

'At least you're not black': Asian Americans in U.S. race relations.

by Elaine H. Kim

The position occupied by Asian Americans in US race relations is in-between the white Americans and Latinos and African Americans. Asian Americans seem to have been designated to the in-between position because they have higher educational attainment and incomes and have different attitudes toward the American way of life than the two other races. Because of this position, Asian Americans have the potential of shaping the American social, political and cultural environment.

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It is often said that by the year 2015, people of color will constitute a majority of Californians. Those fearful of this future have been vociferously supporting a variety of measures and policies aimed at dismantling affirmative action programs and restricting services for racial minorities and immigrants of color, based on the idea that paying any attention to race is racist and perpetuates racism. Asian Americans are frequently positioned as the racial minority that proves that we have attained a color-blind society, since they have higher educational attainment and incomes than Latinos and African Americans, who have presumably not succeeded as well because programs like affirmative action and bilingual education have made them lazy.

In many ways, Asian Americans are positioned on the in-between - on the cusp, at the interstice, in the buffer zone - of Asia and America, between black and white, between old-timer and newcomer, between mainstreamed and marginalized. Yet the in-between is a precarious and dangerous position to occupy if we are not fully cognizant of where we are and what our position means in the larger picture. Armed with that cognizance, we have the potential to participate creatively and courageously in the shaping of the social, political, and cultural environment.(1)

Current Asian American history is not marked by the blatantly discriminatory laws of the past, which prevented them from immigrating, becoming naturalized citizens, marrying, owning land, and testifying against white Americans in court. However, phobic attitudes and discriminatory policies persist. As Richard Fung has observed, old racist stereotypes of Asian inscrutability, unfair competition, cultural unassimilability, and sexual perversity are displaced onto every new group of Asian immigrants and in every new crisis: the most recently arrived refugees of U.S. wars in Southeast Asia find themselves being called "Chinks" and "Japs" as they step into a historical situation they had no part in making (Fung, 1998: 2). In recent years, resentment and hatred have become ever more visible against Asians and Latinos, who are still thought by many to be inferior, alien, and all alike.(2) As in the past, Asian Americans today are still seen as metonyms for Asia and are forcibly distanced from

U.S. national culture, which defines its citizenry - or who can be American - as well as which histories and experience are to be remembered and which ones forgotten.

I am old enough to have experienced various kinds of pre-Civil Rights Movement racial bigotry. Growing up in Maryland in the 1950s, I was continually taunted and subjected to racial gestures and epithets. Sometimes people tried to spit on me. Classmates' mothers sometimes scolded them for befriending me. People told my parents, my brother, or me to go back to our country. People continually joked about how "all Orientals look alike." Asians were assumed to be foreign, since "Asian" and "American" were popularly thought to be mutually exclusive. Even my graduate seminar professor at Columbia University complimented me on my ability to speak English at the end of a four-month semester.

A pair of comments that white people often made remains stubbornly in my memory: "At least you are not black," or "You should be grateful that you are not black." These comments, I think, convey the particular kind of racism Asian Americans should recognize and challenge. While being encouraged to feel superior to African Americans, Asian Americans are being positioned in a racial hierarchy meant to perpetuate white privilege at the expense of both Asian and African Americans.

What seems to infuriate some people the most is the thought of an ungrateful Asian American siding with other people of color, presumably against whites. They want to hold onto their notion of Asian Americans as docile honorary white people whose very existence proves that other people of color are lazy and stupid and that racism does not exist in U.S. society. If you love African Americans so much, why don't you go back to Asia? According to this logic, Asian American affinities with African Americans and acknowledgment of the history of enslavement, segregation, and discrimination equal negation of "America," which can only be coded as "white."

The mainstream media have a stake in discouraging links among marginalized individuals and groups. Instead, they are invested in the maintenance of certain kinds of white supremacy. Last year, the Ethnic Studies Department at

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Berkeley co-sponsored a conference on whiteness called "The Making and Un-making of Whiteness." The program "20/20" was eager to cover the event until they learned that it would not focus on white backlash or the KKK, but on the racialization of whiteness.

We all recall how during the Los Angeles uprisings, the news media were fond of emphasizing the hostilities between Korean and African Americans and how few wanted to highlight various goodwill efforts between these communities. All around us are examples of the mainstream media's investment in preserving the centrality of the white male. Films about romance between Asian women and white men - such as *Come See the Paradise*, *Year of the Dragon*, and *Heaven and Earth*, like the stories of African American caretakers of color in the films *Grand Canyon*, *Ghost*, and *Driving Miss Daisy* - can be read as attempts to grapple with fear of increasing immigration and racial diversity, fear of growth of the U.S. feminist movement, and fear of the decline of U.S. social, political, and economic global influence, which is invariably cast as white and male. Those with the power to tell and sell the stories can only trivialize the experiences of the people of color in them, since their main concern is reassertion of the centrality of whites, especially white males, who can go everywhere - to Chinatown, to Japanese American internment camps, back and forth to Vietnam - while people of color, especially females, are reduced to subordinate manageability.

Asian Americans share with African Americans and other Americans of color a long, complex, and little-discussed relationship. This reminds me a little of the relationships between Korean provinces and villages, linked by roads built by the Japanese colonizers not to each other but to the sea, from which Korean natural resources were taken and into which Japanese manufactured goods are pumped. The political, economic, and cultural histories of Mexico and the Philippines have much to share, but the discussion, instead of being direct, is siphoned through the U.S. and Spain. Likewise, there are many parallels between Asian Indian and Korean American histories rendered invisible by British, Japanese, and American narratives. Unlike the assimilationist attempt to study Japanese-Anglo interracial marriages in recent decades, a long history of Chinese-Native American, Filipino-Native American, Filipino-Mexican, Sikh-Mexican, Chinese-African American, and indeed Japanese-Filipino and Chinese-Korean interracial marriage was simply swept aside and ignored, so that we know about it mostly from our own experiences or from stories the old-timers tell us.

Indeed, one of the issues we need to address in Ethnic Studies at Berkeley is how to move away from always speaking to the dominant and rarely speaking to each

other. Historically, for example, much of our teaching and research has emerged from the impulse to educate ourselves and challenge exploitation in our communities by accusing, protesting to, trying to convince, and even beseeching the dominant about our histories, needs, and interests. This approach might have made sense when students of color were few. We have not addressed each other enough. We have only lately begun to think systematically about what it means to teach, for example, about Native American literature to a group of mostly Chicano, Latino, and Asian American students.

To forge our links in the face of these forces, we need to unearth the buried history of coalition work and activism in the past. For instance, Afro-Asian friendship has hidden roots in our society. No one talks much about how people of the African American community stood, practically alone and certainly at no direct gain to themselves, against the abrogation of Japanese Americans' civil rights during World War II. Or how three-quarters of a century ago the mostly black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters issued a public statement of solidarity with Filipino workers who, they said, "have been used against the unionization of Pullman porters just as Negroes have been used against the unionization of white workers" (Okimoto, 1994: 54).

Asian Americans have a proud if subterranean legacy of fighting economic and social injustice. Since the 19th century, Chinese Americans fought every piece of discriminatory legislation, sometimes all the way to the Supreme Court. Indeed, Chinese and African American court cases against segregation inspired and propelled each other forward over the decades. The spectacular pan-ethnic labor organizing activities between Japanese and Filipinos in Hawaii at the turn of the century and the cross-racial labor organizing between Japanese and Mexicans in California in the first decades of this century and then between Filipinos and Mexicans from the 1960s have provided a legacy for Asian American labor organizing taking place in various parts of the country today. Examples are the multiracial San Francisco hotel maids' strike in the early 1980s and the pan-Asian American Jessica McClintock boycott of the 1990s that included many Korean American participants and was strongly supported by Latina garment workers. The movement beyond narrow nationalism was clearly seen several years ago in Los Angeles, when Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA) organizers fought against the South Korea-based corporation that acquired the Radisson Plaza Hotel and planned to replace unionized Latino workers with cheaper, nonunionized immigrant workers.

Besides divesting ourselves of the old dominant versus marginal binary thinking, we must also try to resist the temptation to see ourselves and our relationships with

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each other through rose-colored glasses. We must reach far beyond simple-minded celebrations of identity and resist the seductive claims of victimhood. We must scrutinize our warts. We need to be critical and self-critical. If building concrete coalitions with other communities of color is at the top of the agenda for Asian Americans right now, we need to look closely at how this crucially important work is made difficult by a number of factors.

First, U.S. immigration policies historically favored middle-class Asian immigrants: merchants and foreign students, not laborers before 1965, and urban professionals until the 1980s. Proportionally, the middle class is better represented among Asian Americans, including South Asians and Filipinos, than is the case with other groups of color, which reinforces the primacy of middle-class concerns that always predominate anyway because poor and working-class people have less access to power. Moreover, U.S. immigration policies favor those who oppose socialism and communism, and many immigrants and refugees from Korea and other parts of Asia have been staunchly anticommunist and, thus, both lacking in sympathy for the poor and ripe for alignment with conservative Republicans who traditionally opposed many of the programs supported by other people of color in the U.S.

A second and related point is that many recent Asian immigrants are from countries colonized by the U.S. and other Western nations. Although anti-U.S. sentiment is growing all over Asia, the "colonial mentality" is a frequent outcome of colonization, and many immigrants are held back from questioning injustices by ingrained old notions about the predominance and superiority of everything "American," which for many of them is coded as "white." Today, burgeoning Korean nationalism and anti-U.S. sentiments notwithstanding, Western cultural influences can be seen everywhere in South Korea. A good friend tells me how the newspapers and TV talk shows there recently carried programs on "postmodernism." When she went to a small village video store to find a video to rent, the owner advised her to rent Terminator II because it was very "postmodern."

On the other hand, Asian American dissident and subversive tendencies have often found expression in Asian cultural nationalisms. In the earliest days of the Asian American movement, the people I knew clamored to study the history and literature of her or his country of origin. Yet Asian American interests and issues were most often cast aside as they were squeezed between U.S. racism and homeland politics. Any Japanese Americans who hoped that Japan would help them when they were interned during World War II were bound to be disappointed; Japan was interested in using them as

pawns in a propaganda campaign against the U.S. or as bargaining chips for Japanese prisoners of war. Chinese Americans were used by Taiwan in its effort to discredit China to the U.S. During almost two decades of military dictatorships, the Korean CIA routinely spied on Korean Americans and tried to enlist them in their effort to influence the U.S. Congress. Filipino Americans were not exempt from the long arm of the Marcos government and its blacklist. Today, a huge amount of Vietnamese American attention has been focused on the dream of "taking back" Vietnam from the Communists. During the past 15 years, many Vietnamese Americans have been murdered in cold blood for making what were regarded as leftist statements. Le Ly Hayslip, author of the book on which Heaven and Earth was based, is hounded everywhere she goes by Vietnamese Americans for sending medical supplies to unified Vietnam. Historically, Asian American involvement in homeland politics, for whatever its effects on the fate of the homeland, has for the most part distracted Asian American attention from U.S. issues, including coalition work with other people of color against racism and social injustice in this country. Perhaps, too, the focus on homeland politics helped perpetuate traditional homeland class and gender hierarchies, often making it difficult for working-class Asian Americans and Asian American women to participate fully in community politics.

Another thing that has dramatically separated Asian Americans from other people of color has been in terms of attitudes toward what we call "America." We know that for many Native Americans, America means stolen land. For many Chicanos, it means occupied territory conquered and taken from Mexico 150 years ago. For many African Americans, it means the country built with slave labor brought here by force. For a large number of Asian Americans, especially of the recent immigrant generation that escaped from war, political upheaval, colonization, and barriers to social and economic mobility in the homeland, America has meant "promised land" or "dream country."

Having immigrated or come as refugees from colonized countries, often escaping from socialist and communist governments, many Asian Americans still feel like guests in the house or a daughter-in-law in her mother-in-law's house. Like a guest or a new bride living with her mother-in-law, she needs to be grateful, obedient, and uncomplaining. She needs to be mindful of the rules and of her host's generosity, without which where would she be?

Coalition work, not only with Anglo groups, but also most especially with other communities of color requires common issues of concern, whether these be issues of workers' rights, equality before the law, or educational

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opportunity, rather than too vaguely general an issue, like "oppression." Of course, work around a narrow problem must emerge from a collective vision and ideological basis. Even so, specific issues can be key sites of conflict for different groups at different points in time; coalition work among people of color is made even more difficult because alliances built around very specific issues are necessarily shifting and temporary.

At times, issues that unite Asian Americans separate us from other people of color. That the Los Angeles Black-Korean Alliance folded after the uprisings can be understood in light of the fact that Korean shop owners needed it much more than people from the African American community did. Korean American concerns have just not been particularly high on a long list of urgent priorities for black and brown people working on economic survival or human rights issues.

In a society held together by hierarchical arrangements of power and the privileging of competitive individualism, it is difficult for groups of color to deal with each other on an equal basis, without falling into competition, ranking, and scrambling around hierarchies of oppression. This is all despite the indisputable fact that people of color in the U.S. wear at different moments and often at the same moment the face of both victim and victimizer.

Even among Asian Americans, hierarchies operate. When Asian Americans came to fuller voice with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, that voice, which has been the loudest ever since, was male, English-speaking, Chinese or Japanese, and heterosexual. Given this picture, for Asian Americans to work together across nationalities, languages, generations, genders, and sometimes social classes is in itself almost a miracle. A few years ago, when the question arose of whether we were experiencing cultural diversity or racial "balkanization" at Berkeley, I remember thinking that experiences of cultural diversity were being defined exclusively from the standpoint of the dominant culture. For many students of color who come from communities where their group is very much in the minority and who have been overwhelmed with growing up brown, yellow, red, or black in a culture defined by whiteness, being with other students of color is experiencing cultural diversity. Moreover, even though all Asians may look alike to others, it is quite a step for some Korean Americans to make friends with Filipino Americans or for some Vietnamese Americans to take classes with Bangladeshi American students. Perhaps we need to redefine what we mean by "coalition."

Racial meaning extends into social relations and social practices. What, indeed, is a person of color? On some California college campuses, Asian Americans are

regarded by some as "inauthentic people of color." But different people of color experience racism and racialization differently. The income gap between Asian and white men is nowhere near as large as between Latino or black men and white men - unless the relationship between schooling and income is taken into account. An Asian American man must have much more education than a white man with comparable income must. Racism against Asian Americans takes other unique forms: resentment and fear of a yellow peril takeover by unassimilable foreigners who excel at copying but cannot originate, or as robotic automatons and nerdy buffoons with no human or animal feelings. Asian American men have often pointed to the feminization of Asian Americans, who, whether male or female, gay or straight, are only good for the "bottom" position.

Since their information sources are primarily from the dominant culture, people of color are almost as susceptible to racist stereotyping as anyone else. Thus, it should not be surprising that what Cornel West has called xenophobia is so prevalent among African Americans and that many Asian Americans stereotype African Americans as unreliable or crime-prone, that many Latinos can routinely call an Asian of whatever background chino, or that many Korean immigrants still refer to all Latinos as "Mexican."

Some Asian American activists feel that other people of color do not respect and trust Asians in coalition work and that other people of color have a difficult time accepting the idea of Asian American leadership. Korean American members of the Oakland East Bay African Asian Roundtable have conjectured that this may be because they accept the Fu Manchu notion of Asians as untrustworthy aliens. I recall the National Conference poll, according to which more than four blacks and Latinos in 10 and 27% of whites agreed with the stereotype of Asian Americans as "unscrupulous, crafty, and devious in business" (San Francisco Chronicle, March 3, 1994).

It has been suggested that other people of color have good reason not to trust Asian Americans, who have not been widely known in this country for risking our own hides or sticking out our own necks for someone else. After African American skulls were cracked in protests over employment discrimination, Asian Americans stepped in to take up the consent decree jobs. Recently, Ling-Chi Wang was feted by the National Association for Bilingual Education for his role in *Lau vs. Nichols*, which had far-reaching effects on the language and education rights of both Asians and Latinos. However, while the organization boasts a membership of 10,000 Latinos and Chicanos, very few Asians participate. Looking more closely, we can better understand why. Asians are fewer in number and far less politically and linguistically powerful

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than are Latinos, especially because there are so many different Asian languages, including multiple Chinese and Filipino languages. Though El Paso and Miami are virtually bilingual cities, nowhere in this country can a Chinese or Korean thrive without any English.

Most people perhaps find it difficult to imagine Asian American leadership in coalitions with other people of color since there has been little history of Asian Americans working in such coalitions - despite a few spectacular examples, mostly in agricultural labor organizing during the first half of this century. They may not realize that the majority of Asian Americans today are primarily newcomers who have been in this country fewer than 25 years.

Some say that irreconcilable differences arise between Asian American newcomers and other people of color who trace their political consciousness and understanding of racial and economic justice to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Yet, I see the struggle for affirmative action and other compensatory programs as having affinity with the movement for immigrant rights. At base, both are about equal access. Even though many of today's Asian immigrants can't claim the U.S. Civil Rights Movement as their legacy, organizing efforts among them could stress heritages in the Asian homelands that are also rooted in struggles for justice and equality, such as the long and bloody movement against martial law in the Philippines and Taiwan and the democracy movements in China, India, and Burma. Every Japanese American can be proud of the huge peace movement in Japan, where the atomic bomb was dropped. In addition, for the past three decades, the most spectacular labor movement in the world has been taking place in South Korea, the country that boasted the world's longest work week, and where murder and assault of labor leaders have been legendary.

Coalition work is not easy for anyone. Moreover, coalition is not right for everything we do. Perhaps it might help for us to view coalition not as a site of comfort and refuge, but as a site of struggle. The fact is that the ever-increasing visibility of Asian Americans means that we can no longer be dismissed as honorary whites, honorary blacks, or a wedge between the two. We need to end "biracial theorizing" and zero-sum thinking. A third space is needed. Tiger Woods has said, "I don't consider myself a Great Black Hope. I'm just a golfer who happens to be black and Asian." Why can't a person be both black and Asian? Or will we just let Nike decide what Tiger Woods "is"?

It seems clear that these days we are hurtling toward the bifurcation of U.S. society into two major economic classes - the very rich and the poor. Most Asian immigrant parents, having struggled so hard to make a new life in an adopted

country, want economic security and social success for their children at almost any price. The children do not want to fall their parents. In many ways, it would be a luxury for either parents or children to stop to think about the so-called bigger picture. In commodity capitalism, both in the U.S. and in Asia, we are strongly discouraged from recalling that the well-being of every American, every Asian, indeed of everyone on the planet, depends on the well-being of the collectivity. No matter what, in the end there is no real turning away from other people's struggles for equality and justice. Yet the combination of pressures from within the Asian family and community and from the often competitively cutthroat world outside the family could poison the atmosphere, making it even more difficult for us to keep our eyes on the prize of peace and justice built on compassion, which are necessary for beauty and creativity to come into being.

If we don't watch out, Asian Americans may find ourselves one day schooled, credentialed, and trapped in the old "buffer zone" or "middleman" position, attempting an ultimately impossible mediation between those mostly white people who have the power to make the rules and those mostly black and brown people who are oppressed by them. Whether as professors, newscasters, attorneys, or middle managers, we could be positioned to serve as apologists for and explicators, upholders, and functionaries of the status quo.

We are all now facing the enormous challenge of the direct and indirect impact of a shameful assault on the poor, immigrants, and people of color in this country. How will Asian Americans face this challenge? With whom will we join forces and what values will we espouse? In my view, one of the challenges for Asian Americans in the 21st century will be resisting the "gatekeeper function" with strong and focused commitment to place first priority, in whatever arenas we occupy, on the needs and well-being of the disenfranchised.

This work can be done quite creatively, I think, from an interstitial location, with one foot in the margins and the other in the mainstream much of the time. An interstitial location is different from a buffer zone. It is "both/and" rather than "either/or." It bears more resemblance to a Trojan Horse than to a mascot.

If we remember the traditional Korean belief that the social health of the individual cannot be separated from the health of the collectivity, then we will be able to see clearly that we might play a pivotal part in this country's progress by helping to envision and participate in the emergence of a multiracial democracy. For the health of a larger community, can we declare our support for policies that might benefit us only indirectly and in the long term, just

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like those justice-loving African Americans who declared their support for the politically isolated Japanese Americans during World War II?

Asian Americans can set an example of commitment to a fairness that rejects narrow self-interest in favor of a community of justice. From our quite different exclusions, from our specific sites of contradiction, from our heterogeneous communities of resistance, perhaps we can reach across our pain and differences to build bridges to one another.

NOTES

1. Today's seven million Asian Americans are the fastest-growing minority in the U.S. Many of them settled in the U.S. during the past 25 years. Not a homogeneous entity, Asian America is composed of over 60 different groups, each with its own linguistic and cultural heritage as well as its own political history, which more often than not is also a history of struggle against U.S. military subjugation and political domination. In response to the frequent exhortation to go back where they came from, they could answer, "We are here because you were there."

At the same time, they could also say that they are as American as German Americans are. Asian immigrant and Asian American labor has been critical to the U.S. and its economic well-being for a century and a half. Today's New Yorkers depend on Korean immigrant greengrocers for their fresh produce, just as people in Los Angeles a hundred years ago relied on Chinese immigrant farmers and peddlers for theirs.

Largely in response to limited employment and promotion opportunities in the U.S., Asian immigrants continue to operate small businesses. American cities are dotted with South Asian hotels and motels, Korean dry cleaners, Vietnamese nail salons, and Cambodian donut shops. Asian workers continue to play a pivotal and ever-increasing role in the garment industry as well as the food service industry in the U.S., and not just in Chinese restaurants or just in California and New York.

Asian America today is diverse and heterogeneous. For every high income Asian American scientist or engineer, there is an Asian American unskilled or semi-skilled worker making less than minimum wage. The new Asian Americans include both the most and the least educated ethnic groups in the U.S. today.

2. Recent newspaper reports indicate that a hate crime against an Asian American occurs nearly every day in the U.S. A group of youths called "Dotbusters," referring to the decorative forehead symbol worn by many Indian women,

was organized to terrorize Indian Americans in New Jersey; through the 1980s, a climate of Japan-bashing resulted in the murder and assault of a number of Chinese, Korean, Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese Americans. In Orange County in late 1996, two white youths in Tustin bragged about beating to death a young Vietnamese American college student because they wanted to "kill a Jap." In New York City, a number of Asian women, some elderly and others young and pregnant, have been pushed to their deaths onto the subway tracks by white men.

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