

360 final project (independent study)
querying black and white:
an exploration of asian-american identity and positionality
in and out of the racial binary

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design notes:

this is less of a persuasive paper and more of an exploratory one, so the conclusion is much more important than the starting thesis. i like to think that its whole is more than the sum of its parts - that is, you get more out of it reading it all together than you would by reading one section at a time. i wanted to explore asian american identity in terms of race, which in turn is usually framed in terms of black and white, so that "side" of the paper is written completely in grayscale.

the three colored pages - yellow, blue, and red - are standalone pieces/poems that i did during finals week. with these, i wanted to symbolize the fact that my identity as asian american is influenced by more than my positionality in the black-white racial binary... so these are ways for me to insert, if you will, my thoughts and feelings about various pieces of that identity throughout my exploration. (and red, the last color, is particularly meaningful in chinese culture... it symbolizes luck and happiness.)

(1) when i was a child i did not like bananas
they tasted foreign and uncomfortable in my mouth,
yellow peel giving way to grainy softness giving way to sweet grit on my tongue and the aftertaste -- white
i spat them out onto the table and shook my head at my mother
don't feed me that

much later, i would learn that banana is a term for an (east) Asian who is
“yellow on the outside and white on the inside”
it made me want to spit the word out of my mouth
wipe the taste from my tongue

(2) once when i was in middle school someone teased me about not liking bananas
he was the cutest boy in my grade
he offered me one, blue eyes laughing
i tried it and it was even worse than i remembered
but i swallowed my mouthful and smiled and said *okay so it's not that bad*

i wanted so badly to be friends with the girl in my theater group
her name was rachael, written in perfectly round letters with a looping l
she had blue eyes and skin so pink it glowed and one day she called me her “raisin” - “rachael's asian”
i wanted to point out that asian and raisin are not spelled or even pronounced the same way
but i swallowed and smiled and told myself *at least we're friends*

(3) i learned recently that this kind of labeling is not limited to me
i was surprised to discover that there are many variations;
coconuts: “brown on the outside”, oreos: “black on the outside”, apples: “red on the outside”
all of their insides are white white white

when i went to Switzerland i tried so hard to fit in, i tried so hard to be swiss enough
i was surprised to discover, after meeting other 2nd gen asian friends, that i did not seem asian enough
i cannot roll wontons perfectly, i do not speak Chinese, i cannot name pop icons
to them i was white white white

(4) in Switzerland i never ate bananas,
which was not an issue
because the swiss, i think, do not regularly eat bananas

sometimes people would ask me where i was from - china? thailand? *nein, ich bin amerikanerin.*
they would keep guessing - taiwan? japan? (as if asianness and americanness were mutually exclusive)
and i would shake my head and repeat myself, but i don't know if all of them believed me.
the swiss, i think, do not typically encounter asian-americans

(5) my name sounds white when pronounced in a classroom
nonsensical when pronounced in a song
hannah hannah bo banna banana fee fi fo fanna
people called me banana when i was in high school
don't call me that.

not white

“[my body] marks me, announces my weakness, displays it as yellow skin. it flagrantly tells my story, or a compacted, distorted version of it, to passersby curious enough to cast their eyes my way. it stunts their creativity, dictates to them the limited list of whom I could be... it cripples their imagination as it does mine. it tells them, they believe, all that they need to know about my past and, of lesser import, about the life that I now live within their present.”

-- Binh, *The Book of Salt*

I started using the phrase “people of color” when I came to Bryn Mawr. To me, it was a way to connect my experiences to others’, to explain the way that I entered the world. Even though my life before college had been constantly marked by my race and culture, Bryn Mawr “was one of the first places I ever felt like it was okay to talk about that out loud” (hannah, Serendip, 26 Sept 2016). It was a way to mark myself explicitly as non-white, and in turn to access the world of non-whiteness.

In sociology, the idea of the “Other” - a person or group that is intrinsically unlike oneself - is vital to the construction of social identity. “Othering”, then, is defined as excluding persons who do not fit into one’s own group identity, and grouping them reductively into an (often subordinate) social category; in short, creating a “we” vs. “them” mentality.

Throughout American history, things like the Chinese Exclusion Act and the forced internment of Japanese citizens in camps consistently served to “other” and dehumanize East Asians in the United States. In fact, from the 1800s until the late 1940s and 1950s, Asians were stereotyped and denigrated as “brown hordes” or the “yellow peril”; alien, menacing, and degenerate (Guo 2). *Because they were not white*, they were viewed with suspicion and reduced to a monolithic foreignness despite their specific ethnicity or cultural identity. But Marjorie Wu, professor of history and Asian American Studies, notes that by the 1960s a different view had begun to dominate ideas of Asian identity... the model minority myth, which she calls “equal parts truth, propaganda, and self-enforcing prophecy”, had set in (Guo 2). Although this new view came with its own benefits and drawbacks (which we’ll explore later in this paper) it remained consistent with the distancing of white Americans from their Asian counterparts... positive stereotyping is, after all, still stereotyping, and that stereotyping is inherently reductive.

The “othering” of Asianness, however, is by no means the only influence on Asian-American identity and its positionality within the black-white binary. As Jeff Chang puts it, Asian American means being “conspicuous and invisible at the same time” (Chang 137-138). The invisibility he refers to is echoed by the fact that Asians are often excluded from conversations on race-related political and social issues; for example, when thinking about undocumented immigrants, most Americans picture Latinx families - even though an extremely high percentage of these undocumented immigrants are from Asian countries.

Asian communities are not left untouched by the destructive effects of white supremacy. South Asians, for example, are subjected to Islamophobic hate and violence, while many Southeast Asians are disproportionately affected by mass incarceration (Ng, Kelvin). Asian Americans, like Black Americans and Native people, have been forcibly segregated, violently displaced, and erased from history. And yet, as many researchers and politicians continue to point out, the Asian community remains quiet.

Why is this? As calamitychild pointed out, “invisibility is not the nature of my race...” but she also noted that “...there are aspects of east asian american culture and the construction of the east asian american identity that make it possible for me to be less visible, and to feel less raced than other racial groups” (Serendip, 1 November 2016). One could argue that traditionally Asian

(usually Chinese and Confucian) values point towards conflict avoidance, adaptability, and conservatism, making Asian cultures less likely to “make a stir” about injustice than others. One could also note that the cataloging of Asian as foreign to American society serves to further distance and/or silence Asian-American voices. In short: while invisibility is not an inherent part of Asian identity, it is nevertheless present in the cultural representation of Asian-American-ness, and we must question why.

In addition to this, Asian Americans have consistently benefited from the risks taken by other activists of color – the Civil Rights movement, which was led by Black Americans, included voter protection, the universal legalization of interracial marriages, and an immigration act that “enabled the migration of more than 10 million Asians to America” (Ng, Kelvin). Thus, any exploration of Asian civil rights must recognize and give credit to the other groups of activists who fought for collective liberation, while ensuring that the burden of moving towards this liberation is not always placed on the backs of Black (and Latinx) activists.

In the second year of #OscarsSoWhite, Jose Antonio Vargas (a journalist and Filipino activist) became one of the main targets of a new Twitter hashtag: #NotYourMule. This was in response to his questioning about Chris Rock’s opening speech, where he asked “when will @chrisrock bring up Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, Native American actors and opportunity?” (Chang 51). Black writer and activist Mikki Kendall originated the hashtag in reference to a quote from one of Zora Neale Hurston’s books, a quote that explains how black women are “de mule uh de world” – and called Vargas out, saying “Solidarity doesn’t look like Black people taking the risks & everyone else reaping the rewards”. Even today, Black directors, producers and writers are often the champions of opportunity for non-white individuals in media and the arts (Chang 54). Freedom and representation in the world of not-whiteness is carried, not by Asian Americans or other non-Black people of color, but by Black individuals.

With this in mind, I must contemplate my race and positionality in a system that does not explicitly name or give space to people who look like me, while recognizing how I benefit from a system in which I (as a light skinned East Asian American) do not belong to the most marginalized group. I am forced to think not only about the ways in which I am “not white” but the ways in which I am “not black”.

“i don’t know if i belong at bryn mawr”, your friend tells you,
and you are at once sympathetic to and confused by this
because you recognize this, this feeling of not belonging,
but you don’t understand why it is only an issue now
after all, it is a feeling you have had – and will have – for the rest of your life.

when your grandmother first came to the united states, she says,
she visited the bathroom and there was a sign that said “white” and a sign that said “colored”
in china they learn that Asians are yellow and yellow is a color so she went into that one
but, she tells you, as she was washing her hands, a lady came up to her
“ma’am, you should be using the other bathroom!”
your grandmother laughs, shaking her head, as she remembers this story,
but you have always remembered it a little differently
your grandmother did not know where she belonged and neither do you.

you are ten, maybe, sitting at rehearsal with your friends at break
as you take out your lunch and bite into the first piece
your friend sam leans over and gasps, “ew! is that *seaweed*? are you eating *sushi*?”
you say no, no, you don’t even like sushi, yuck,
it’s spam musubi, and... “what, you’re eating *spam*?” asks hanailah
then suddenly there are three of your friends right next to you asking what is it, is that rice, why is it *brown*,
and sam leans in again and sniffs it and shrieks “ewwwww it *smells*”
suddenly your face is hot and you swallow your mouthful and laugh and say
“i don’t know, my mom packs me weird food sometimes”
for the rest of the show run, you pack yourself a sandwich and an apple every single day
you are convinced that without this sandwich, you will no longer belong with this group of friends.

in high school, you get a camera and learn to take pictures of your friends
gradually, you become the unofficially designated photographer for group outings and new profile pictures
you are thrilled by this, not only because it means your friends need you,
but because it means that you will never have to be on the other side of the camera
you hate pictures of yourself... on the rare occasions when someone takes a picture of you,
you have learned to filter the tint and the temperature of the photo – tint +6, temperature -4
so that your skin looks pink and not gold
you are the master of filters and photos, invisible,
always a little bit distant when everyone else is laughing in front of the camera
but at least you have a place to belong.

in college you are severely lacking in knowledge of pop culture and you are very bad at going out
you blame it all on the fact that you were homeschooled, but that’s not true and you know it
lots of homeschoolers have watched all the Disney movies and lots of homeschoolers are familiar with the mall and
lots of homeschoolers are comfortable ordering food at restaurants or sitting in coffee shops
it is due to the fact that you never watched TV, and your parents only ever shopped at thrift stores, and your family
almost never ate out except on special occasions because their parents didn’t so why would they?
you aren’t sure if this is a culture or a class thing or what
but you figure that if you are as busy as possible people will focus on all the great things you’re doing
while you try to catch up on all the skills you’re lacking
maybe eventually you can fool people into thinking that you belong.

so when your friend brings it up, you comfort her by saying that she is not alone
you do not think this is a unique feeling
you do not mention that you have never known if you belonged.

not black

“In homeroom or at the drugstore or at the supermarket, you listened for morning announcements or dropped off a roll of film or picked out a carton of eggs and felt just like another someone in the crowd. Sometimes you didn’t think about it at all. And then sometimes you saw the girl across the aisle watching, the pharmacist watching, the checkout boy watching, and you saw yourself reflected in their stares: incongruous. Catching the eye like a hook. Every time you saw yourself from the outside, the way people saw you, you remembered all over again.”

-- Lydia, Everything I Never Told You

One important reality that I faced in this 360 was that of recognizing my proximity and access to whiteness - unpacking the fact that while I am marginalized in certain ways as a person of color, my struggles cannot compare to the oppression that Black people face due to their constant objectification and the resulting violence, incarceration, and discrimination caused them by structures built around racial oppression. As uncomfortable as this feels, I'm starting to recognize the ways in which my existence as Asian American serves to perpetuate anti-Black racism, and to question my positionality as I enter the black and white binary that is race in America.

The "model minority" stereotype was built around the 1950s and served multiple purposes. For Chinese and Japanese citizens, for example, the myth of the model minority was built on their perceived patriotism and hard work. It created space for Asians to assimilate, to fight discrimination, to prove that they "fit" into mainstream American culture and should be granted personhood by society. However, this idea was quickly appropriated by white politicians, who used Asian American success to both highlight their "racial democracy" to international allies and to shift the blame for Black and Latinx poverty (Guo). In the wake of Black freedom movements, white people - both conservative and liberal - were increasingly uncomfortable. By framing Asians as the ideal citizen, capable of assimilation and social movement in a way that didn't threaten whiteness, Americans reinforced respectability politics and created what Ellen Wu calls "a model for political cooperation", a racial and ideological opposite to the angry Black protester.

In this way, the model minority stereotype shifted; originally a way for Asian Americans to combat exclusion and racism and "re-brand" themselves as good citizens, it became a way to police Black behavior. Later, as the narrative of the model minority became one less focused on patriotism and more on education and social mobilization (Guo), it would pit people of color against one another and undermine interracial solidarity.

It's important to recognize, however, that Asians (particularly East Asians) are by no means inculpable in this systemic oppression. With the history of the model minority myth in mind, Asian-Americans need to confront the reality of anti-blackness in Asian American communities. All too frequently, Asians utilize the hypervisibility of the Black body to make yellow (and, to a somewhat lesser extent, brown) bodies less distinctly visible, to highlight Asian similarities to the white ideal and contrast it with the objectification of Black individuals in order to be viewed as equal.

Some Asian Americans seem to argue that since they also hold a history of systematic racial oppression, they either identify with the struggles of the Black community or cannot be held responsible for working within the system. But empathizing with someone's struggle because of a similar experience is not the same as identifying with it - while I as an Asian American may face racial discrimination and injustice, it is nothing like the erasure, discrimination, and systemic violence which Black Americans regularly encounter. In addition, as a light-skinned East Asian, much of my capacity for advancement is in actuality a privilege based in Black oppression. As Alicia Garza, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, wrote: "our destinies are intertwined... non-Black oppressed people in this country are both impacted by racism and domination, and

simultaneously, BENEFIT from anti-Black racism”. My status as oppressed does not inhibit my capacity to oppress another.

When Akai Gurley, a young Black father, was shot in Brooklyn by an Asian-American rookie cop, some were outraged. It was yet another example of police brutality, of anti-Black racism, of the recklessness and lack of empathy in police forces that causes pain to communities they are supposed to serve and protect. But to some Chinese Americans, the officer’s – Peter Liang’s – indictment was unfair. Jeff Chang notes, “They wanted Peter Liang to be seen as white, and Asian Americans to be offered all the privileges of whiteness” (153)... despite the fact that Liang had taken the life of an innocent Black man, despite the fact that his actions were unjustifiable. Chang goes on to note that “Asian Americans are the least segregated racial group... in the country, and there are some in the community who would use that power to make things worse for other communities of color” (154). When Asian Americans fight injustice *only* when it directly oppresses them, we are selfish. Acting out of self-interest, getting to the top by stepping on the heads of those who have even less social mobility than you do – that’s not fighting systems of oppression. That’s not working towards an equal and just society.

As my friend Em pointed out, the fact that Asian Americans occupy space between black and white, coupled with the stereotyping of Asians as good citizens, means that we are often allowed unquestioned into white communities and spaces. As Lydia notes in *Everything I Never Told You*, it’s possible to forget your Asian-ness in these spaces. But this, too, is a privilege granted by our proximity to whiteness. It’s also another reason to question the cycle in which Asian Americans seem to be stuck; having to adapt to a society that values and privileges whiteness in order to survive, being praised for that assimilation, and at the same time realizing that assimilation of any kind only serves to make Asian Americans complicit in a structure that perpetuates anti-Black racism. As neither white nor black, Asians should learn to question their own identity and the way they enter into the binary.

i do not speak Chinese.
i speak German and French, Spanish and English –
languages of the oppressor, of the colonizer,
languages that originated with people who look nothing like me.
languages that they taught in school

i do not speak Chinese.
my parents never spoke it fluently and so never spoke it to one another
my mother's parents spoke it to her when she was a child but
she lost the words, like baby teeth, along the way to school
if she could not fit in her tongue could
it was a part of growing up

i do not speak Chinese.
when i was four, we lived with my grandparents
they spoke the language to me, to my parents, and to one another
it is for this reason that when i hear the melodic tones of mandarin,
i understand words and cannot explain how i understand them
i can almost taste the words on my tongue
but not quite

i do not speak Chinese.
when i went to my grandparents' church i clung to my mother's leg
shook my head and refused to let go
didn't tell her that the one time i went to Sunday school there,
the teacher asked me a question in Chinese and i told him i didn't understand in English
watched other faces swivel instantly toward me, faces so like my own and yet so different,
because they spoke their language and i did not

i do not speak Chinese.
this used to make me feel like an impostor, not a "real" Asian
but it also helped me justify my American-ness,
distance myself from a country and a culture i knew very little about,
"i'm not a foreigner i don't even speak Chinese"
and at the time that seemed more important.

i do not speak Chinese.
when i got to college i was given the choice of learning either French or Mandarin
i chose the language i had dreamed about learning since middle school
accents soft, romantic, special
i did not choose the language that my heritage tugs me towards
that my grandfather, his face bent over a book, reads carefully every morning
that my grandmother, rocking back and forth, sung to me and my sisters when we were small
i wonder, too late, if this was in its own way a betrayal.

i do not speak Chinese
i hope, one day, to learn.

in between

“what does it mean to be the evidence that racism is not real? to be fetishized by colorblind liberals and white supremacists alike? to be so innocuous that teachers and policemen and figures of authority mostly allow you the benefit of the doubt? to be desired for your fluid, exotic, futuristic, yielding difference? what does it mean to be the solution? ...it haunts you.”

*“most of your life you have been in-between... you remember trying to find your way between
black and white.”*

“what does it mean to be in-between? it means one can afford to sit on the fence, decide not to take a stand, to always reserve the privilege – while the battle rages all around – to disengage... you have never been one to sit on the fence. but you constantly worry about what it means to engage. you have learned that between intention and liberation, a lot, maybe everything, can go wrong.... you have said to asian americans that it’s time to get off the fence. it’s time to declare your asian american-ness. but where will you all land?”

- Jeff Chang, We Gon’ Be All Right

And so, as I study the binary of race – as I learn to query ideas of blackness and whiteness, and to recognize the ways that I fit as a non-Black person of color into this binary – I attempt to navigate my own identity as well.

In Education class earlier this semester, I remember stating emphatically that my identity as Asian-American was more than my proximity to whiteness. And I do think that seeing non-Black people of color only through their proximity to whiteness is inherently reductive of their experiences (and sometimes used to erase violence against Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous communities, among others). But what I think I failed to recognize at the time was that my identity as Asian American *is* inextricably bound up with my positionality within the racial binary and the power structures attached to race – which basically *is* my proximity to whiteness. I cannot separate myself from that.

The lack of Asian visibility can be damaging, in that it often negates Asian American experiences and/or fails to recognize that black and white are not categories that can describe/include everyone within a given society or group (this applies to non-Black people of color, as well). But it's also, in its own way, a form of privilege; it means that Asian communities are not subjected to the same kind of prejudice or magnitude of discrimination that Black communities are. Invisibility is both a gift and a curse.

In addition, advancements in Asian American success and social mobility are due not to their investments in education or in their better economic choices, but in the simple fact that their social image shifted... in other words, that “their fellow Americans became less racist toward them” (Guo). Rather than being portrayed as threatening, barbaric, and morally questionable, they were framed as adaptable and hard-working; still seen as “other” but granted entrance into a system of white meritocracy. But even this model minority myth served to further the stratification of oppression within the race binary, denying the experiences and injustices suffered by other people of color and furthering gaps between racial groups. Today, it perpetuates anti-Black racism and undermines solidarity, reinforcing structures of oppression and pain.

So where does this end?

In *The Book of Salt*, Binh describes his yellow skin as something that marks him, that makes him “generalized and indiscriminate, easily spotted and readily identifiable all the same” (152). In response to this, he desires a recognition of his humanity... something that makes him, above all, just a man. But this humanity cannot be achieved without some form of liberation, and liberation cannot come through assimilation to standards of whiteness. Although on the surface, the model minority stereotype appears to have benefited Asian Americans, it in fact serves to maintain white supremacy, crush the diversity of Asian-American identities, and advance anti-Blackness by forcing conformity to “impossible standards of white respectability” (Ng, Kelvin).

This is because, in a system where “race is [not] a “surface level” marker, but rather a tenet of subjectivity” (Eze), that not only privileges whiteness but refuses to acknowledge Black humanity, liberation cannot be achieved. Any movement towards freedom must be accompanied by antagonism towards and deconstruction of this system (Eze). And the first step that Asian

Americans, as non-Black people of color, can take is to confront and destroy the presence of anti-Black racism in American culture and in their own communities. This happens by listening to Black voices, engaging in emotional and mental labor to confront racism, and recognizing our own in-between-ness, our own access to privilege. As Alicia Garza notes: “When Black people get free, everybody gets free”.

Liberation for the Asian American happens, then, in a way indicative of our positionality within structures of oppression; in the space between rejecting whiteness and challenging anti-Blackness, in listening and learning from Black anti-racist activists and in using our own voices to dismantle the racist frameworks of American society. Kelvin Ng points out that “we need to hold ourselves accountable as both oppressors and allies” - not one or the other, but both, acknowledging our common ground *and* our unique struggles.

It’s here that I am constantly questioning my own voice and positionality and privilege, exploring Asian-American identity and reflecting on the way that I carry this identity into racialized spaces. As with a lot of this 360, I think that the more I learn, the more I realize I am unaware of. And while I can’t say I’m comfortable with this, I think it’s the one place I will constantly occupy; a space between knowing and not knowing, between whiteness and blackness, between stumbling and growth. In between.

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