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What is Racist Love?

The work of Frank Chin, writer and social critic in our time, has been almost forgotten. Only his writing and his critical analysis of racial hierarchy in America survive. He, more than anyone, formulated the concept of “Racist Love” regarding minority - particularly Asian American - social status in contrast to other minority groups as well as in the dominant society. This concept had its fullest expression in two writings from Chin: *Allleeeeeee!: an Anthology of Asian-American Writing* in 1975, a book considered by many as the Asian American literary manifesto that “effectively challenges the exclusivity and dominance of the American canon,” according to Davidson and Wagner-Martin. But Chin introduced the concept in a 1971 article that coined the phrase with the title “Racist Love,” in which he directly confronts how mainstream society imposed the Model Minority label on Asian Americans as a means to divide minority groups during the height of Civil Rights Movement.

Then, what is Racist Love? And how is the concept relevant today? According to Chin, there is Racist Hate and Racist Love in America. Racist Hate is easy to identify. Minorities confront Racist Hate every day in the form of discrimination and institutional bias. Racist Love, however, is less tangible: it is like a back-handed compliment. Racist Love implicitly gives rise to negative consequences for minorities in three ways. First, it is used detrimentally to show the deficiencies in other ethnic groups. For example, model minority group like Asian American is succeeding, why couldn't African, Latino, and Native American succeed? Second, it reduces ethnic groups' cultural expression, silencing their voices. And Third, it actually prevents minorities' integration in the United States from being achieved.

Chin postulates that the “good image” paradigm is nothing more than a means to deny Asian American uniqueness and to cast them into the “myth of being either/or and the equally goofy concept of the dual personality haunted our lobes while our rejection to both Asian and white America prove we were neither one nor the other.” Most of us would agree that a significant number of ethnic people and immigrants would be glad to be noticed as making it and doing well in the United States. The thinking goes that, as minority in this country, they would be glad that a negative image is not cast on them, thankful to go about their business without any negative spotlight. The “model” description means that the group has been accepted by the dominant society.

These powerful, enticing forces are hard to resist. What could be so wrong with accepting the title “model minority”? How could these positive impressions about a specific group of

Americans be devastating to them? From the perspective of “Racist Love,” the positive image does have adverse effects. Chin say that “America’s dishonesty---its racist white supremacy passed off as love and acceptance—has kept seven generations of Asian American voices off the air, off the streets, and praised us for being Asiatically no-show.” Viewing the debate in another way, it is fair to say that the dominant society’s steady promotion of positive images about a group can have the same detrimental effect as a negative image.

Racist Love, as extolled by proponents of the model minority standpoint, can neutralize criticism from the accepted group. Once neutralization occurs, marginality sets in from both the majority and other ethnic groups. Then the accepted group cannot belong to either camp. If a group is designated as model for others, that designation automatically silences that group. No one in his or her right mind would criticize those who say positive things about one’s own group. In other words, the concept can be dangerous because in the way that it can be used as a tool to redirect any blame from themselves and to attack other minorities. The concept can also be used to incorporate other “non-European Americans” into the proponents’ camp, creating an extended arm of the dominant group. On the flip side, it works as a hidden tool to suppress expression by the accepted group and its members to the extent that they are merely tokens.

With the recent anti-Asian violence protests across the country, the Racist Love concept has come full circle even though the Asian community has changed and evolved as a result of the social, economic and demographic influences of the post-1990’s Asian immigrants who came to this country with money and education. Now, there are class differences, and the racial issue often does not affect the upper class Asian Americans/immigrants until it directly touches them. Hopefully, their few experiences reveal to them that no matter how rich or how educated they are in this country, you’re still look upon as “chink,” “Jap,” or “gook” because in America, all Asians look alike. Such encounters by rich Asians might propel them to be empathic to what African-Americans have been saying about being Black.

It is not enough for Asian protesters to demonstrate and to shout in front of City Hall that “we are not a Model Minority” who must keep quiet. The protesters realize that they need to build allies in many places, not only where they have sizeable populations like in California, and they must work with these allies on greater change and understanding to stop the hate and mis-understanding. To build allies, it is easier said than done. But first, Asians must educate their own community. The fact is that other minorities are not being treated with respect in Asian restaurants, Pop and Mom stores, supermarkets, and other service businesses in general. For example, many Latinos work in Asian restaurants, doing jobs from frying fish to washing pots, but few advance to become Asian chefs. And when a Black customer walks into a Asian market, they are often followed, as pointed out in Ice Cube’s 1991 song *Black Korea*, “So don’t follow me up and down your market...” My friend and I witnessed something like this - an African-American Mom who entered a Chinese candy store in Oakland Chinatown being eyed

by a clerk - which revealed in plain sight the harmful stereotypes that Black people endure. To show her kid was not stealing, the Mom consciously held up and waved around a \$20.00 dollars bill for all to see that she was buying candy for him. These types of stereotypical practices in the Asian community are unacceptable.

The concept of Racist Love is not only about pointing fingers at white society: when a person is pointing fingers at someone, three fingers are actually pointing to oneself. The African author of *Half of the Yellow Sun*, Chimamanda N. Adichie, warned about the dangers of the single story. In her speech, she asserts that “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”