

Invis-ABILITY

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"Nobody's free until everybody's free" -Fannie Lou Hamer

I have a secret. I have a superpower and there are millions of us with the same "gift" in America. About eighteen million, according to population statistics. To those that know about their ability, I believe we should plan to conspire together to help reshape this country. Our superpower is Invisibility.

Within America, there are other Asian Americans who grapple with their Invisibility on a daily basis. For one, my nationality is usually invisible. Oftentimes I am not seen as "American," and told to "go back" to a continent (Asia) that I have never even been to before. Additionally, in nearly every history class, I've hardly learned Asian history let alone Asian American history; I rarely see myself accurately depicted or frequently represented in the media, and because the national race conversation is typically Black and White, I'm often erased as a person of color and pinned as the "model minority."

Introduction

In *We Gon' Be Alright*, American journalist and music critic Jeff Chang (2016), highlights institutional racism through an amalgamation of various essays. Throughout his book, Chang illuminates the ongoing existence of resegregation and expounds upon the vicious cycle people of color (specifically Black men and women) continue to endure everyday. Chang includes an essay on Asian American "in-betweenness" with the current social and political climate, while insisting that Asian Americans join the conversation. Chang highlights his observations about Asian American "in-betweenness" to concretize Asian American existence and provoke Asian Americans to start holding accountability for their "Asian privilege." In this essay, I will be highlighting how Asian American invisibility has worked hand in hand with the model minority myth, granting Asian Americans privileges that have hurt and helped their

communities, and also stress how it's time they join the conversation and stand in solidarity with other people of color.

The Myths Construction

Before the 1940s, America had viewed Asians as sneaky, sly aliens who were perpetual foreigners. However, during the 1970s, *The New York Times* published an article declaring Japanese and Chinese Asian Americans as “an American success story” and the “model minority” (Wu, 2013). This change of view towards Asian Americans can be attributed to World War Two; according to Indiana University Professor Ellen Wu, the model minority myth was fueled by “American leaders and the American people to work on race relations” (Wu, 2013). During the 1940s, lawmakers had agreed that exclusionary policies towards Asian allied countries (ex. China) was “bad diplomacy.” Congress had decided to create a “goodwill gesture” to China, who was an ally to America. White politicians decided to utilize a “positive” relationship with Asians for an opportunity to allow “ the United States to proclaim itself a racial democracy...and to assume the leadership of the free world” (Wu, 2013). Soon afterwards, Asian Americans weren’t looked at as sly or untrusting, but were painted as the “example” for other minorities; by the late 1960s, White America pinned Asian Americans as the poster child for the “successful” minority.

A study performed last year by a Brown University economist, Nathaniel Hilger (2016), has proved that contrary to stereotyped belief, Asian American financial success compared to other minorities has nothing to do with “educational values” or “Confucian family values.” His research suggests that American society just became less racist towards Asians and Asian Americans, so they were therefore “allowed” into corporations and educational institutions in ways that other people of color were not (Hilger, 2016). However, once Asian Americans are in these spaces, they face a sort of “bamboo ceiling,” where they are not expected to lead and expected to be more subservient (Gee, 2015). Because of the “positive” model minority stereotype, many Asian Americans (especially East Asians) are allowed in White institutional spaces, but also personal spaces like friends groups, affiliation groups/clubs, etc. Asians are not stereotyped as “angry” or “intimidating” to Whiteness, they are seen as wanting to assimilate, therefore, their race becomes invisible.

The Lack of History

Growing up, I used to believe Asian Americans magically appeared in the United States. I didn't know why or how my ancestors got here; I just knew that they weren't with the Pilgrims, and they got here...somehow. I always enjoyed history classes and reading about American history, but always wondered...Where were all the Asians during this? Many Asian Americans are not aware of how their position in society was shaped, or even how or why their ancestors immigrated here. This lack of information also causes Asian Americans to be unaware of the privileges they gained because of Black and Brown fight for liberation; they have not internalized how Black liberation has provided the space for Asian bodies to exist. Former Assistant Attorney General Bill Lann Lee stresses the beneficial impacts of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although African Americans were fighting for Black liberation specifically, they also paved the way for other minorities to be treated fairly regardless of the basis of "race, color and national origin" (Lee, 2014). Asians Americans were then granted more political rights and less discrimination because African Americans were at the forefront at fighting for rights. The lack of history, the lack of representation, and the lack of overall visibility contributes to the "in-between" feelings of Asian Americans. It only increases the divide between other people of color, as well as expands this state of confusion.

Lack of Solidarity

African Americans who fought for liberation during the 1960s started to make White Americans extremely uncomfortable. Professor at the University of California, Irvine, Claire Jean Kim (1999) in her journal, delves into the model minority myth and how White America started to make the unexplicit suggestion of why the Black community couldn't be like their model minority counterparts (Kim, 1999). I have realized that this myth has caused America to see Asian and Black individuals as polar opposites: Asians are stereotyped to be shy, docile, and studious, whereas Black and Brown individuals get pinned as loud, aggressive, and troublemakers. White acceptance of Asian Americans into institutionalized practices, while also leaving Black and Brown communities out, have only created more barriers for harmonious intersectionality. Ultimately, it has only pushed back African American liberation and created a further divide between Asian and Black solidarity.

Chang delves into the lack of participation from the Asian American community in times of social injustice. The Salt Collective Blogger Liz Lin describes how Asians do not fit into the “black and white binary that usually frames conversations about race in this country” (Lin, 2015), however it’s important to recognize that a lot of the Asian/American identity does function in the binary with examples like achieving honorary whiteness or cultural Blackness. Many Asian Americans do not see themselves as people of color, which is problematic with goals of solidarity: this in-betweenness perpetuates Black and Brown struggle. As Chang mentioned, Asian Americans who sided with Peter Liang and chanted “Asian Lives Matter” have not internalized the rewards they receive for taking part in anti-blackness. As mentioned before, the model minority myth was constructed by Whiteness, in attempts to justify the mistreatment of Black and Brown individuals (Yang Stephens, 2016). Asians siding with Liang expected to gain the same privileges as White police officers and it is imperative to note that “if it was not for Ferguson...Peter Liang might have not been convicted” (Chang, 2016). Chang states that there are some in the Asian American community who “would use that power (model minority 'privilege') to make things worse for other communities of color” (Chang, 2016).

Chang highlights an interaction with an older Chinese American woman, who questions his point on the ongoing issue of resegregation. By getting rid of ‘quotas’ for Blacks and Latinos, she believes she is “supporting” Asian Americans. She continues by sharing that there is nothing wrong with “wanting to protect our people (Asians) from discrimination.” Chang is shell shocked, unable to respond to her comment, which overarchingly highlights the misconceptions many Asian Americans have towards standing in solidarity with other people of color. Chang delves into how this woman does not understand that she is not “supporting” Asian Americans by keeping other people of color out of public school systems. She is unaware that her comments of “protecting” Asian Americans from discrimination is discriminatory itself towards Black and Brown people. Her point further reinforces how dangerous Asian American invisibility can be towards not only Asian Americans themselves, but also to other people of color. Asian Americans need to start joining the conversation and thinking outside of “their self-interest” and

they need to “think about what it means to fight for justice and equality for all” (Chang, 2016).

Asian American invisibility causes Asians to exhibit a feeling of being on the outside, looking in, unsure of how they are seen in society. In regards to appropriating Black culture, Jeff Chang mentions Eddie Huang and his inappropriate domination of Black culture. As Eddie Huang appropriates hip hop, he expresses vengeful feelings on Asian American emasculation. In an interview with Bill Maher, Eddie Huang stated, “I feel like Asian men have been emasculated so much in America that we’re basically treated like Black women” (qtd. in Kuo, 2016). This comment further degrades Black women and highlights how Huang feels his masculinity should be “taken more seriously.” Although Huang may feel connected with Black culture, there is a difference between appreciating it and pretending like he understands the same struggle. Huang uses hip hop as a platform and benefits from the profit. With little to no representation of Asian Americans in the media, Eddie Huang holds a major responsibility. Many people of color get pinned with being representative of their entire race; many times they do not get the privilege of individuality. His appropriation of Black culture in the media and claim to his authenticity and thereby success is an extremely dangerous adoption that stems from Asian American invisibility.

So What Now?

In many superhero movies and books, the protagonists grapple with the fact that it would be selfish of them to keep their powers to themselves. If I just use my Invisibility for my advantage, to step over Black and Brown people who aren’t given the same credit from institutions and White Americans, then I am not using my abilities “for the world at large,” let alone even for myself and other Asian Americans. Chang reinforces to his readers that it’s time for Asian Americans “to get off the fence” and “declare their Asian Americanness.” The model minority myth and Asian American Invisibility have given me and other Asians access to resources that should be allocated to other people of color, making it pay for what it has done to Asian Americans, and other people of color.

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