

ON WHERE STEREOTYPES COME FROM SO THAT KIDS CAN RECRUIT THEM

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In reading the papers by Bucholtz, Reyes, and Talmy, I was struck by the attention that all of these authors give to what has come to be called "agency": The capacity, even among young people who are members of disadvantaged racialized populations, to recruit what might be thought of as unpromising semiotic materials for the construction of vivid and dynamic identities. However, in a sort of contradictory reaction, the papers made me think about agency's opposite, "structure," the huge historical system of White racism that produces these stereotypes and endows them with voicings and metapragmatic tendencies against which these young people must struggle (since that's what I've been working on, it's the first thing that comes to mind). Thus I'll begin with a question that these papers, with their emphasis on the production of identity in microinteraction, did not emphasize: Into what kind of racializing system do Asians fit in the United States? This question is hardly new. The inclusion of papers about young people with Pacific Island, Laotian, and a complex mix of Cambodian-Chinese-Vietnamese-South Asian in the group of essays I was asked to discuss must be drawing on something like the 1990 U.S. Census category "Asian-Pacific Islander." But the 2000 U.S. Census responded to both scholarly and popular pressures for the recognition of diversity by an involuted taxonomy of "races" that recognizes six different kinds of Asians and three different kinds of Pacific Islanders, plus, of course, a "write-in" category and the notorious "mixed-race" option. Is this insistence on diversity the best way to get a purchase on what is going on with Asian American populations, on what they confront as they make their lives in the United States? Do we in fact see a huge diversity of experiences and outcomes, or does the system of White racism impose certain constraints that are felt right across the full spectrum of this diversity - and not only "Asian" diversity, but all the different ways of being Black, or Latino, or Native American, or Arab American, or any kind of person of color?

My own view is that the elaborate taxonomies of the 2000 U.S. Census mystify a much simpler system: A single social division between Whiteness and Color that accounts for most of the ways that White racism plays out in the United States. This is a controversial position, not only because it deemphasizes obvious diversity, but also because it downplays what is sometimes called "Black exceptionalism" (Espinoza and Harris 2000): The assertion that African Americans were uniquely damaged by the economic loss and social psychological degradations under slavery and Jim Crow¹ and that they are uniquely centered in White racist imagination as prototypical Others.

¹ "Jim Crow" is the era of official racial segregation and White terrorism that endured from the 1870's until the 1960's in the United States.

There is much to recommend the concept of Black exceptionalism. Almost certainly everyday White racism of the type that Davis (2000) has called "microaggression" is felt most acutely by working-class African Americans. Only African Americans are racialized by the "one-drop rule" (Harrison 1995: 60). The special status of African Americans is indicated by their uniquely low level of intermarriage with Whites (Sanjek 1994).

While "Black exceptionalism" is an important idea with much empirical support, a number of scholars have suggested that a more fundamental division between "Whiteness" and "Color," where Blackness is perhaps centrally constitutive of a dimension of color, but not distinct from it, is both analytically and politically useful. Marable (1995) pointed out that all people of color in the United States confront very similar structural contexts and have very similar experiences with racism, a circumstance that argues for the logic of political alliances across the diverse groups. Delgado and Stefancic (2000: 226) report that museum collections of racial memorabilia show that, regardless of the minority group represented,

"Each group is depicted, in virtually every epoch, in terms that can only be described as demeaning or worse. In addition, we found striking parallels among the stigma-pictures that society disseminated of the four groups [Mexicans, African-Americans, Asians and Native Americans]. The stock characters may have different names and appear at different times, but they bear remarkable likenesses and seem to serve similar purposes for the majority culture."

Carey McWilliams, surveying American minority groups in 1943, saw many historical and sociological connections between their experiences. For instance, McWilliams argues that the confrontation with Native Americans by the first colonists shaped the way that their descendants understood Africans brought as slaves. For the 19th century he shows that California politicians anxious to crush the ambitions of Chinese immigrants worked closely with politicians from the Deep South who were building the edifice of Jim Crow segregation. He suggests that Mexican Americans in the U.S. Southwest simply filled for Whites a political-economic and ideological site that elsewhere was occupied by African Americans, and were treated accordingly.

These structural and semiotic similarities in racial practices by Whites, regardless of exactly who in the zone of "color" is the target, play out as common experiences of racism, where Asian Americans, regardless of subpopulation, share much with other racialized populations both historically and in contemporary struggles. For 100 years they were the targets of ferocious racializing immigration legislation that separated families and denied the most basic rights of membership in the American community even to people who had been here all their lives. This situation continues; Asians especially have been victims of the egregious *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996*, that permits deportation of permanent residents who are discovered to have committed felonies, even if these were juvenile mistakes long since absolved by years of law-abiding community membership. Asian Americans, like Native Americans and African Americans, have suffered the theft of their property, especially in the forced sales by the Japanese American community when they were removed to concentration campus from their homes on the West Coast during World War II. Asian Americans, like African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians, have been victims of racially-based violence. The murders of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982 and of Yoshiro Hattori in Baton Rouge in 1992 are notorious because the White perpetrators either received very light prison sentences (in the case of the

vicious murder of Vincent Chin, who was beaten to death with a baseball bat) or were let off without penalty (the shooter in the Hattori case). At the time of this writing the death of Cau Bich Tran continues to cause fear and indignation in the Asian community of the city of San Jose, California. Cau Bich Tran was a tiny 25-year-old Vietnamese immigrant mother of two who was shot to death in her own home on July 13, 2003, by a San Jose police officer. A grand jury refused to indict the officer for what is widely considered in the local Asian community to have been an act of, if not flat-out murder, at best a manslaughter based in profound misjudgement rooted in racial stereotyping. The case has so ruptured relationships between the community and the police that Asian women in San Jose are now reluctant to call the police even when they are in danger (Anh Le, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

When new stereotypes about Asians appear, just as with stereotypes about other racialized groups these have much more to do with White anxieties than with any cultural reality in the racialized population. An example is "Asian intelligence." As recently as 1974, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Lau v. Nichols* that bilingual education had to be provided for Chinese-American students in San Francisco, the concern in California's Chinese American community was that schools were failing their children. Today's stereotype of the Asian academic superstar is thus not very old, and it has emerged along with the so-called "winner-take-all" economy, when Whites, anxious about reduced social mobility, believe that admissions to "trophy" colleges and universities may give their children a crucial leg up in an increasingly frozen system of class and status. To quote a teenaged character in a recent film ("The Perfect Score"), Whites worry that high S.A.T. scores² have been cornered by "Chinese girls who never watch television" (the burden of the film is that everybody else is better advised to cheat). But when Whites act on this stereotype of Asian intelligence the result is often not preference, but discrimination. For instance, many in the California Asian community believe that new, post-affirmative action criteria for admission to the University of California, which de-emphasize S.A.T. scores, discriminate against Asians, who do in fact tend to do well on these. Since for many years the children of the community faced explicit quotas, they suspect that the motive for the de-emphasis on test results is to keep them from dominating university admissions (Izumi 2002). (Affirmative action in admissions at the University of California was ended by amendment to the California State Constitution in 1996).

The silly "Asians drive minivans" stereotype observed by Reyes among her subjects in Philadelphia deserves discussion in this perspective. As Reyes points out, this stereotype may be local. But I can't avoid noticing that this articulates very well with White male anxieties about masculinity, anxieties that develop within the Whiteness/Color binary. Peculiarities in federal environmental regulations that favor "light trucks" have led car manufacturers to target men with campaigns to sell ever larger and ever more environmentally irresponsible sports utility vehicles. One recent television advertisement specifically set up a "beige minivan" as the most embarrassing kind of car a White guy could drive - an embarrassment that could be avoided by buying the manufacturer's SUV.³ A wonderful ongoing gag in the 1995 film "Get

² The "S.A.T." is the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Scores on the S.A.T. are an important factor restricting admission to many U.S. colleges and universities.

³ "SUV": Sport utility vehicle. These cars (well-known examples include the Jeep Cherokee and the Ford Bronco) evade government standards for fuel economy by being classified as "light trucks",

Shorty" had John Travolta, playing a charming mobster, driving a minivan because the rental agency was out of SUVs (Travolta's deep masculine cool, of course, was adequate to this challenge to his identity). In this context, the idea that "Asians drive minivans" creates a new dimension in the iconic set of gender stereotypes that construct Asian males as effeminate and "unsexy," a useful Other against which Whites can measure their masculinity. Thus Asian men provide, along with African American and Latino men, a useful range of colored masculine Others against which White males can seek a "just right" masculine identity.

I find other elements in the three studies under discussion that support this notion that Asians are very likely to experience life in the United States in terms of a Whiteness vs. Color binary. For instance, Bucholtz reports that her Laotian high school students confront two choices in identity construction: Alignment with "hyperwhite" Nerds, or alignment with a gangster identity shaped around models understood to be African American. Talmy's poignant example of Raven and China, being denied the opportunity to "do Christmas" for a school project about holidays, is another telling case; their teacher's example of a "foreign" holiday was the Mexican Day of the Dead, suggesting that she imagined a zone of colored "foreignness" that seemed to be indifferent to fine-grained racial differentiation.

In summary, Asian Americans, in spite of their reputation as the "model minority" that has produced many "honorary Whites", have been the targets of exactly the same kinds of institutional and everyday racism that afflicts African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. These authors are able to use tools for microanalysis of discourse and conversation that show that there is within this system space for appropriation and negotiation. But there is not as much wiggle room as one would hope. It is obvious from these studies that schools especially have a long way to go to provide spaces for genuinely creative self-production for all students. It is not clear that they can do this within the powerfully over-determined structures that oppose Whiteness and Color, and force children to choose identities within this constricting set of meanings.

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supposedly a category for working vehicles used in business, farming, etc. In fact most SUV's are used for ordinary personal transportation on city streets.

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