand the realities of having to flee and run constantly out of fear of racial persecution? How could he understand segregation and being denied at the movies, as the song describes? How could he understand the weariness of longing for change and justice but getting knocked down every time he began to hope, as the song describes?

That doesn’t mean the young white man hadn’t had his fair share of struggles and challenges. For all we knew, he could have grown up in poverty, or experienced abuse in his household. This man might have been bullied and made fun of constantly by his peers. Maybe he even battled depression and suicide. I’m not trying to minimize the very serious and real challenges of those in the majority culture. I’m not trying to compare or judge levels of pain that people have endured in their lives.

What I’m trying to do is clarify that minorities experience a *unique* and *additional* layer of pain that those from the majority culture simply do not have to deal with. It’s the pain that comes from minority injustices, from slavery and Japanese internment camps to racial slurs and negative stereotypes in the media. It’s the pain that comes from not knowing if you belong in this country simply because of your race. It’s the pain that comes

from unequal treatment and fewer opportunities due to one’s race. These are all realities of the minority experience.

It’s so important to make this distinction, because if there’s one thing I’ve learned in my crosscultural experiences working with thousands of people—*there is an irresistible temptation to simplify things by placing everyone in the “same” category*. Every time I discuss the pain of minorities, someone in the room tends to mention that “white people experience pain too.” Every time I discuss stories or culture of minorities, someone in the room will remind me that white people have stories and a culture too. If you haven’t seen or experienced this kind of reaction yourself yet, I guarantee you will in the near future.

There’s always an attempt to equalize people and experiences, and it’s almost always done in reaction to attempts by minorities to assert their own distinctiveness or value. Consider the Black Lives Matter movement, which arose out of a Facebook conversation between two ethnic minority women, Patrisse Cullors and Alicia Garza, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African American teen Trayvon Martin. Black Lives Matter originated as a cry for justice and humanity amidst a long history of injustice and inhumanity experienced by African Americans. Dr. Leah Gunning Francis writes in *Ferguson & Faith* that to say that Black Lives Matter is to

- (1) see black people as human beings and not racist stereotypes;
- (2) affirm the human dignity and value of black people as equal to all other people; and
- (3) challenge the

hearer or reader to consider what it means to create a social order that values the lives of black people in all facets of their existence.<sup>5</sup>

The context of the movement clearly defines a need to assert the value of black dignity and worth due to a lack of such value throughout history. But what has been the reaction to this movement from some in the majority culture? The phrase “All Lives Matter.”

On the surface, this statement may not seem problematic. But if white people really lived out All Lives Matter, it would actually raise the bar on their commitment to do more on behalf of blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, refugees, and so on. Unfortunately, we rarely see such action follow such a statement. Instead, reactionary statements like this tend to shut down conversations. They tend to discourage the expressiveness of minorities, who are often trying to define who they are or bring attention to the pain they have experienced.

Put another way: I don't hear people saying, *Yes, keep saying “Black Lives Matter.” And we need more movements like it.*

Instead I hear, *Why have a Black Lives Matter movement? It's divisive and controversial. Let's not focus on any racial group like that.*

Do you see the difference in these two approaches? The first approach encourages further minority expression, while the second approach discourages it. The first leads to more action, while the second evades responsibility.

Moreover, there is an even bigger problem with the “equalizing” response, especially when whites interject “White Lives Matter, too.” Simply put, ethnic minorities and whites are not on equal ground. To claim that white pain is the same as black pain is not only unhelpful—it's simply not accurate.

Activist and professor Drew Hart illustrates this well in his book *Trouble I've Seen*. He tells the story of meeting up for sweet tea with a friendly white suburban pastor, who placed his foam cup on the table between them and decided to make a racial analogy. The white pastor said, “Because I can't see what is on your side of the cup, I need you to share with me your perspective so I can see things from your standpoint. Likewise, you need me to share my point of view so that you can understand the world from my vantage point.”

Hart reflects that while this was a nice sentiment, it was a naive assumption that the two men were on equal ground.<sup>6</sup> Hart graciously but firmly corrected his pastor friend, explaining that Hart had learned Eurocentric history, read white literature and lectures, studied under mostly white teachers, and lived for many years in white communities. On the other hand, the white pastor could easily have gone his entire life without needing to know black literature, art, music, and history. He could choose to never engage with the black community, and he would never be penalized in his livelihood or economic status for that.<sup>7</sup>

Hart exposes the oversimplified image that many people have in the mind when it comes to race relations—two people of different *ethnicities* sit down and share stories across a table. This

structure ignores the vast gaps in pain, power, and the past between whites and ethnic minorities. Instead of a horizontal divide between two people on equal standing, Hart encourages readers to picture a vertically structured hierarchy based on the power gap between *races*.<sup>8</sup>

Now, there is no question that people from the majority culture experience pain. But what kind of pain? And from where does the pain originate? If we're honest, the answers to those questions lead us down vastly different paths from ethnic minorities. There is simply no way that whites in North America can understand the pain of Native Americans who had their homeland invaded and taken away, because that is not part of their experience. Native Americans experience a very specific layer of pain that we cannot (and should not) try to equalize.

These days it seems popular in crosscultural settings to say that we need to "listen to each other's stories." This is a great starting point, but we need to go one step further. We need to start talking about and listening to *stories of minority pain*.

Here's an example, straight from the life story of an African American leader in Cru, Charles Gilmer. In his book *A Cry of Hope, a Call to Action*, Gilmer shares,

I learned that when we traveled south from our home in West Virginia, we could not assume that restroom facilities at gas stations and other public accommodations were at our disposal. I learned that our White neighbors across the road that ran up the little hollow in which we lived did not

want us to play with their grandchildren. I learned that you did not want to be out in certain parts of the county after dark. Just driving your car through the neighborhood could get you in trouble—just because you were Black.<sup>9</sup>

How have minorities been impacted by negative stereotypes of their race in the media? When have minorities felt excluded or discriminated against because of race? These are just a couple of examples of conversations that need to happen more often.

We need to go deeper than just talking about ethnic customs and values—and address minority pain.

## POWER

There is a phrase in the Japanese language, *shikata ga nai*, that is translated as "It cannot be helped." In Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's book *Farewell to Manzanar*, an entire chapter explores this phrase and sentiment that captures the apparent passivity of the Japanese in the face of oppression during World War II, when many Japanese American residents of the United States were put into internment camps.

One of the saddest aspects of Houston's book is her description of how her father was "broken down" in the internment camps. Almost overnight, he went from being a proud and contributing American to being an object of fear and scorn. Houston writes about her father,

But I think he knew it was futile to hide out or resist. . . . He didn't struggle. There was no point to it. He had become

a man without a country. The land of his birth was at war with America; yet after thirty-five years here he was still prevented by law from becoming an American citizen. He was suddenly a man with no rights who looked exactly like the enemy.<sup>10</sup>

Simply put, this description of the minority experience has to do with power—the powerlessness that a group of people experiences as they are forced against their will into horrific circumstances.

It's not about whether or not they tried to assert themselves. Some Japanese Americans did fight back or tried to escape the internment camps, but were shot. On a global scale, the Japanese who fought during World War II were ultimately shut down by the ultimate display of power—the atomic bomb. Not once but twice this weapon effectively silenced the Japanese people, and this had an impact that carries to this day in the country's memory.

When Emperor Hirohito was asked about the bombings in 1975, he responded, "It's very regrettable that nuclear bombs were dropped and I feel sorry for the citizens of Hiroshima, but it couldn't be helped [*shikata ga nai*] because that happened in wartime."<sup>11</sup>

*Shikata ga nai* captures an aspect of the minority experience that whites in the United States cannot relate to. This doesn't mean that whites haven't experienced helplessness or despair. However, they do not share the historical realities of minorities

such as the Native Choctaw and Cherokee tribes, who tried to resist the western advance of white settlers, but were manipulated into giving up their land.<sup>12</sup> When Native leaders tried to represent a dissenting voice at meetings, they were jailed or massacred, like the Lakota at Wounded Knee.<sup>13</sup>

Although Native Americans were originally more populous than the white settlers who invaded their homes, their majority numbers did not save them from the pain and powerlessness of the minority experience. Chief Folsom of the Choctaw tribe describes his peoples' emotional reality well: "We are exceedingly tired. . . . Our doom is sealed. There is no other course for us but to turn our races to our new homes toward the setting sun."<sup>14</sup>

*Power* is a word that carries many meanings and connotations, but in the context of race, it is most important to understand the following.

***There is always a discrepancy between the majority and minority cultures.*** Sometimes that may mean a difference in perceived ability to act, as measured by Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede's "Power Distance Index."<sup>15</sup> Sometimes it's a very blatant imposition of the majority culture's will to restrict the power of a minority group, as in the segregating "Whites Only" signs.

This is where a helpful distinction must be made. *Segregation* is one of the most misused terms in conversations about race and diversity. I've misused the term myself, as when I've referred to ethnic minority groups who form distinct or separate communities and don't mingle with other groups. At times, I still



hear employees in Cru and some congregations use the negative connotations of “segregation” to aid their critique of ethnic-focused ministry groups and churches.

However, the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance defines segregation as “the act by which a (natural or legal) person separates other persons on the basis of one of the enumerated grounds without an objective and reasonable justification, in conformity with the proposed definition of discrimination.” Segregation is an act of power imposed upon a minority group against their will, not a voluntary attempt to form a community for support. The Commission’s statement goes on to say, “As a result, the voluntary act of separating oneself from other persons on the basis of one of the enumerated grounds does not constitute segregation.”<sup>16</sup>

Segregation throughout history has also meant acts of controlling a minority group by intimidation and force. At a gas station, basketball legend Bill Russell’s father once was told he had to wait for all the white customers to pump their gas first. After waiting for a long time, he began to leave, but the station owner put a shotgun to his head and ordered him to wait. “Boy, don’t you ever do what you just started to do,” the white owner told Russell’s father.<sup>17</sup> That is racial power.

John Perkins describes how the purpose of the Ku Klux Klan was less about exterminating the black race and more about scaring them back into line. He writes, “The Southern white doesn’t want the blacks removed. What he wants is to have the blacks under his control, in a special relationship to him.”<sup>18</sup> Thus,

lynching was designed as a public spectacle—even publicized in newspapers in order to draw crowds of tens of thousands of people.<sup>19</sup> In each of these examples, there is a vast difference in the power and control possessed (and demonstrated) by whites and blacks.

***Differences in power can also be unconscious.*** Much research on implicit bias shows that most people in the United States have subtle biases about race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and physical appearance. In the 1940s, African American psychologists Kenneth Clark and Mamie Clark conducted a now famous experiment using black and white dolls to judge the value and beauty young children attributed to race. Overwhelmingly, white children grouped positive attributes to the white doll and negative attributes to the black doll. However, black children were also inclined to attribute goodness and beauty to the white doll and negativity to the black doll. Even at an early age of development, children had internalized value judgments based on the power gap between races.<sup>20</sup>

I attended a lecture by UCLA professor Dr. Miguel Unzueta, who has done extensive research on diversity, bias, and discrimination. Flashing words and images on a screen, and asking the audience to respond with a positive or negative association, he provided a real-time demonstration of how deeply embedded these associations can be. Unzueta and other experts in race studies call this *unconscious bias*—we all possess social stereotypes about certain groups of people outside of our conscious awareness.<sup>21</sup>

*Differences in power aren't just between individuals; they are systemic.* The most common term to describe systemic imbalances of power is racial privilege—which in the case of the United States is white privilege. This means that there are numerous societal advantages from which white people benefit (e.g., greater access to jobs and housing, social comfort and ease), even if they're not aware of them.<sup>22</sup>

In *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*, Andy Crouch describes the moment he understood privilege and power at an airport in Mumbai, India. While he waited in a long line of passengers to be checked in, Crouch was suddenly approached by the ticket agent, who told him to skip past the seventy-five people in front of him, straight to the counter. Crouch realized that his status as a white American male allowed him ease and access that the other travelers did not have. Though he felt embarrassed and even wanted to tell the others “I didn't ask for this!” they were not in the least surprised by what had happened. Crouch notes that *they* understood power and privilege whereas he was just becoming aware. Indeed, privilege is most invisible to those who have it.

Crouch defines privilege as “the ongoing benefits of past successful exercises of power.”<sup>23</sup> For instance, he got to skip the line because of America's historical success and accumulated power. Many people in the world speak English because of Britain's success in colonizing so many countries throughout history. As mentioned before, language is a major part of privilege—when white Americans travel internationally, they

have come to expect that people in other countries should speak English, rather than the other way around. This kind of expectation of convenience is the result of a systemic difference in power between majority and minority cultures.

In my experience, systemic power is often the hardest for people to accept or understand, because it is largely invisible. Also, it is far easier to blame an individual than a system, because a system doesn't have as clear a culprit and solution.<sup>24</sup>

Drew Hart writes about the example of some racially offensive remarks that celebrity chef Paula Deen made, and how quickly she faced backlash from the media. I can think of numerous athletes like Curt Schilling and actors like Mel Gibson who have gotten fired or reprimanded for such remarks. Yet Hart observed that it's easier to blame one person like Paula Deen for being a racist than to face the systemic realities of injustice—the centuries of ideology—that led to her remarks. He writes, “When mainstream America makes an example of Paula Deen, it both turns her into a scapegoat and also creatively claims its own innocence, because it limits the definition of racism to individual acts.”<sup>25</sup> It's easier to put the blame on individual acts rather than confronting systemic processes that are broken.

The result of white privilege, and of unconscious and blatant differences in power, is that there are always additional layers that minorities must contend with. Ken Wytsma, author of *The Myth of Equality*, writes, “White privilege doesn't mean your life

isn't hard. It means that if you are a person of color, simply by virtue of that, your life might be harder."<sup>26</sup>

In some of my talks on race, I have defined power as *not having to think about something that is significant to somebody else*. Think about it this way. Minorities might have to deal with two or three times as many challenging realities as whites—in the workplace and in everyday social settings. Some whites may *never* have to think about or experience some of these challenges.

For instance, here are some examples of additional layers that minorities must contend with:

- They are often overlooked or go unnoticed, and have to work harder to get noticed, because they are minorities.
- They often have less access and fewer opportunities, because they are minorities.<sup>27</sup>
- They often have fewer people who understand their realities, or who share their experience, because they are minorities.
- They often have to deal with negative stereotypes in the media that devalue their appearance and dignity, because they are minorities.
- They often face discrimination or overt racism, because they are minorities.

In any society, the power disparity between majority and minority cultures inevitably creates these realities. First, living on the “margins” of society comes with certain inherent pressures for minorities. A *New York Times* article about Asian Americans

competing for acting roles describes this well. Actress Constance Wu says: “An Asian person who is competing against white people, for an audience of white people, has to train for that opportunity like it’s the Olympics. An incredibly talented Asian actor might be considered for a leading role maybe once or twice in a lifetime. That’s a highly pressurized situation.”

Then if an ethnic minority does receive an opportunity, they often recognize that they are representing their people group to the rest of the organization. A Latina speaker at a conference may not know the next time her people will have a chance for representation, so she needs to make a great impression. A basketball player like Jeremy Lin knows he is the only Asian American athlete of which the public is aware, and so it’s on him alone to represent his people. Can you imagine the way these kinds of pressures might wear on a minority?

Second, there’s a natural tendency of those in power to abuse it, and this is not unique to the United States. Consider the oppression of Armenians during their brutal genocide at the hands of the Ottoman government in 1915, or the torture and execution of ethnic minorities under the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia in the 1970s. These genocides show the extremity of what a power gap between majority and minority can do within a country.

We’re not all on equal ground. It’s not a matter of whether we like it that way or not, or what we wish it could be. It’s reality.

## THE PAST

I was horrified and disturbed by the comments sections of sports articles and the racial war of words going back and forth. I also knew most of the people writing were probably a combination of internet trolls and bored people who needed to blow off steam anonymously. But I couldn't stop reading anyway. Have you ever felt the same way?

There were several articles about a talented Latino martial artist named Cain Velasquez and the tattoo he wears across his chest that reads *Brown Pride*. In an interview, Velasquez talked about his challenges growing up not seeing many Latino male role models, and how he took pride in being Mexican and showing the world that people from his culture had strength and dignity too.<sup>28</sup>

But the commenters on these articles took the tattoo in a much different way. Numerous people wrote something of this nature: *If that tattoo said "White Pride" everyone would be up in arms about it. What a double standard! He's the real racist!*<sup>29</sup>

I can't tell you how many times I've heard this kind of argument or sentiment in the past decade. When professional football player Colin Kaepernick refused to stand for the pre-game playing of the United States national anthem, it sparked a heated debate over important topics such as racial inequality, law enforcement violence, the meaning of the national anthem, and respecting the sacrifices of the US military. Kaepernick and his protests even made the cover of *Time* magazine.<sup>30</sup>

In just about every article about these protests, numerous people responded with backlash comments against African American protestors, calling them "brainwashed racists,"<sup>31</sup> "black racists,"<sup>32</sup> and "the biggest racists of all,"<sup>33</sup> and calling Kaepernick's protest "racism in itself."<sup>34</sup>

These kinds of reactionary comments aren't unique to the NFL protests but are commonplace in most discussions on race that I read online, whether on social media or articles about current events.

In a *Los Angeles Times* article that pointed out the concern that white actors were cast to play traditionally Asian roles,<sup>35</sup> some of the responses included: *So the Japanese were racist by making all of their manga characters have Japanese names and Japanese features, and When you start getting worked up about black actors playing traditionally white roles then I'll start to care.*

In an article about the insensitivity of the Cleveland Indians baseball team's caricatured mascot (Chief Wahoo),<sup>36</sup> here's a typical response: *Can't the Indians just get over it? I don't call for the banning of "The Jeffersons" on TV because George calls Tom Willis a "honky" as a punch line.*

Perhaps these people were frustrated by the sensitivity to potential racism or discrimination of minorities, and so they lashed out in defense: "Everyone is so sensitive to minorities! If the same things were said about white people, nobody would create such a fuss." Again, these are attempts to equalize things in reaction to assertiveness from minorities.

The problem? We've forgotten about the past.

We all have too short a memory these days. When we look at the simple words of *brown pride* and *white pride*, they seem to be the same, just different colors for different races, right? But the associations are entirely different, and especially when we consider their history.

*White pride* has historically been associated with (and used by) white separatist and supremacist organizations and individuals, from the Ku Klux Klan to Neo-Nazis. These groups have been responsible for countless murders of ethnic minorities, from African Americans to Jews throughout the world. Their ideology is based in a belief that whites are superior to other races.<sup>37</sup>

*Brown pride*, on the other hand, is a motto with far less history. If you search for it online, you'll mostly find references to clothing and tattoos, or to Mexican ethnic identity. The most you'll find related to racial violence or tension is a few links to Mexican gangs in southern California. It doesn't carry anywhere close to the same historical association of violence and domination of one race on another as *white pride* does.

The truth is, these terms are not at all the same, not at all on equal ground—when we view them through the lens of history.

A more keen commenter wrote about the Cleveland Indians' mascot debate: "Vikings are a 'people' too. Except the real difference is that Vikings were the conquerors and not the conquered, the oppressed. We, collectively, treated Indians like dirt, like vermin to be hunted, relocated and/or killed. That's the difference." This comment shows an awareness of the way

history has impacted the present day. It shows an awareness of power and of the past.<sup>38</sup>

Why do we "forget" the past? Some would argue that this is not accidental, but the result of massive gaps in how we teach and learn about history. In *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, renowned history professor Ronald Takaki describes the Eurocentric bias in classrooms across the United States. In what he labels the "Master Narrative of American History," Takaki outlines the "popular but inaccurate story" that our country was settled by European immigrants and that Americans are white. He points out that reputable historians such as Oscar Handlin only studied migrations from Europe and overlooked not only the indigenous Native Americans, but those who were "uprooted" from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.<sup>39</sup>

Takaki believes that this Master Narrative reflects and reinforces the thinking that we see in today's school curricula, news and entertainment media, business practices, and government policies. However, the United States' demographics show that over one-third of its people do not trace their ancestors to Europe. To Takaki, a United States history that contains minorities is not only more inclusive, but more accurate. As minorities get in touch with their histories, they find that they too have deep roots in America's past. As they tell and retell their stories, Takaki writes that minorities "contribute to the creating of a larger memory of who we are as Americans."<sup>40</sup>

During my freshman year at Stanford University, I was required to take a series of classes called "Culture, Ideas, and

Values (CIV).” What I didn’t know is that this series used to be called “Western Culture,” and was transformed decades before by ethnic minority advocates to be more historically inclusive.<sup>41</sup> If not for that change in curriculum, I would have been exposed even more to the “Master Narrative of American History,” probably without even knowing what I was missing! How many of us can say something similar about our history classes from childhood?

Another theory for why whites point their fingers back at minorities and call them racists, is that it’s not a matter of historical memory, but of racial reactivity.

Racial reactivity is backlash that goes back and forth between majority and minority cultures, built up by years of mistrust, resentment, and anxiety. Former Attorney General Eric Holder describes this toxic environment like a “powder keg” that can be set off by a single incident.<sup>42</sup>

In her award-winning book *White Rage*, professor Carol Anderson outlines numerous historical examples of white backlash or reaction immediately following a significant advancement for black Americans. For instance, the Black Codes of Mississippi in 1865 outlined severe labor restrictions for newly emancipated slaves, which put blacks at a disadvantage to attain civil rights and economic independence. They had to sign unjust labor contracts, and were forbidden to seek better wages or working conditions with other employers. If they left their work because of intolerable working conditions, they would be jailed and auctioned off. Many historians feel the Black Codes were simply

slavery under a different name, but it was a reaction of whites to reassert control that they felt they had lost with the abolition of slavery.<sup>43</sup>

Michelle Alexander comes to a similar conclusion in her acclaimed book *The New Jim Crow*, where she tracks three systems that whites have used for social control—slavery, Jim Crow laws, and mass incarceration. She observes that following each collapse of one of these systems of control, there is a pattern of confusion, transition, and “then backlash intensifies and a new form of racialized social control begins to take hold.”<sup>44</sup>

In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant also describe this cycle of minority social advancement, and then a reaction to “reestablish” the identity and strength of the majority culture’s place in society.<sup>45</sup> For instance, after the civil rights movement in the 1960s, the state spent money on a range of social programs in the name of equality that left some whites feeling disregarded. In response, they countered with their own cries of “racial injustice” in an attempt to reestablish their place in a changing society.

In reaction to strong civil rights leadership, there inevitably arose strong white identity leadership again in the 1970s and 1980s. The more extreme groups were supremacist movements like Aryan Nations, the Silent Brotherhood, and the Ku Klux Klan—a network of commoners who protested the changes in the federal government. Within the government, leaders like Tom Metzger were backed by more moderate white voters.

One such supporter told a television interviewer, "It's nice to have someone that represents the white people. It seems like nobody cares what the white people say anymore and all the candidates seem to run around and go out to all the minorities and never even once ask the white people how they feel so I guess we're turned around: the whites are now the minority and the minorities are the majority."<sup>46</sup>

How could someone call whites the "minority" in the United States in the 1980s when whites vastly outnumbered ethnic minorities in terms of demographics? *Perhaps statements like the one above have little to do with numbers, percentages, or history—and have everything to do with racial reaction.* After all, whites calling minorities "the majority" or "racists" is the epitome of reactivity. It's the very accusation that they feel is being thrown at them.

It's hard to overstate the power of racial reaction, as it can often overpower and politicize nearly any conversation about race, turning dialogue into accusations and even name-calling. Some of the strongest forces that drive us are subconscious, and have roots from generations long before us—and it behooves us to recognize this today.

### THE PAST LIVES IN THE PRESENT

Just around the block in my neighborhood there's a restaurant called Yellow Fever. To many Asians, the term *yellow* has negative connotations because of the way it has been used throughout history to demean their looks or status in society. I must admit that, although I enjoy the food that the restaurant

serves, I find it hard to eat there because of the name. But it would be much worse if the restaurant wasn't run by Asians, but by whites.

Many people are familiar with the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*—another term that I used to hear in the playground to insult Asian immigrants who didn't speak very good English. Again, the show would be very different if it didn't feature so many Asian American actors but was filled with white people making fun of Asians instead.

Why is this the case?

Why is it that some minority groups can say certain words to one another within their own culture and community? Why is it that when majority culture people use that same word, it's so offensive?

Again we must consider the impact of the past. It's offensive when white people use the word *yellow* or the initials F.O.B., because there is history of whites demeaning Asians or communicating that they don't belong—not just through words, but through events like the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese internment camps. Because of the history of racial slurs, the person who's speaking it makes all the difference in how it's communicated and interpreted.

I remember watching an episode of the reality television show *Survivor* when an African American man named Phillip was very sensitive to an older white contestant (Steve) who used the word *crazy* to describe him. Phillip explained the history of

words like *crazy* and *boy*, which were used by white people when blacks were enslaved.

The white contestant simply could not understand and kept on insisting that he had “no prejudice” in him. Steve claimed he didn’t mean anything other than simply remarking that Phillip had been acting “crazy” like anyone else—regardless of race!

However, no amount of insisting on his intentions could change the associations that came with those words for Phillip. It was another example of how we can’t escape the impact of the past. If you’re from the majority culture and a minority reacts to a word or phrase that you say, it may have very little to do with you personally. In fact, someone might feel anger or fear—no matter how eloquently or competently you communicate—simply because of what you represent to them as a member of the majority culture.

Of course, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try our best to be sensitive. But we shouldn’t forget how much the history of majority and minority dynamics still shapes us today, in ways we feel very strongly and tangibly in our relationships and debates.

As an ethnic minority, I am not part of the white history that drove Native Americans from their lands. However, as a person living in the United States, I share in the benefits of the settlers’ actions. I have a home and enjoy privileges based on past and present acts of power of which I am not even conscious. Most importantly, as the late Native historian Jack Forbes once emphasized, I am responsible for the society I live in, which is a product of the past.<sup>47</sup>

What might it look like if the past were acknowledged more often in race-related conversations today? In the debate over professional athletes standing for the United States national anthem, it’s a completely polarized choice. Either they must stand and accept everything the anthem stands for, or sit and be perceived as rejecting one’s country. What if prior to playing the anthem, someone was to acknowledge the realities of American racial inequality and oppression, and how the song is not a symbol of perfect unity, but of a reminder of how we must continue to strive for justice for all? Can you imagine how powerful something like this could be? How might it speak to minorities, who feel the onus is entirely on them to make an impossible choice between their ethnic communities and the country they love?

In any current race-related event, there is some aspect of history that strongly impacts how people perceive and react to it. That’s because the past isn’t over and done with. It lives in the present.

### GOD’S MESSAGE: “DO NOT FORGET”

You might notice that the three categories of pain, power, and the past are interconnected. It’s hard to talk about the past for ethnic minorities, for instance, without talking about pain and power. While there are undoubtedly positive memories as well, a large portion of interracial history between ethnic minorities and the majority culture contain memories of pain—whether it’s Native Americans or Latinos being driven from their homeland or betrayed by the breaking of treaties, African



Americans working as slaves and property of their white owners, or Asian Americans always feeling like the enemy because of World War II (internment camps), the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Many of these events involved the exertion of power from the majority culture to subdue or silence those of ethnic minority communities.

Whether we focus on pain, power, or the past, they all speak directly to the minority experience. They all illustrate the emotional realities that have shaped minorities in a way that a cultural training seminar on ethnic differences and customs simply cannot. They go beyond pragmatic goals and tactics to bring light to the underlying dignity of minorities.

Unsurprisingly, these three categories are not new, but reveal the way that God sees minorities as well. We've already outlined Moses' experience seeing his fellow Israelites enslaved by the Egyptians. The book of Exodus shows us how God heard the cries of the Israelites and delivered them to freedom out of Egypt. However, for the next forty years they wandered in the wilderness, frequently facing famine and other hardships.

In many ways, the Israelites were a minority group—not in terms of their numbers, but in their realities of pain, power, and the past. That shaped God's words to this community as they prepared to enter and finally possess a homeland. He told them:

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and

are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. (Deuteronomy 8:11-18)

God's message to the Israelites can be captured in these three themes:

- *Do not forget your pain.* You endured thirst, hunger, and illness because I (God) provided for you. I didn't intend that pain for your harm, but to teach you humility and gratitude.
- *Do not forget that you were powerless.* You were enslaved and oppressed, and I used my power to deliver you. Remember that it's not your own power that creates wealth and safety, but those are in my control.

- *Finally, do not forget the past.* I have been with you from the beginning, and I haven't forgotten the promises I made to your ancestors. Don't lose sight of the big picture, of how I am with you throughout the generations and ages—I have not forgotten you.

God understood the experiences of pain, power, and the past as part of the Israelites' reality—and told them to not forget. Later, he would experience some of these realities himself when he came to earth as Jesus. After all, an order was given to kill all babies under the age of two years, and Jesus had to flee with his family to Egypt as a refugee. He grew up and began his ministry seeing his fellow Jews oppressed under Roman rule.

Jesus didn't just experience the impact of pain, power, and the past—he lived it out in his own ministry to people and the world! He saw people who suffered and were the most marginalized. He advocated for the powerless, and empowered his disciples to lead and serve. Jesus never ceased to remind his followers about history, from the words of the prophets to the ancient promises of God.

As we seek to understand the minority experience in the stories that follow, let's remember that we are not the first to stumble upon these truths and realities—often we need only unlock what is already in the pages of biblical history. Let us continue to draw from the wisdom of the ages, so that we might see with new eyes!



## Chapter Three

# DOMESTICATION

## Understanding Power

*Can I really be myself?*

I'll never forget the feeling of being stared at.

I was at a restaurant in a small town where I hadn't seen any other Asian Americans. My two white friends and I were lining up, waiting to be seated, and I could feel the silent weight of a hundred sets of eyes on me.

It's a very strange phenomenon. There are no words spoken, and *you're not doing anything besides being yourself*—but you know that people are looking at you differently.

My two friends had no idea it was happening, so I had to explain it to them later. I said, "Sometimes I feel like I'm at an exhibition or something . . . like I'm some rare specimen that nobody's seen before."

As a minority, this powerful, silent weight of eyes on the back of our heads puts incredible pressure on us. We desperately want and need to find a way to fit in.