of calling minorities "niggers," "spics," or "chinks." Today most whites justify keeping minorities out of the good things in life with the language of liberalism ("I am all for equal opportunity; that's why I oppose affirmative action"). And today as yesterday, whites do not feel guilty about minorities' plight. Today they believe that minorities have the opportunities to succeed and that if they don't, it's because they do not try hard. And if minorities dare talk about discrimination, they are rebuked with statements such as "Discrimination ended in the sixties, man" or "You guys are hypersensitive."

3

SMELLS LIKE RACISM

Rita Chaudhry Sethi

When I started my first job after college, Steve Riley, an African American activist, asked me: "So, how do you feel being black?" I confessed, "I am not black." "In America," Steve responded, "if you're not white, you're black."

U.S. discourse on racism is generally framed in these simplistic terms: the stark polarity of black/white conflict. As it is propagated, it embraces none of the true complexities of racial behavior. Media sensationalism, political expedience, intellectual laziness, and legal constraints conspire to narrow the scope of cognizable racism. What remains is a pared-down image of racism, one that delimits the definition of its forms, its perpetrators, and, especially, its victims. Divergent experiences are only included in the hierarchy of racial crimes when they sufficiently resemble the caricature. Race-based offenses that do not conform to this model are permitted to exist and fester without remedy by legal recourse, collective retribution, or even moral indignation.

Asians' experiences exist in the penumbra of actionable racial affronts. Our cultural, linguistic, religious, national, and color differences do not, as one might imagine, form the basis for a modified paradigm of racism; rather, they exist on the periphery of offensiveness. The racial insults we suffer are usually trivialized; our reactions are dismissed as hypersensitivity or regarded as a source of amusement. The response to a scene where a Korean-owned store is being destroyed with a bat in the 1993 film Falling Down (a xenophobic and racist diatribe on urban life) reflects how mainstream American culture responds to the phenomenon of anti-Asian violence:

There was, in the theater where I saw the film, a good deal of appreciative laughter and a smattering of applause during this scene, which of course flunks the most obvious test of comparative racism: imagine a black or an Orthodox Jew, say, in that Korean's place and you imagine the theater's screen being ripped from the walls. Asians, like Arabs, remain safe targets for the movies' casual racism.

The perpetuation of the caricature of racism is attributable to several complex and symbiotic causes. First, Asians often do not ascribe racist motivation to the discrimination they suffer, or they have felt that they could suffer the injustice of...

racial intolerance, in return for being later compensated by the fruits of economic success. Second, many Asians do not identify with other people of color. Sucheta Mazumdar posits that South Asians exclude themselves from efforts at political mobilization because of their rigid self-perception as Aryan, not as people of color.  

The final and most determinative factor, however, is the perspective that excludes the experiences of Asians (and other people of color) from the rubric of racism. Whites would deny us our right to speak out against majority prejudice, partially because it tarnishes their image of Asians as "model" minorities; other people of color would deny us the same because of monopsonistic sentiments that they alone endure real racism.

For example, a poll conducted by The Wall Street Journal and NBC News revealed that "most American voters thought that African Americans did not suffer discrimination" but in fact received too many "special advantages." Similarly, when crimes against Asians were on the rise in housing projects in San Francisco, the Housing Authority was loathe to label the crimes as racially motivated, despite the clear racial bias involved. The deputy director of the Oakland Housing Authority’s response to the issue was: "There may be some issues of race in it, but it’s largely an issue of people who don’t speak English feeling very isolated and not having a support structure to deal with what’s happening to them."

Other minorities reject Asian claims of racial victimization by pointing to economic privilege or perceived whiteness. Such rejections even occur among different Asian groups. Chinese Americans in San Francisco attempted to classify Indians as white for the purposes of the California Minority Business Enterprise Statute: "If you are a white male buyer in the City, all else being equal, would you buy from another Caucasian [i.e., Indian] or from a person of the Mongolian race?"

The perspective of some people of color that there is a monopoly on oppression is debilitating to an effort at cross-ethnic coalition building. Our experiences are truly distinct, and our battles will in turn be unique; but if we are to achieve a community, we must begin to educate ourselves about our common denominator as well as our different histories and struggles. Rankism and diminishing relative subjugation and discrimination will only subvert our goal of unity. Naheed Islam expresses this sentiment in part of a poem addressed to African American women:

Ah Sister! What have they done to us? Separated, segregated, unable to love one another, to cross the color line. I am not trying to cash in on your charm. I have my own. The rape, plunder, pain of dislocation is not yours alone. We have different histories, different voices, different ways of expressing our anger, but they used the same bullets to reach us all.

The combination of white America refusing to acknowledge anti-Asian discrimination, and minority America minimizing anti-Asian discrimination, forms a formidable burden upon Asians to combat our own internalized racial alienation, and to fight extrinsic racial classifications by both whites and other minority groups.

It also renders overly simplistic those suggestions that if South Asians simply became "sufficiently politicized" they could overcome fragmentation in the struggle.

As activists, a narrow-minded correlate of racism impacts our political initiatives to use racism as a banner that unites all people of color in a common struggle. The mainstream use of the word "racism" does not embrace Asian experiences, and we are not able to include ourselves in a definition that minimizes our encounters with racism. Participation in an anti-racism campaign, therefore, is necessarily limited to those involved in a battle against racism that fits within the confines of the black/white paradigm, and conversely relegates anti-Asian racism to a lesser realm in terms of both exposure and horribleness.

We need to be more sophisticated in our analysis of racism, and less equivocal in our condemnation. In doing so, we will expand the base of opposition against anti-Asian racism, and forge an alliance against all its myriad forms. The first step in this process is to ask for Asians to apply a racial analysis to our lives. This involves developing a greater understanding of how racism has operated socially and institutionally in this country against ourselves and other people of color, as well as acknowledging our own complicity; and secondly, accepting ourselves as people of color, with a shared history of being targeted as visibly Other. Only then can we act in solidarity with other efforts at ending racism.

Anti-Asian Racism: Fashioning a More Inclusive Paradigm

Racism takes on manifold creative and insidious expressions. Intra-racism, racism among different racial communities, and internalized racism all complicate an easy understanding of the phenomenon. My project here is to uncover shrouded racism perpetrated against Asians, particularly South Asians, in an attempt to broaden the use of the term.

Accent

It is only since 1992 that the Courts have begun to realize the legitimacy of discrimination based upon accent. Immigrants, primarily those of European descent, suffer heightened racism because of their accents, including job discrimination and perpetual taunting and caricaturization. This is a severe and pervasive form of racism that is often not acknowledged as racist, or even offensive. Even among Asians there is a high degree of denial about the accent discrimination that is attributable to race. In a letter to the New York Times, an Asian man blithely encouraged immigrants to maintain their accents, without acknowledging the potential discrimination that we face, though he personally was "linguistically gifted" with an "American accent."
man wrote, “Fellow immigrants, don’t worry about the way you speak until Peter Jennings eliminates his Canadian accent.”

Accent discrimination is linked directly to American jingoism, and its accompanying virulently anti-immigrant undertones. In the aforementioned movie Falling Down, the protagonist has the following exchange with a Korean grocer:

Mr. Lee: Drink eighty-five cent. You pay or go.

Foster: This “tie,” I don’t understand a “tie.” There’s a “v” in the word. It’s “tie-vah.” You don’t got “v” in China?

Mr. Lee: Not Chinese. I’m Korean.

Foster: Whatever. You come to my country, take my money, you don’t even have the grace to learn my language?

A person’s accent is yet another symbol of otherness, but it is one that even U.S.-born minorities do not regard as a target for race-based discrimination. Language is implicitly linked with race, and must be treated as such.

Subversive Stereotyping

The myths that are built based on the commonality of race are meant to dehumanize and simplify people. To many, the Indian persona is that of a greedy, unethical, cheap immigrant. This stereotype is reflected in popular culture, where it’s appearance gives it credibility, thereby reinforcing the image. In the television comedy The Simpsons, a purportedly politically sensitive program, one of the characters is a South Asian owner of a convenience store. In one episode, in an effort to make a sale, he says, “I’ll sell you expired baby food for a nickel off.” Similarly, in the program Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, an alien race called the Ferengi (Hindi for foreigner) are proprietors and sleazy entrepreneurs who take advantage of any opportunity for wealth, regardless of the moral cost.

These constructs are reflected in everyday life as people respond to Indians as if they have certain inherent qualities. Indian physicians, for example, are perceived as shoddy practitioners, who are greedy and disinterested in the health of their patients. In successful medical malpractice suits, Indian doctors are routinely required to pay higher penalties. Similarly, in the now-famous “East Side Butcher” case, where an Indian doctor was convicted of performing illegal abortions, there was no racial analysis despite the fact that no one had been prosecuted for that crime in New York State since the early 1960s despite the fact that hundreds of illegal abortions are performed annually. Another Indian doctor, less than two weeks later, was found guilty of violations in her mammography practice and fined the largest amount in New York State history in such a case. One can not help but wonder if these convictions were, at least in part, motivated by the stereotype of the Indian immigrant.

The Onus

A white, liberal woman once asked my friend Ritu if she wasn’t being overly sensitive for taking offense when people put their feet near her face (a high insult in Indian culture), when she could not fairly expect people to understand her culture. The onus is always on us, as outsiders, to explain and justify our culture while also being expected to know and understand majority culture. Constant cultural slightings about cows, bindis, and Gandhian are deemed appropriate by the majority while we are expected to subjugate expression of our culture to an understanding and acceptance of American culture. As another example, the swastika is an extremely common, ancient Hindu symbol. However, Hindus cannot wear or display the swastika in India because it’s considered a symbol of evil and diabolical worship. The assumption that it is our normative responsibility to make our culture secondary is racist because it suggests that one culture should be more free to express itself than another.

Religious Fanaticism

Eastern religions are commonly perceived as fraudulent, cultish, and fanatical; they are rarely perceived as equally legitimate as the spiritual doctrines of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The story of immaculate conception is accepted as plausible, while the multiarmed, multiheaded God is an impossible fantasy. Hinduism is portrayed as Hare Krishna chanting with shaved heads and orange robes; and Islam is characterized as a rigid, violent, military religion. These hyperbolic characterizations are responsible for the fear of religion that causes local communities to refuse to permit places of worship in their neighborhoods.

Western appropriation of Hindu terms reflects the perception of religion as charlatanical; the words have been reshaped through their use in the English language with an edge of irreverence or disbelief.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hindi Meaning</th>
<th>English Use</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Guru</td>
<td>Religious teacher; Purported head; self-designated leader</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Nirvana</td>
<td>Freedom from endless; Psychedelic ecstasy; cycle of rebirth; drug-induced high</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Pundit</td>
<td>Religious scholar; One with claimed knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mantra</td>
<td>A meditative tool; repetition of word or phrase; Mindless chant</td>
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Similarly, during times of political crisis (the 1991 Persian Gulf War; the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing), Islam has been the object of derision as a dangerous and destructive religion. After the suicide attacks from the World Trade Center...
bombing were identified as Muslims, the media, the FBI, and mainstream America responded with gross anti-Muslim rhetoric. A professor in Virginia pointed out the ignorant confusion of the entire Muslim population into one extremist monolith:

Not all Islamic revivalists are Islamic fundamentalists, and not all Islamic fundamentalists are political activists, and not all Islamic political activists are radical and prone to violence.22

Muslims have linked these characterizations of their religion to racial demonization.23 The New York Post carried a headline entitled "The Face of Hate" with the face of a dark-skinned, bearded man of South Asian or Middle Eastern descent (the accused bomber). Similarly, the New York Times described the work of courtroom artists: "the defendant's beakish nose, hollow cheeks, cropped beard and the sideways tilt of his head."24 In an Op-Ed piece in the New York Times, one Muslim responded to this description: "Such racial stereotyping serves nothing except to feed an existing hate and fear."25

Class Conflicts/Economic Envy

Racism and economic tension are inseparable because race discrimination against Asians has often been manifested as class competition, and vice versa. Since the early 1600s, when Asians became a source of cheap labor for the railroads, we have been an economic threat. As Asians have more recently been portrayed as the prosperous minority, the favored child of America, there has inevitably been sibling rivalry. When auto workers beat up Vincent Chin, was it Japanese competition in the auto industry or unbridled racism that motivated the murderers? When African Americans targeted Korean-owned stores in the riots in Los Angeles after the Rodney King verdict, was it the economic hardship of the inner city and perceived Asian advantages or was it simply racism? The answer is that race and class are inseparable because of the inherent difficulty in identifying the primary or motivating factor; any racial analysis must consider economic scapegoating as an avenue for racial harassment and racial victimization as an excuse for expressing economic tensions.

Conceptual and Perspective Differences

When an immigrant perspective clashes with a white American perspective, the conflict should be considered a racial one. Values such as individuality, privacy, confrontation, competition, and challenging the status quo are considered positive and healthy; however, these components of the liberal state are not necessarily virtues elsewhere. When Hawaiian children do not respond to competitive models of teaching, but thrive in group activities; and when Punjabi children defer to authority, rather than challenge their teachers out of intellectual curiosity, they are harmed by their inability to function in an essentially and uniquely "American" world. Identifying the differences in perspective and lifestyle between Asian immigrants and Americans will help in recognizing arenas in which we will be at a cultural/racial disadvantage.26

NOTES

1. While the film generated much debate about the possible ironic intent of its stereotyping, the reactions of moviegoers showed that the irony was lost on most audiences.
2. Godfrey Cheshire, complete citation for article not available.
5. Racial slurs were rampant (including "Go home, Chinaman" and accent harassment) and tension between the Asian and African American community was worsening. The fact that the perpetrators were African American might have contributed to the general reluctance to characterize these crimes as racially motivated. Again, this reflects an inability, or an unwillingness, to intellectually digest racism between non-white races, as it falls outside of the narrow black/white paradigm.
7. Witness this maelstrom of divisiveness. In Miami, where large Latino and African American populations coexist, a Cuban woman was sworn in as State Attorney General, and while the African American community were dismayed by this decision, and responded by stripping Cubans of their "rank" as a minority. One black lawyer commented: "Cubans are really white people whose native language is Spanish" and others agreed that Cuban Americans should be "disqualified because they have higher income levels than other minorities." Certainly there is complexity in this conflict; however, the net result is that people who could be in alliance based on race are divided. Rohter, Larry, "Black-Cuban Rift Extends to Florida Law School," The New York Times, March 19, 1993, p. B16L.
8. Transcript of San Francisco Board of Supervisors Special Session of Economic and Social Policy Committee, April 30, 1991.
10. Mazumdar, supra at p. 36.
11. Here, and throughout this chapter, I am operating within the constructs of our existing political reality. I am not addressing the normative question of whether people of color should be in coalition against racism, but given that it has been our primary organizing principle, how can we be more effective and inclusive?
12. Interestingly, the case was brought by the EEOC while under the tenure of Joy Cherian, a naturalized Indian. The Commission's 1980 guidelines covering this type of discrimination were written by an Indian, and the case was brought by an Indian plaintiff. Is that what it takes to obtain recognition of the racism that we experience?
13. The Executive Assistant for the Commissioner noted: "If an employer has an applicant who speaks with a French accent ... or with an English accent, they say, 'How cute.' But if he speaks with a Hispanic accent they say, 'What's wrong with this guy?'"