Always Ethnic, Never "American": Reading 1 Peter through the Lens of the "Perpetual Foreigner" Stereotype[1]

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Introduction

The cultural stereotype of the perpetual foreigner has been persistently imposed upon ethnic minorities in the United States, particularly Asian Americans.[2] The stereotype interrogates the identity of those who understand themselves to be as American as their European American counterparts but who are perceived by both white and black Americans to be less American. Research in social dominance theory suggests that simply being a member of an ethnic minority can lead individuals to experience a decreased sense of belonging to the nation and mainstream American culture.[3] Furthermore, a recent psychological study suggests that when American ethnic minorities are frequently perceived as foreigners and denied their in-group status, they may experience a greater sense of "cultural homelessness" and conflict about their national identity (Huynh, Devos, and Smalarz 2011, 157). Such findings have implications for understanding the ways in which ethnic minority groups, particularly Asian Americans, participate in American civic society and experience a sense of perpetual foreignness. They also ironically suggest the potential success of the strategy the author of 1 Peter offers his beleaguered addressees to help them cope with the social hostility and alienation resulting from their conversion and engage with nonbelievers, while disengaging from dominant cultural values and way of life unbefitting the people of God.

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[2] The perpetual foreigner stereotype also applies to Latinxs, but for the purposes of this chapter I will focus on how it applies to Asian Americans. It should also be noted that the umbrella term "Asian American" does not suggest that Asian Americans are a monolithic, homogenous group.

[3] See, for example, Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto 1999.

The theme cultural homelessness runs throughout the letter of 1 Peter. In his seminal book, *A Home for the Homeless*, John Elliott argues that the addressees of 1 Peter face tensions between their homelessness in society and "at-home-ness" in the household of God (1981; see also Elliott 2007, 14). While I disagree with Elliott that the letter's recipients are literally homeless, I strongly agree with him that the Petrine author expresses concern for their social estrangement from the dominant culture and promotes their radical social cohesion as people of God. I argue that the author of 1 Peter promotes such social cohesion by describing what it means to be Christian using ethnic language or what Denise Buell calls "ethnic reasoning" (2005; 2007). By constructing Christian identity as an "essentially Jewish form of ethnic identity" for his predominantly Gentile audience (Horrell 2013, 160–61, 145),[4] the author seeks to imbue them with a stronger sense of in-group identity and solidarity, while weakening their sense of belonging to the values of the dominant culture and the values of their family and associations. Thus the author of 1 Peter detaches Christian identity from those Greco-Roman values and social associations at odds with Christian values in order to help his addressees disidentify with their past and reidentify as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (2:9).

My purpose in this chapter is threefold. First, I will explore research that describes the psychological impact of the perpetual foreigner stereotype on Asian Americans. Secondly, I will demonstrate that the author of 1 Peter's strategy to describe Christian identity in ethnic terms promotes, in effect, the idea that Christians are perpetual foreigners in mainstream society. Lastly, I will consider how this strategy may be problematic when applied to Asian American Christians, who already experience the perpetual foreigner stereotype by virtue of their ethnic identities.

Always ethnic

After my first stint as an adjunct professor some years ago, I received a number of positive student evaluations. Despite this fact, one particular negative review really stung and stunned me. The student had complained, "Instructor doesn't know how to speak English." I reread that statement a few times to make sure I was seeing correctly. *What? Really?* I was born and raised in the United States, and English is my first language. The only explanation for this student's comment was that she[5] saw me as a foreigner. I could have accepted this student's critique of my teaching style, methods, or content. I could have accepted that she just did not like me for whatever reason. But for a student to say without qualification that I do not know how to speak English is implicitly to say that because I am not white, I cannot speak English properly. It is to say that she views English language proficiency or fluency as a marker of whiteness

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[4]   With a significant number of Jews in Asia Minor, the presence of Jewish converts in these Christians communities is plausible and likely. However, it is important to distinguish between the author of 1 Peter's imagined audience and his actual audience, as the author envisions and writes to his readers as if they are Gentiles (Holloway 2009, 19).

[5]   Because of the anonymous nature of instructor evaluations, I have arbitrarily chosen to refer to this individual as a female.

(Wan 2012, 177). Therefore, even though I possess the English fluency of a native speaker with a Midwestern-fused-Californian accent, in this student's eyes, I could not possess English in the way that she could as a white person. This student felt entitled to assess my command of English because she understood English as her property, not mine. She judged my English proficiency through the lens of white supremacy.

The lens of white supremacy, which is a form of social dominance, has many aspects. Sze-kar Wan paraphrases legal scholar Cheryl Harris in the following way:

> Whiteness is a social and legal construct that depends not on any racial or ethnic category, or on any "inhering unifying characteristic"—not accent, not social class, not origins, and most definitely not phenotypes like skin color—but on what "whites" are not. Exclusion of "nonwhites" is as much a part of affirming who "whites" are as discovering what "whites" have in common. (2012, 176; Harris 1993, 1736)

The concept of whiteness, as it emerged in the courts, was based on white supremacy rather than mere difference, as the possessors of whiteness were granted exclusionary rights to determine who was or was not white enough to enjoy the privileges afforded to those who qualified as being white (Harris 1993, 1736–37). European immigrants, such as Italians, Greeks, and Jews, who were once labeled and marginalized as "ethnic," were able to collapse/merge ethnically into "whiteness" when viewed in contrast to and in the presence of blacks, Asians, and Native Americans (Wan 2012, 179). Their children over time could drop their ethnic labels or hyphens and melt into the broad and indistinguishable category of "white" as a way to distinguish and distance themselves from ethnic "others" (Zhou 2009, 229).

From the time that Chinese immigrants arrived on US soil in the mid-nineteenth century, Asian Americans were categorized as "Oriental" and were demonized as exotic, non-American, and threatening to white labor and American society (Yu 2002, 7).[6] Since the 1960s, however, a new narrative about Asian Americans arose in stark contrast to the problematic Oriental. The hailing and sanctifying of Asian immigrants as the "model minority" recast Asians from being viewed as a racial "problem" to being valorized as a racial "solution" (7). This shift in social thought, however, still depended on exoticizing Asian Americans as not American and as exceptions to the norm. The model minority narrative is misleading because it conceives of Asian Americans as a group that has managed to achieve economic, political, and cultural success not by addressing inequalities, fighting for rights, or requiring government aid, but by their sheer reliance on hard work and determination (Bascara 2006, 1, 4). Despite America's long history of racism, this misleading myth asserts that social inequities can be overcome with minimal systemic effort or require little change on the part of the state (4). It claims that Asian Americans can overcome the racism and systemic inequality that black Americans have historically fought against by silently and relentlessly

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[6] Although the imprecise term "Oriental" is not inherently negative, as it literally means "Eastern," it has become loaded with cultural baggage, connoting foreignness to the West and exotic difference from Western norms.

pursuing the American dream. It protects white privilege by pitting Asian Americans against blacks, often using Asian Americans as a proxy for white discriminatory and racist agendas.[7]

Never American

Research in the field of social psychology demonstrates that there is an overwhelming propensity for whites and ethnic minorities living in the United States to equate mainstream American culture with being white (Devos and Banaji 2005).[8] By cultural default, white Americans are more likely to be thought of as "prototypical or representative of the category *American*" than members of other ethnic groups (464). Furthermore, white racial identity and male gender are treated as cultural expectations and as the standard by which incongruence or congruence is judged (464). But what does it mean to be *American* and to what degree are Asian Americans conceived as American?

According to a study in which white Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans agreed on the relative importance of egalitarianism/equality, patriotism, and native status to define what it means to be American, researchers found that

> white Americans always perceive themselves as more American than the comparison. African Americans equate themselves to White Americans and see themselves as more American than Asian Americans. Asian Americans perceive themselves as less American than the dominant groups and as American as African Americans. (460)

Note that all three groups perceived Asian Americans to be *less* American than white Americans—even Asian Americans themselves!

Furthermore, among white Americans and Asian Americans, the category *American* automatically elicited positive feelings and a sense of belonging relative to the category *Foreign* (460). Even white American participants who do not express an implicit pro-white attitude indicate a propensity to link whites to American. Asian American participants who display a significant implicit preference for their ethnic group (i.e., in-group favoritism) still equate being white to being American (461–62). In other words, white Americans see an inextricable link between their ethnic and American identities, whereas Asian Americans do not. Asian Americans cannot rely on their ethnicity to achieve a national identity. This disassociation between measures of ethnic-national identity requires careful interpretation.

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7 While the American racial landscape is certainly more diverse than white, Asian American, and black, the model minority narrative reflects how the praise of Asian American cultural values "has always worked in tandem with explicit constructions of [b]lacks as culturally deficient" (Kim 1999).

8 This appears to also be the case for white European persons. In studies conducted by Devos and Ma (2008), test subjects were more likely to conceive of famous white European persons as more American than famous Asian American persons.

Perpetually foreign

What is the psychological and political impact on Asian Americans who are perceived across the board by ethnic groups (African Americans and Asian Americans) and the dominant group (white Americans) as being less American and hence more foreign? In other words, what are the implications of the American = white association and Asian Americans = less American association on the inclusion or exclusion of Asian Americans from the national identity?

The explicit and implicit propensities to equate American identity with whiteness manifest themselves in covert and subtle forms of racial microaggressions, such as questioning a person's birth origins, or complimenting his/her English language proficiency (Huynh, Devos, and Smalarz 2011, 134). "No, where do you really come from?" Or, "Your English is so good—you barely have any accent!" These forms of racial microaggressions disguise racism in seemingly benign and well-meaning behaviors and comments but convey the idea that Asian Americans are less American and more foreign than their white European American counterparts.[9] These microaggressions, in other words, amount to a kind of identity denial.

The perpetual foreigner stereotype is a racial microaggression that has strong impact on the psychological adjustment of ethnic minorities, including their mental health (depression) and well-being (hope and life satisfaction) (154).[10] To various degrees, Asian Americans, Latinxs, and African Americans report a significantly higher awareness of the perpetual foreigner stereotype toward them than do European Americans.[11] It is this awareness of the perpetual foreigner stereotype that contributes to ethnic minorities seeing their own ethnic and national identities as dissimilar and even incompatible, resulting in these individuals experiencing "significantly more tension in their efforts to form a unified and integrated identity" (150, 155). This conflicted social identity resulting from the perceived exclusion has potential impact on civic participation among Asian Americans. It may lead them to disidentify with mainstream American culture because they feel as they will never truly feel at home in America (156–57). Are there potential benefits and liabilities to being seen as perpetually foreign?

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[9] See Sue et al. 2007a; Sue et al. 2007b.
[10] Asian Americans may find it more culturally acceptable to attribute depressive symptoms to physical problems, hence the difficulty in accurately quantifying depression among Asian Americans (Huynh, Devos, and Smalarz 2011, 138–39).
[11] It should be noted that the perpetual foreigner seems to operate differently for Latinxs and Asian Americans. With American involvement in wars in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam and the xenophobic, psycho-cultural fear of colored people from the East, known as the Yellow Peril, American history is fraught with conceptions of Asians/Asian Americans as foreign and dangerous enemies. In the recent immigration debate, Latinxs are often labeled as illegal aliens, rather than as foreigners, and have a different history in the United States, as some Latinxs are racially white or have ancestors who lived in land before nation's founding (see Huynh, Devos, and Smalarz 2011, 156). African Americans also report feeling excluded from the national identity and marginalized from mainstream American culture. While they are labeled with many stereotypes, they are less likely to be perceived as foreigners (in the common sense of the term) and more likely to be perceived as atypical Americans (148, 154).

Christian identity as an ethnic identity in 1 Peter

Cultural homelessness is a major theme in the letter of 1 Peter. In 1 Pet. 1:1, the author both describes and prescribes his readers' exceptional relationship with God and estranged relationship with society when addressing his letter "to the elect who are living as foreigners in the diaspora."[12] First Peter addresses Christians as "elect" (*eklektoi*)[13] in the sense that they are chosen by God to live a life set apart for God among "the races, the nations, and the people" (*ta genē, ta ethnē, hoi laoi*), just as God selected and gathered Israel of old from among all the races, nations, and people of the earth.[14]

John Elliott draws attention to the theme of "homelessness" in the letter by arguing that the author of 1 Peter's use of *paroikoi* and *parepidēmoi* ("resident aliens and foreigners") in 2:11 refers to their sociopolitical status prior to conversion (Elliott 1981, 21–58; 2011, 476–483). The Petrine author thus offers already "homeless" or "foreign" people a (new) "home." Although Elliott's thesis fits very well with the scenario for Asian Americans, who are perpetually made to feel foreign,[15] I find Elliott's concrete sociopolitical interpretation of *paroikoi* and *parepidēmoi* unconvincing. The phrase does not refer to the actual social condition of 1 Peter's addressees.[16] Rather, it refers to the way in which the author desires them to understand themselves vis-à-vis the prevailing Gentile values and way of life. Being "built into a spiritual house" and constituting the "household of God" (2:5; 4:17), believers are to experience "at-home-ness" among fellow believers and no longer feel at home among the Gentiles.

When taken metaphorically and in relation to "elect," the phrase "foreigners in the dispersion" in 1:1 offers a glimpse of the social alienation and marginalization experienced by the letter's recipients as a result of their divinely chosen status. While the language used to describe them in 1:1, 17, and 2:11 is figurative, their social conflict is not. Later in the letter, it becomes more apparent that they are indeed beleaguered and beset by social hostility, conflict, slander, and persecution from their non-Christian neighbors, governors, masters, husbands, and so on (e.g., 1:6-7; 2:12, 14–15, 18–20; 3:13, 16–17; 4:1, 4, 12–16). Thus the language of election and living as foreigners in the diaspora serves sociological purposes.[17] Through the idea that Christians are perpetual foreigners in a land in which they are no longer to feel at home, the author seeks to equip believers with a theological and emotional narrative to interpret their suffering and better endure it.

Christians have become dislocated from the world and from their former way of living not only through election, but also because they have been "born anew to a

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12   Translations of 1 Peter are mine unless otherwise noted.
13   See 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:9; cf. 2:4, 6.
14   See 1 Pet. 2:9. Most commentators agree that the language in 1 Pet. 2:9 is drawn from Exod. 19:6 and Isa 43:20-21.
15   *Contra* Russell G. Moy, who agrees with Elliott's thesis that *paroikoi* in 1 Peter refers to literal foreigners and immigrants, who comprised a separate class of people. Moy sees close parallels between the social location and experiences of marginalization of the resident aliens addressed in the letter and nineteenth century Chinese Protestants in San Francisco (Moy 2002).
16   For a detailed challenge to Elliott's seminal proposal and an alternative hypothesis for the socio-economic status of Peter's addressees, see Horrell 2013.
17   For a recent study on the diaspora thinking at work in 1 Peter, see Smith 2016.

living hope" (1:3; 23). The concept of new birth serves as the point of departure for the way in which Christians are to understand their former existence. The very idea that Christians have a new identity challenges them to intensify the process of their identification with Christ and disidentification with their past.[18] Those born anew must continue to struggle against their former lusts, values, and behaviors. The author pleads in 2:11, "Beloved, I exhort [you], as resident aliens and foreigners, to disengage from the desires of the surrounding culture, which wage war against [your] life." The fact that this admonition comes immediately after the author has spelled out in rich ethnic language who his readers *are* (2:9-10), reveals that who they are *no longer* continues to trouble them in the present. The letter's addressees continue to face the persistent temptation and social pressure to succumb to the desires of the surrounding culture. The idea of being "resident aliens and foreigners" helps believers maintain a critical distance between their former and present values and behaviors.

Because there are no physical markers to clearly differentiate or set apart his primarily Gentile Christian audience from the pagan people they once were to the people of God they are now (2:10), the author of 1 Peter portrays Christian identity in ethnic identity language to promote a stronger sense of peoplehood and in-group solidarity. When he ascribes his beleaguered addressees with the community- and ethnic identity-forging titles and dignities of Israel in 2:9 drawn from Jewish Scriptures, he does not do so in order to replace Israel as the "people of God" (2:10) or transpose the status and identity of Israel unto the church (Richardson 1969, 172). Rather, as David Horrell explains, the author of 1 Peter uses the language of Jewish ethnic and religious self-identity in order to "describe and construct 'Christian' identity" as a form of ethnic identity "with religio-cultural practices at its heart" (2013, 161). The author uses ethnic reasoning in his construction of Christian identity in order to provide a new way for his Gentile Christian addressees to understand themselves in relation to God the Father and to one another as a holy people who, because of divine election and new birth, share the same blood line—that of Jesus Christ's (1:19-20). In doing so, he seeks to build greater internal cohesion among the churches throughout Asia Minor and imbue them with confidence by giving them a separate system of honor by which they can better endure hostility and persecution.

In both 2:12 and 4:3, the author contrasts the exceptional and holy people of God with those whom he refers to in one sweeping, opposing category, "the Gentiles" (*ta ethnē*), that is, the people *not* of God. The dichotomy between the special people of God and the rest does more than characterize, stereotype, or demonize the "other." This contrast functions, first and foremost, to distinguish his readers' past as nonbelievers from their present as believers (1:3–2:8). The author's characterization of the "other" is also a characterization of the "self," as he depicts his addressees as those who continue to struggle to pattern themselves after Christ and to understand themselves as people who have been born anew.

Therefore, the author of 1 Peter in effect encourages his addressees to perceive themselves as perpetual foreigners. For Christians who feel very much at home in the dominant culture prior to their conversion, the idea that they are set apart as a

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[18]   For the application of the coping strategy of psychological "disidentification" to the study of 1 Peter, see Holloway 2009.

metaphorically ethnic people as a result of their conversion provides a strategy to cope with the temptation to revert back to the values of the dominant culture. By conveying Christian identity as an ethnic identity, the author of 1 Peter does not do away with his addressee's sense of identity conflict between who they are and who they are no longer. Rather, his approach strengthens the cohesiveness of their religious identity by weakening their sense of belonging to mainstream pagan society because they are no longer to think of themselves as typical Gentiles but as the people of God now differentiated from the Gentiles. The author of 1 Peter thus detaches Christian identity from the social values that had earlier put them at odds with their new life in Christ by giving them a sense of a communal ethnic identity that has its own distinctive culture.[19]

Conclusion

According to the psychological research explored earlier in this chapter, it is the awareness among Asian Americans that they are perceived and treated as perpetual foreigners that contributes to them seeing their own ethnic and national identities as dissimilar and even incompatible. This dissonance often results in the increased struggle to form a unified and integrated identity. By virtue of having two contrasting and often conflicting identities, Asian Americans are forced to maintain a more complex social identity. This complex social identity may lead to depressive symptoms, a decreased sense of hope and life satisfaction, and a lower level of civic participation relative to white Americans.

The addressees in 1 Peter must also maintain contrasting and often conflicting identities as former Gentiles who are to see themselves as entirely new people who belong to a new ethnic group with a new culture. However, unlike Asian Americans who struggle to belong to the dominant culture because they are perceived as perpetual foreigners, the Christians in 1 Peter face social hostility and persecution because they seek and are encouraged to disassociate and disengage from the values and behaviors of the dominant society and conceive of themselves as temporary foreigners. The author of 1 Peter is at pains to help his addressees see themselves as culturally homeless and socially different, so that they live as people born anew to a living, eschatological, and heavenly hope—while remaining in Kansas, so to speak. How then can the letter of 1 Peter offer any sort of exhortation or consolation to Asian American Christians, who wish to shed the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner and be seen as a vital and integral part of the national identity while maintaining their ethnic identities?

The impact of the perpetual foreigner stereotype ironically provides evidence for the potential effectiveness of the Petrine author's strategy for employing ethnicity as a theological category in order to construct an ethnic identity for his addressees. However, contemporary experiences of Asian Americans also problematize a straightforward application of 1 Peter for constructing a theopolitical identity.[20] The

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19   This, I should note, is the subject of my dissertation, "Who You are No Longer: Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter" (Ok 2018).

20   It must be said that the Roman Empire was not a participatory democracy, and the addressees living throughout the Anatolian Peninsula (Asia Minor) were not necessarily Roman citizens.

Petrine author's strategy of constructing an ethnic identity for his addressees helps them to disidentify from their former identity as a people "not of God" and cohere to one another according to their new identity as the "people of God" (2:10). When read in light of recent studies on the psychological and civic impact of the perpetual foreigner stereotype on ethnic minorities, the author of 1 Peter levels a powerful critique at white American evangelical Christians who conflate religious, ethnic, and national identity because of their dominant racial and religious place in society. Yet, for Asian American Christians who desire to shed the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner, be perceived by others as being at home in and belonging to America, and also have a critical stance toward dominant American culture, the strategy employed by letter's author is more problematic.

The author of 1 Peter's strategy is one that must be appropriated with a double vision for Christian Asian Americans. The fact that others already perceive them as literal foreigners may contribute to their difficulties with psychological adjustment and withdrawal from active political and civic engagement.[21] The idea of living as perpetual foreigners in 1 Peter functions as a self-designation to build a stronger sense of in-group identity and encourage appropriate interaction with nonbelievers. However the image of the perpetual foreigner functions for Asian Americans as a stereotype negatively imposed upon them. This stereotype, coupled with the author's theological language of being "resident aliens and foreigners" (2:11) may further marginalize Asian Americans and encourage a position of civic and political withdrawal, while at the same time strengthening their sense of ethnic-religious group identity. What I am ultimately suggesting is a line of inquiry about whether the language of ethnicity in 1 Peter hinders political and/or civic engagement among Asian American Christians. In that vein, more ethnographic and sociological study is required.

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[21] Asian Americans have generally displayed lower rates of political participation, especially when compared to whites and blacks. See Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004.

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