

Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White

By Hisham Aidi, Blackworld

Black-Asian relations have always been complicated. Richard Pryor joked in the 1970s that the first English word Asian immigrants learned was the N-word. Nobel laureate Toni Morrison did little to counter widespread views of Asians as competitive, clannish “bloodsuckers” when she charged that Asian immigrants had made it “on the backs of blacks.” And Maya Angelou described the disturbing reaction of blacks in her neighborhood of the Western Addition in San Francisco when President Roosevelt placed thousands of Japanese Americans in internment camps during World War II:

[A]s the Japanese disappeared, soundlessly and without protest, the Negroes entered with their loud jukeboxes, their just-released animosities, and the relief of escape from Southern bonds...[N]o member of my family and none of the family friends ever mentioned the absent Japanese. It was as if they had never owned or lived in the houses we inhabited.

In the scholarly yet accessible *Yellow* Frank Wu, a Chinese civil rights activist and professor of law at Howard University, tries to locate Asian Americans in an American racial landscape that has historically been divided into black and white. Wu “writes race” and confronts the “colorline” in the spirit of his intellectual mentor W.E.B. Du Bois, and indeed, the model of the African American freedom struggle pervades Wu’s analysis. Following Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Wu writes, “I alternate between being conspicuous and vanishing, being stared at or looked through.” Wu examines anti-Asian racism, black-Asian relations, white-Asian relations, and addresses the debates on affirmative action, multiculturalism and globalization through the prism of the Asian-American experience.

Despite explosive growth (the Asian American community grew by 48 percent in the last decade and is now some 10-million strong), this is a population rarely included in discussions of race in America, whether academic or journalistic. Stereotypes of Asian Americans, whether as a “model minority” or as perpetual foreigners, are all the more powerful, Wu writes, because they are “at once highly visible in popular culture and virtually invisible in serious discourse.” And racism against Asians is pervasive, from subtle to not-so-subtle. As Wu points out, most Americans these days triumphantly denounce racists but are largely in denial about their own racism. In a national telephone survey conducted last year of highly educated individuals in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, Wu points out, 25 percent said Chinese Americans are taking too many jobs, one-third agreed that Chinese Americans have too much influence in the hi-tech industries and are more loyal to China, and 50 percent worried that Chinese Americans’ passing information to China is a problem.

Wu analyzes the more flagrant episodes of racism against Asian Americans, from the internment of Japanese Americans in the 1940s (very few German or Italian-Americans were interned; FDR himself joked that Italian-Americans were harmless—“a bunch of opera singers”),

to the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 and the humiliating and unjust imprisonment of Chinese American scientist Wen Ho Lee for spying. A lack of public outrages, Wu argues, characterized all these events.

Still, many of the stereotypes held about Asians are positive, right? Wrong. Wu looks at the negative impact of the stereotype of Asian Americans as a “model minority”—a community of hard-working, (over)achieving, studious, family-oriented and “race-neutral” people. Wu cites a legal analyst who wrote in the Wall Street Journal, referring to Judge Lance Ito, who presided over the racially-charged O.J. Simpson trial, as a “suitable race-neutral judge of Japanese ancestry.” Ronald Reagan famously called Asian Americans “our exemplars of hope.” Wu notes that Asian Americans have not yet reached the income levels of white Americans, while confirming that as a group they earn more than blacks and Hispanics, largely because most of the Asians who can afford to emigrate to the US have post-graduate educations. Yet model minority status is not as positive as it seems—it always implies, as Wu points out, “an invidious statement about African Americans—‘they made it; why can’t you?’” Along with being implicitly racist to other less privileged ethnic groups, the myth also denies that Asian Americans experience racial discrimination and turns Asian Americans into a racial threat aimed at insecure whites. Perhaps worst of all, the expectation of being exceptionally talented has a devastating effect on Asian American children, who suffer from high rates of anxiety and depression.

Wu stresses that despite hurtful stereotypes, Asian Americans do not in any way suffer from the same level of discrimination and disadvantage as African Americans, who bear “the greatest burden of racial discrimination,” and for this reason does not advocate doing away with America’s “black-white paradigm” although it does not accurately capture the Asian American experience. Wu points to some advantages Asian Americans have over their African American neighbors; for instance, when Asian Americans are denied a bank loan, they can always resort to the rotating credit “pot” that exists in many immigrant communities.

Wu concludes with a powerful, introspective chapter explaining why he teaches at Howard University, why he chose to part company with many “Asian Americans [who] follow whites, not blacks, in trying to become American.” He underlines the importance of siding with African Americans and calls for multiracial coalitions that engage different ethnic, immigrant and progressive civic groups but that revolve around the civil rights struggle.

One of Wu’s points requires further elaboration; he calls for a pan-Asian American identity, but why would or should Hindu Indians, Catholic Filipinos, Buddhist Thais and Muslim Pakistanis come together in a cultural political bloc? The fact that a pan-Asian American identity has not emerged could be seen as proof of the weakness of the racism facing Asian Americans, especially when such efforts are compared with the growing pan-black and Latino political lobbies and voting patterns.

Still, *Yellow* is an important book on a hitherto neglected topic, and a welcome antidote to the rantings of neo-conservative scholars such as Dinesh D’Souza, who hold up the success of Asian Americans to show how African Americans have only themselves to blame for their predicament.

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