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The Invisible Asian

By **George Yancy and David Haekwon Kim** October 8, 2015 3:21 am

This is the latest in a series of interviews about philosophy of race that I am conducting for The Stone. This week's conversation is with David Haekwon Kim, an associate professor of philosophy and the director of the Global Humanities initiative at the University of San Francisco and the author of several essays on Asian-American identity. — George Yancy

George Yancy: A great deal of philosophical work on race begins with the white/black binary. As a Korean-American, in what ways does race mediate or impact your philosophical identity?

David Haekwon Kim: In doing philosophy, I often approach normative issues with concerns about lived experience, cultural difference, political subordination, and social movements changing conditions of agency. I think these sensibilities are due in large part to my experience of growing up bicultural, raced, and gendered in the U.S., a country that has never really faced up to its exclusionary and often violent anti-Asian practices. In fact, I am sometimes amazed that I have left so many tense racialized encounters with both my life and all my teeth. In other contexts, life and limb were not at issue, but I did not emerge with my self-respect intact.

These sensibilities have also been formed by learning a history of Asian-Americans that is more complex than the conventional watered-down immigrant narrative. This more discerning, haunting, and occasionally beautiful history includes reference to institutional anti-Asian racism, a cultural legacy of sexualized

racism, a colonial U.S. presence in East Asia and the Pacific Islands, and some truly inspiring social struggles by Asians, Asian-Americans, and other communities of color.

It's a challenge to convey this sort of lived experience, and this, too, has shaped my philosophical identity. So little has been said in philosophy and public life about the situation of Asian-Americans that we don't have much in the way of common understandings that are accurate and illuminating. Making matters worse is that the void is filled by many misleading notions about race in general, which includes such notions like our country being beyond race, that critiquing white privilege is hating whites, that any race talk is racist, etc.

There is also problematic discourse about Asian-Americans in particular, like the Model Minority myth. This popular notion posits Asian-Americans as being successful along many indices of assimilation and socioeconomic well-being and thus a model for other non-whites. Its veracity aside, its actual political function is to excuse anti-black and anti-Latino racism and prevent interracial solidarity. In any case, I believe the invisibility of Asian-Americans in our culture has been so deep and enduring that Asian-Americans themselves are often ambivalent about how they would like to see themselves portrayed and perhaps even uncomfortable about being portrayed at all.

G.Y.: In what ways has Asian-American philosophy had to legitimate itself within or even against a philosophical myopia that focuses on Western traditions?

D.H.K.: As I see it, the undoing of this hegemony requires at least two sorts of diversification, and ultimately these efforts have to be integrated. One has to do with race, gender, sexuality, class, disability and other identities related to subordination and social justice. The other concerns the study of non-Western conceptual traditions, like those found in Buddhist, Confucian, Vedic, Ubuntu, Nahuatl, and Islamicate perspectives, as well as modern hybrid traditions of the non-Western world. If we look at philosophy journals and requirements for the philosophy major and for graduate school in philosophy, it's hard to deny that white, Euro-American male perspectives and Euro-American traditions form the center of the profession

both historically and presently, and descriptively and normatively. It's just silly to deny this.

Given this context, I think Asian-American philosophy as philosophy of Asian-American experiences or conditions faces a steep uphill struggle. Insofar as Asian-American philosophy seeks to draw from indigenous Asian traditions, and I think it should, it faces Eurocentrism and the traditions diversification problem I mentioned. Furthermore, if Asian-American philosophy tries to expand the justice dialogue and the traditions dialogue simultaneously, it may take on a damaging burden. Just think of what a dissertation or tenure committee would say to a philosopher putting forward, say, a Confucian theory of racial shame or a Buddhist critique of the exoticization of Asian women. Such a philosopher has committed professional harakiri.

G.Y.: And yet, by remaining so philosophically insular, I wonder if Anglo-American and European philosophy will, perhaps, die by its own hand in light of the "browning" or even "yellowing" of America.

D.H.K.: As the U.S. becomes a majority non-white nation, a transition from insularity to obsolescence is a vital concern for the profession. We are already seeing setbacks to philosophy departments in the wider tide against the humanities. So if philosophy wants to avoid the diminishing trajectory of classics departments, then among other things, it must fully commit to social justice diversification. It should have done so yesterday!

However, I think it is also quite possible that insularity and hegemony unite and create a professional membership consisting largely of dark bodies and Westernized minds. The idea that philosophy simply is Western philosophy, be it analytic or Continental, is such a deep structure of the profession. In fact, I don't think it's such a strange future in which we have a statistical majority of blacks, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, and Middle Easterners in the American Philosophical Association, nearly all members of which work primarily in the Western canon. Even philosophy addressing race, gender and class inequality can rely solely on Rawls or Foucault, or on analytic moral psychology or Heideggerian phenomenology, out of more ideological than pragmatic reasons. Such a future would mean a terrible loss of

opportunity. Ending formal Western imperialism was difficult; ending Eurocentrism may prove to be still more challenging. So, as I see it, there may yet be a sense in which Anglo- and Euro-American philosophy persists as the center, even in a profession filled with a darker professoriate.

And transformative efforts face a complex legacy of insularity. For example, currently, there is an increasing presence of “East-West” comparative philosophy in the profession. Unfortunately, the wider picture, one including a “North-South” axis, reveals that non-Asian, non-Western philosophies, like those found under the headings of Africana philosophy, Native American philosophy, and Latin American philosophy, do not even make it onto the map in the Western profession of philosophy. I think it’s no coincidence that these exclusions are of philosophies of colonized peoples. And it should be pointed out that Asian peoples and philosophies, too, have been enmeshed in colonial conditions. A sign of significant progress would be the robust development of what we might call “East-South” philosophy. In fact, I propose that we operationalize this idea and build it into the infrastructure of the American Philosophical Association. This would not only indicate the admission of “South” philosophy into the profession, but also “South” philosophy’s engagement with “East” philosophy would imply a strong decentering of Western philosophy. Perhaps all this is to say that I long for the day when we let the world teach us about the world.

G.Y.: A Chinese student of mine said to me recently that she was told by a white male to go back to her own country. The fear of the “Yellow Peril” is well known. What are some of the ways in which you see this playing itself out in our contemporary moment?

D.H.K.: I think Yellow Perilism, or anti-Asianism more generally, persists. This is especially clear if we look beyond large coastal cities, like San Francisco, or contexts like the academy. There is a whole lot of America between the urban dots in which Asian-Americans are beginning to appear more familiar, and there are many realms of life outside of the university, a place where Asian-Americans are regarded as a model minority. In many of these other locations and contexts, Asian-Americans are often not welcome. And in these places as well as the ones where they

are more familiar, they are often welcomed in a conditional fashion: they have to be “good” Asians, politically compliant and sometimes even white-identified.

Sometimes the exclusion is crass or violent, with classic racist elements. Historically, this is often linked to the state of our foreign policy. So if we continue to see a large influx of Asian immigrants, and tensions with China and North Korea persist or worsen, then predictably we’ll see a spike in Yellow Perilism. We have already seen a terrible rise in hate crimes and arguably state crimes against many members of Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian peoples since 9/11.

G.Y.: I recall that once at a conference you mentioned being called “Ching Chong.” How did you resist this sort of racist vitriol and slur? And what sort of psychic scars does this sort of thing leave?

D.H.K.: To your first question, honestly, the answer is: poorly! I sometimes hear Asian-Americans and other people of color insisting on matching the vitriol in kind. I have often resisted in this way simply because I couldn’t control my outrage or contempt.

However, I would not insist upon this sort of resistance. It can quickly escalate the nastiness of the situation, and one may end up beaten, humiliated, even killed. And whatever else may be true, we do not need more people of color degraded or killed by racism. Also, at the end of the day, we need to have community, in some wide sense of the word, with racists. I don’t know if I’m saying something controversial here or simply identifying part of the agony of race in this country. But, as W.E.B. Du Bois mournfully noted, as infuriated as we may get by violent or structural racism, we must be reminded by the end of the day that racists are human, even all too human.

Having said all this, I do think that a decently effective response to racist vitriol is needed because a lack of resistance can deepen the stereotype of Asian passivity, which can encourage more such racism elsewhere. Also, not resisting can have corrosive effects in which one begins to internalize the image of oneself conveyed by the racist, which gets at your point about scarring. There is something about constantly returning to the site of degradation in one’s memory and imagination that has really baleful effects on one’s sense of self. Perhaps we can get help by thinking

about all this in terms of practices with aims. I think, typically, the aim of the antagonism is to goad the victim into anger fear, or agitation, the expressions of which incite pleasure and more such ridicule, intimidation or violence. So I think in many such cases an alternative to counter-vitriol is performing a kind of imperturbability with a calm indignation or even a kind of composed hostility.

I have sometimes folded my arms in front of my chest and calmly glared at antagonistic racists, trying to convey with my face and comportment two things: You don't unsettle me, and you're pathetic. Sometimes, I even smile a little and say in my own mind: "uh-uh, no, you're an idiot." The problem with this strategy is that sometimes I cannot end the performance, and afterward I continue to feel animosity and contempt. There are clearly other, and no doubt better, strategies that can be used. Importantly, given the support offered by the wider context of racial and gender hierarchy, it may actually be impossible to win this battle of wills.

Perhaps the hardest part of all this is contending with a distinctive kind of vulnerability, one that can also cause scarring. Following a Fanonian line of thought, one that resonates with some Confucian themes of the ritualization of the social self, I am thinking of a very basic kind of sociopolitical affiliation or identification process, a subject-forming sense of attunement to and belongingness within a community, which subsequently conditions, often invisibly, one's social encounters in everyday life.

This process often unfolds as naturally and unconsciously as breathing air, but it forms one of the many fundamental bases of the self. The problem, then, is when this subject-forming sociopolitical affiliation is directed toward the very community in which racists are important members. One of the very bases of the social self makes the subject deeply vulnerable to racist vitriol and to the more pervasive context of racist exclusion.

To appreciate this point, it can be useful to contrast two Asian-Americans, one who has mostly grown up in the United States and one who recently immigrated here. Both can be angry at racist insults, fearful of racist assaults, and can worry over racist exclusions. Thus, they are both vulnerable to racism. But insofar as the "American" in "Asian-American" plays a significant role in the former's subject-

forming sense of sociality, whereas it is, say, China, Korea, or Vietnam that plays a parallel role in the latter's sense of self, then the former can be more deeply, we might say existentially, unsettled by racism than the former. This, I believe, is one of the points of contention between immigrant parents and their children who are raised here. The parents puzzle over how much their children are impacted by racism and sometimes even flee from any cultural affiliation with their homeland. The deep, unsettling effects of racism can be relatively easily described, but are very difficult to appreciate with a kind of lived understanding. And here, I'm afraid only structural changes to society can significantly remove the vulnerability I've just described.

G.Y.: What has to change in America, more generally, for you, as an Asian-American, to feel affirmed? And what, specifically, in the professional field of philosophy?

D.H.K.: I think the sort of affirmation that's salient here isn't a sense of feel-good multiculturalism but an ethical affirmation that concerns social transformation and political accountability. In regards to the profession of philosophy, I would go back to the two processes of diversification noted earlier. I am certain that less than 1 percent of philosophy departments across North America have students pursuing majors or minors, to say nothing about graduate students, required to take courses that could be considered part of either justice or traditions diversification, like feminism and Buddhism, respectively. But if even 10 percent did, I would have an energized sense of hope.

In regards to national changes, and to limit myself, two things come to mind. First, I think we need to align the implicit sense of history in our civic affairs with the best history produced by our Asian-Americanist scholars and others doing the work of justice diversification. Stories of anti-Asian institutional racism, American imperialism, and Asian-American democratic struggles must be a part of the basic infrastructure of our historic self-understanding in our K-12 education and our civic narratives, rather than being relegated to an elective history seminar in college.

Second, Asian-Americans have to see themselves as part of a larger community of color. We are often hoodwinked into believing the model minority story and that

we should be grateful for our successes. Note that such gratitude, apparently compulsory, frames our interests or affiliations in an unethically narrow fashion and invites a kind of political affiliation with whiteness. But the America of blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, Middle Easterners and so on is also a part of our America. The killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown are but the tip of the iceberg of anti-black racism; Latinos are hunted by I.C.E (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), and the tragedy of border crossing is a human rights issue for which subsequent generations will judge us; Asians have arrived on an already occupied land, one filled by peoples for whom virtually every treaty was violated. And with the same logic as the Japanese internment, so many Middle Easterners, Arabs and Muslims are being held without trial, and more generally they are profoundly ostracized in our “war on terror.” Thus, with a wider sense of ethical community, I’ll have to reserve my gratitude for the day when a deeper democracy is achieved.

This interview was conducted by email and edited. Previous interviews in this series (with Linda Martin Alcoff, Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, Charles Mills, Peter Singer, Cornel West and others) can be found [here](#).

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