

Yellow

Frank Wu

Writing Race

I'd like to be as honest as possible in explaining why and how race matters, because it shapes every aspect of my life—and everyone else's. I'd like to do so in a manner that allows my white relatives and my white friends to understand and empathize.

I have learned how naïve I was to have supposed that children grew out of their race and to have expected that adults could not possibly be racist. The lives of people of color are materially different than the lives of whites, but in the abiding American spirit we all prefer to believe that our individualism is most important.

As a member of a minority group everywhere in my country except among family or through the self-conscious effort to find other Asian Americans, I alternate between being conspicuous and vanishing, being stared at or looked through. Although the conditions may seem contradictory, they have in common the loss of control. In most instances, I am who others perceive me to be rather than how I perceive myself to be. Considered by the strong sense of individualism inherent to American society, the inability to define one's self is the greatest loss of liberty possible. We Americans believe in an heroic myth from the nineteenth century, whereby moving to the frontier gives a person a new identity. Even if they do not find gold, silver, or oil, men who migrate to the West can remake their reputations. But moving to California works only for white men. Others cannot invent themselves by sheer will, because no matter how idiosyncratic one's individual identity, one cannot overcome the stereotype of group identity.

Sometimes I have an encounter that demonstrates how easily people can be transfixed by a racial stereotype. In a casual aside, a business colleague, who I thought knew me well enough to know better, may make an earnest remark revealing that his attempt to connect with me can come only through race. Although they rarely mention their personal lives, people always will make it a point to tell me about the hit movie they saw last night or the museum exhibit they toured over the weekend if it had a vaguely Asian theme, whether Chinese, Japanese, Korean,

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Vietnamese, or whatever, because, "It reminded me of you." They tell me I resemble the cellist Yo-Yo Ma or their five-year-old son's friend in school. Or in a passing instant, a white boy or a black boy, whom I would credit with childhood innocence, can rekindle my memory of the ordinary intolerance of days past. At an airport or riding on a subway, boys will see me and suddenly strike a karate pose, chop at the air, throw a kick, and utter some sing-song gibberish, before turning around and running away. Martin Luther King Jr. asked to be judged by the content of his character rather than the color of his skin, but in these surreal episodes I am not judged by the content of my character because the dealings have no content except for the racial image. Worse, it is as trivial for others as it is traumatic to me. I may as well be a stage prop. University of California at Berkeley literature professor Elaine Kim has recounted being told by a white friend who'd read Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, one of the earliest works of Asian American novels to become a staple of literature courses, that only through the book did she come to understand Kim.¹ The fictional character becomes more believable than a real person, as though it is easier to know Asian Americans through the representation than through the reality.

At other times, I will have another type of encounter in the anonymous rush of contemporary life, one that confirms that people can be oblivious to folks who don't resemble them.² To present an analogy, most motorcyclists and bicyclists who ride regularly on city streets are accustomed to the situation in which they will make prolonged eye contact with a driver, who then blithely proceeds to cut off the bike or turn directly in front of it. The person behind the wheel may have seen the rider but responds only to vehicles like her own; anything else doesn't register. Likewise, waiting in line, I am amazed when a white person, sometimes well-dressed and distinguished looking and sometimes not, cuts in front of me or expects to be given VIP treatment. I am galled by not only the action but also the sense of entitlement that this person radiates. I want to say, "Hello? Did you not see the rest of us back here, or did you take it for granted that you were more important?" Of course, sometimes people are momentarily distracted or generally impolite. It happens often enough, however, in cases where it is fair to surmise that race and gender are involved. When whites are disrespected by other whites—for example, when they are ushered to a deserted area of the restaurant near the kitchen—they generally are not plagued by the suspicion that it is for racial reasons. It is easier for them to write off an incident as the consequence of incivility rather than another indication of something worse. Even if people of color are spurned for reasons other than race, the maltreatment harkens back to race because of the uncertainty of the matter. People of color are held to a double standard. Asian Americans are impudent if we presume to behave as others have done without doubting their right; what is assertive and commanding when it comes from a white male is bossy and presumptuous from an Asian American female. . . .

My premise is straightforward. Race is more than black and white, literally and figuratively. Yellow belongs. Gray predominates. I advance these arguments together, and they are mutually reinforcing. Being neither black nor white, Asian

Americans do not automatically side with either blacks or whites. Columbia University professor Gary Okihiro once asked, “is yellow black or white?”³ Chang-Lin Tien, who was the first Asian American to head a major research university, recalled arriving in the United States in 1956. He says that when he was a graduate student, “I never rode the city buses” in Louisville, Kentucky. He was humiliated when he boarded one and saw that “whites rode in the front and ‘coloreds’ rode in the rear.” He asked, “Just where exactly did an Asian fit in?” He did not wish to be consigned to the back of the bus, but neither did he believe that even if he dared to sit down in the front of the bus, he could stay there in good conscience.⁴ Theirs are the best type of question, because they have no answers. . . .

In race matters, words matter, too. Asian Americans have been excluded by the very terms used to conceptualize race. People speak of “American” as if it means “white” and “minority” as if it means “black.” In that semantic formula, Asian Americans, neither black nor white, consequently are neither American nor minority. I am offended, both as an academic and as an Asian American. Asian Americans should be included for the sake of truthfulness, not merely to gratify our ego. Without us—and needless to say, without many others—everything about race is incomplete.

It isn’t easy to call people on their unconscious errors. If I point out that they said “American” when they meant “white,” they will brush it off with, “Well, you know what I mean,” or “Why are you bringing up race?” Yet it is worth pondering exactly what they do mean. What they have done through negligence, with barely any awareness, is equate race and citizenship. They may even become embarrassed once the effect is noticed. Asian Americans were upset when the MS-NBC website printed a headline announcing that “American beats out Kwan” after Tara Lipinsky defeated Michelle Kwan in figure skating at the 1998 Winter Olympics.⁵ Like gold medalist Lipinsky, Kwan is an American. By implying that Kwan was a foreigner who had been defeated by an “American,” the headline in effect announced that an Asian American had been defeated by a white American in a racialized contest. If two white Americans compete against each other in a sporting event—say, rivals Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding—it would be preposterous for the result to be described as one of them defeated by an “American.” If Kwan had won, it also would be unlikely for the victory to be described as “American beats out Lipinsky” or “Asian beats out white.” Movie producer Christopher Lee recalls that when studio executives were considering making a film version of *Joy Luck Club*, they shied away from it because “there are no Americans in it.” He told his colleagues, “There are Americans in it. They just don’t look like you.”⁶

NOTES

1. Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), xix.