

# **Blacks and Asians**



# Blacks and Asians

*Crossings, Conflict and Commonality*

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of David Fagen,  
African American soldier, Twenty-fourth U.S. Army Infantry Division,  
who in solidarity with the Filipino Cause during the Philippine-American War,  
1899–1902, defected and accepted a commission in the army of  
Filipino revolutionary leader Emilio Aguinaldo.*



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# Foreword

*Frank H. Wu*

What exactly is the so-called “new paradigm” of race relations? “Beyond black and white” tells us what it is not, but it fails to tell us what it is. “Beyond black and white” is the leading candidate that has emerged from among the contradictory worldviews which purport to inform us about race through the lenses of nature, nurture, history, discrimination, culture, chance, and power, whether respectively or in combination, clarifying or distorting. Whatever else they may have to say about the causes, context, and consequences of the racial disparities that continue to mark individuals and communities in our diverse democracy, most writers are starting to observe life in terms that are complex rather than simple, ambiguous instead of definite, dynamic and not static, preferring inclusion to exclusion. Nonetheless, much like “post-modern” as a school of thought, with which it may be understandably confused, “beyond black and white” is an oppositional slogan. Like “post-modern,” it names itself ironically against the prevailing tradition.

It is easy enough to argue that society needs a new paradigm, but it is much harder to explain how such an approach would work in actual practice. The resistance was anticipated by the late philosopher-scientist Thomas Kuhn. He introduced the concept of a paradigm shift which alters the very framework that disciplines intellectual activities. This new paradigm of “beyond black and white,” which can be as facile as it is sophisticated, is only starting to be adopted. It is encountering the usual resistance from those who, as Kuhn predicted, are married to the established methodology even if they cannot help but be aware of its limits.

Even after a new paradigm has become established, of course, it only sets forth new questions. It does not necessarily determine any new answers. That ongoing project is exemplified by this collection of essays. They hold the promise of a renewed commitment to academic inquiry seriously engaged with race and racism.

The new paradigm of “beyond black and white” is in some sense a belated return to difficult realities distorted by the imposition of a Jim Crow racial order which mandated an imaginary but inviolable black-white color line. The descriptive and empirical case for this new paradigm is clear. There have always been and there now are obviously individuals and communities who are neither black nor white, whether Latino/Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, Arab American, or proudly mixed. We are not interlopers. A black-white paradigm produces a picture of the population that is inaccurate. It omits much of humanity.

Until recently, different ethnicities would have been regarded as different races. The Irish no less than the Chinese constituted a distinct “race” under the amateur typologies fashioned in the name of pseudo-sciences no better than phrenology from the turn of the century until the Nazi era. There was once an “Indian problem,” a “Chinese problem,” and a “Mexican problem,” which interfered with the manifest destiny of westward progress, just as there was the “Negro problem,” each to be resolved by separate albeit related regimes of extermination, exclusion and segregation. The demand for mutually exclusive categories, opposed to one another, led to the creation of whiteness and its corresponding but presumed inferior counterpart of blackness. The Irish assimilated, as the Indian and the Chinese and the Mexican became archetypes of the noble savage, the perpetual foreigner, and the illegal alien.

Even so, there is no need to be enamored of a finer sensibility specifying degrees of civilization. Those schemes were perverse in their own style, whether they were the archaic labels given to varying admixtures of ancestry, from octoroon on downward in a scale of darkness, or the modern intricacies of the tourists’ paradise of Hawaii, where everyone has a cousin who is “hapa” subsumed in the overall regime favoring white Americans, foreign Japanese, and Japanese Americans, all the while disfavoring indigenous peoples, an enthusiasm exceeding that on the mainland. Such tendencies only confirm that a more precise representation of the world does not necessarily lead to any better understanding of the world. It is the hopeful fallacy of the Enlightenment era, that knowledge corresponds to wisdom.

Thus, the slogan of “beyond black and white” has a dual meaning. The model is not only literal but also metaphorical. Beyond the egregious instances of racial discrimination are the subtle but pervasive patterns and practices that result in racial disparities. It has become imperative to demonstrate how both problems effectively violate our shared ideals of equality.

The crude story of villains and victims, even as it holds guilty identifiable wrongdoers and induces vague sympathies for romanticized victims, allows us to exonerate ourselves as innocent and celebrate the superiority of our pity

without the benefits of self-awareness or self-doubt. There have been and still are villains and victims, but there also are instances in which the absence of certain villains does not relieve the pain of definite victims. Problems such as house segregation or infant mortality may have a host of causes, but they also have a stark racial effect. So it may be that blameworthiness cannot be assessed and good faith is not sufficient. Introducing non-black people of color is worthwhile for more than merely their own sake; it forces us to acknowledge the structures that enforce racial injustice.

Asian Americans show, for example, that positive images can be dangerous. The model minority myth, which presents Asian Americans as the exemplars of the "good" subordinate, conceals the risks of backlash against the subjects themselves. To work hard is to be unfair competition. Furthermore, it encourages the manipulation of the subjects against others. Asian Americans become pawns in the taunting question to African Americans, "They made it, why can't you?"

The challenge of calculating who has faced the more severe prejudice would be a contest of suffering with no winners, as between the Asian American and the African American who happen to find themselves in the sort of merchant-consumer conflict that arises on a daily basis no matter the background of the players. The former is much more likely than the latter to be a newcomer to the society, notwithstanding the many native-born Asian Americans and foreign-born blacks. The former is much less likely than the latter to have experienced the raw subordination on a group basis imposed by skin color, but it is possible that in isolated cases an Asian American has faced violence that is indistinguishable at the individual level from what an African American has encountered, both becoming the targets of the Ku Klux Klan or skinhead gangs.

The new paradigm creates the dangers of false affinities and superficial comparisons. The prescriptive and normative consequences of this new paradigm are ambiguous. Even if the presence of Latino/Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, Arab American or mixed race persons is plain, the implications which follow for public policy or social activism from their addition to the serious discourse on civil rights remains obscure, other than that complications are bound to ensue. African Americans may begrudge the "Johnny come lately" phenomena, with other groups taking advantage of their memory out of self-interest but without genuine respect. Those other groups may resent the perceived monopoly of African Americans on the public conscience, with everyone else relegated to a seemingly subordinate status in a bizarre inversion of conventional hierarchies.

Although the insertion of non-blacks (or even black immigrants) into polarized debates may serve the ulterior purposes of increasing competition

among communities of color, it is possible to pursue a pragmatic course of recognizing that universal principles may be coupled to particular priorities. Otherwise, it would be foolish for African Americans to relinquish their hard-fought gains. Intent matters, and intent is discerned in the subtleties.

The standard “black and white” paradigm was powerfully persuasive in its own time against the ideologies of white supremacy. Its considerable merits ought not be denigrated. As with most paradigms that become outmoded, its very success was its undoing. For once everyone came to the conclusion that bigotry was wrong, everyone alike denied that they had ever been bigots or insisted that they had overcome their past. Amnesia in turn leads to abstraction. The proposition that African Americans deserved equal rights, meaning that whites enjoyed racial privileges, was reduced to the proposition that everyone deserves equal rights, as if there were the same chances in the past and across locales that whites would be deprived of their customary status by African Americans as vice versa.

Moreover, rhetoric must adapt to reality even as rhetoric shapes reality. The arguments that the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., made to Southern white clergymen who proclaimed themselves progressive in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and to the nation as a whole in *Why We Can't Wait* were compelling then as little has been since. New arguments are needed that address credibly the concerns of non-black people of color, not to mention the apprehension of African Americans that the arrival of Latinos/Hispanics and Asian Americans will worsen the condition of those whom William Julius Wilson has called “the truly disadvantaged” or the corresponding anxieties of white Anglos that their numbers will ensure a new heterodoxy.

The interactions among people of color, then, can serve as a corrective. The addition of Asian immigrants and their American-born progeny, for example, can highlight the color line and its ensuing hierarchy. The addition of Asian Americans can do so, because Asian Americans present the recurring problem of “which side are you on?” Sociologist Harry Kitano, in the leading monograph on Japanese Americans, proclaimed that if you scratch a Japanese American, you find a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant underneath. Filmmaker Spike Lee, in the realistic drama *Do the Right Thing*, presents a Korean immigrant exclaiming that he is black, thereby managing to save his shop from destruction by African Americans angry at the local Italian American pizza joint.

Since the invention of the New World, Asian Americans have been black or white if they are to belong at all, or they are excluded altogether as outsiders of whom the system cannot make sense. It is necessary to point out only because there are those demagogues who would deny it, but the demand that Asian Americans pick a side prevents any denying that there are sides. Asian

Americans, like Latinos/Hispanics, stand astride the black-white color line by circumstance if not choice. If Asian Americans are to assimilate, their fitting in reinforces a rule much as a Chinese immigrant and then his fellows becomes alternately “the Chinaman” or the “Yellow Peril.” We are eager to extrapolate from an individual example to the racial type.

The implicit standard is a white Anglo standard: An Asian American who conforms to it is commendably mainstream, upwardly-mobile, all-American, if perhaps “trying too hard” as a social climber, mildly discomfiting for her eagerness. But an Asian American who is distinctly Asian is at once reassuringly ethnic and unmistakably exotic, confined to Chinatown, Little Tokyo, Koreatown, Little Saigon, or some such place of her people. And an Asian American who copies African Americans, in speech, manners, clothing or music, is worst of all, either deluded or radical.

The study of “whiteness” as a socially-constructed category does much to destabilize the black-white paradigm from within itself: “White” is not what it seems; it cannot be analogized to “pure” anymore than any other skin color. The study of “whiteness” as a convenient fiction can be extended, however, to advance a reconstructive project. Just as “whiteness” as a category is weakened by the “passing” of individuals, “black and white” as a schemata is weakened by the assimilation of groups.

If some Latinos/Hispanics can be either black or white, but lead lives that are similar in culture but dissimilar due to race, it is possible to isolate the variable of race as cannot be done in a social science bounded by black and white. If Asian immigrants are integrated as “honorary whites,” with hesitation on both sides, that phenomenon will emphasize the remaining segregation of African Americans, even or especially if the better position of Asian Americans is welcomed as progress. In each instance, the black-white paradigm becomes a black-white scale. It is neither biology nor culture that justifies it, but expediency. Skin color overwhelms race. Tiger Woods, more outstandingly multi-racial than any of his peers, is for practical purposes black and not Asian.

African Americans and Asian Americans have much to teach one another as well as anyone else who cares about race. The mutual education has been restricted to the invidious clichés set forth by the model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner syndrome. According to their assumptions, Asian immigrants will teach African Americans how to study diligently and work hard while African Americans will teach Asian immigrants about the American Dream by negative example. Asian immigrants will strive to become white (or to be other than black, which passes for the equivalent); African Americans can take refuge in their citizenship being established to a degree newcomers cannot claim.

The contrary is more true than the stereotypes. The model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner syndrome form the basis for an original interpretation of the American dilemma.

The perpetual foreigner syndrome belies color-blindness. One cannot very well oppose immigration of Latinos/Hispanics and Asians because “they” are presumed to be incompatible with “us,” but also maintain that we ought not remedy inequalities affecting African Americans because we cannot be conscious of race. The fear of foreigners exposes the distinctions that would be denied domestically. At the border, we can see very well who looks like us and who does not; we demand to know of the American-born who looks “foreign” where they are “really from,” for it cannot ever be here.

The alarm expressed toward the inevitable demographic shifts of the nation, resulting in the eventual “browning” of the people, indicates the power of race. Communities have the right to define themselves through their admissions standards, by a line of reasoning that is deemed inherent to sovereignty itself. The communal identity, and individual identities in turn, has a solidly racial core in calls for a closing of the borders, as its strongest proponents articulate with pride. In a genuinely color-blind regime, there can be no racial majority. Consequently, there can be no fear of the loss of that status. In the nineteenth century, the Know-Nothing political party flourished until its anti-immigrant platform was divided against itself by the slavery issue. Antagonism toward immigrants, motivated by religion (Roman Catholic) and race (Asian), was overwhelmed by hostility premised on skin color (black).

The model minority myth reverses the causes of academic success. By positing that Asian Americans do well in school because of their Asianness, it defines Asianness as doing well in school. Traits such as doing homework, which are not inherently Asian, are commended as Asian as if race determined behavior. A vicious cycle is set off, in this instance not wholly benign because of the expectations imposed on Asian American schoolchildren.

Perceiving the circularity of the ascriptive formula, however, allows a parallel to be drawn to the treatment of African Americans. The more Asian Americans and academic success are confused, the more apparent it should become that attacks on African Americans for possessing an allegedly pathological culture are unwarranted. By depicting the trait as racial, before condemning it (for example, out-of-wedlock births), observers goad the subjects of the stereotype into agreeing with the description but disagreeing with the judgment. Even if the trait had only a weak correlation to race, the stereotype gives it causation by race. It is easier to accept the trait and valorize it than reject both the expectation of how one will behave and the evaluation of that behavior.

The range of topics “beyond black and white” demanding scholarship form an intellectual frontier of boundless possibility. More than a century ago, Frederick Jackson Turner famously opined that the United States was characterized by its physical frontier. Whether they followed his thesis or took objection to it, most thinkers have taken for granted that the issue is whether white Anglo America was defined in this manner. Even W.E.B. Du Bois’s quote about the problem of the twentieth century being the problem of the color line is typically misquoted in the interests of consistency. He actually predicted—to recall the full sentence: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”<sup>1</sup>

There is, for example, the beginning of Asian Americans as African Americans. The Yellow Power movement of the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1960s, which brought together Asian ethnic groups into the novel formation of “Asian American,” was a direct descendant or at least distant cousin of the Black Power Movement. There would be no Asian Americans if black had not been beautiful. Earlier, Asian Americans were legally the same as African Americans: Incapable of testifying in court, prevented from marrying whites, and relegated to inferior schools.

African Americans also are Asian Americans. Reparations for slavery became a less quixotic cause when Japanese Americans won redress for the internment of World War II, in the 1988 Civil Liberties Act. The current efforts in Congress are based on the precursor of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, the official panel that concluded the internment had been motivated by wartime panic, racial prejudice, and lack of leadership, not military necessity. The precedent cannot be denied: If Asian immigrants are entitled to recompense, it follows that African Americans are (leaving aside problems of case-by-case proof).

The study of the past is the study of the present. Across cultures and in perpetuity, it has been easier to discuss the controversies of the past than the controversies of the present. We write our history to justify our contemporary values, and we use our contemporary values to write our history. Each generation needs to write its own history. Ours may be the first to realize that our histories are plural rather than singular. The stories presented here are the start.

Frank H. Wu  
Washington, D.C.

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1. W.E.B. DuBois. *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).



# Preface and Acknowledgments

*Hazel M. McFerson*

The idea for this collection of essays on political and social interactions among African Americans, Asian Americans, and Asians was born during my two years of residence and travel in South and Southeast Asia. Living in and traveling around the Philippines (where I was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Asia and the Pacific, Manila), and visiting the People's Republic of China, Cambodia, India, Japan, Korea, Laos, Maldives, Nepal, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam, provided the opportunity to interact with different groups of Asian ethnicities and national origins.

My experience in the Philippines, where an African American woman is still an attention-drawing rarity, made me curious about how other Asians would react to me. Presumably, their reaction would differ from the intense attention I attracted in Manila and elsewhere in the country, with constant staring and sometimes-intrusive inquisitiveness, alongside good-natured interest. There was in that inquisitiveness an interesting interplay between my gender and my race—with gender probably the more salient influence, as Filipinos have long been familiar with African American men from the long-standing military presence of the United States in their country. My experiences in the other Asian countries proved to be different. Rarely did I look up to find someone staring at me, and there seemed to be an attitude of positive goodwill toward me as an African American. People called out to me good-naturedly: “Hi, Oprah!” And others shyly requested to be photographed with me.

Visiting shopping stalls in Itaewon, Korea, I was struck by the courtesy and friendliness of shopkeepers, and the total absence of the tension and rancor evident in so many Korean-black encounters in Los Angeles and elsewhere in America. This experience was replicated in Indo-China, India, China, Japan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Everywhere, the attitude toward African

American social capital was positive. I did expect to find some familiarity of local people with African American music and style, but not such widespread affinity. Blues and jazz clubs were everywhere. I was completely enthralled by local talents, such as that displayed nightly at Just Blues, Itaewon, Korea, by blues man extraordinaire Chae-so-Yeong, whose “down-home” blues style, talent, and enthusiastic love of traditional African American music ranks him with the best on the Chicago blues scene. In other venues, I encountered young people emulating hip-hop mannerisms of dress—oversized shirts, untied shoes, and droopy pants—the latter creating peculiar difficulties for their much slimmer hips. Asian-style “rap” music videos dominated the local MTV equivalent. The admiration for American sports superstars was ubiquitous—the likeness of Michael Jordan and Grant Hill looking down from billboards, and young people wearing No. 39 Chicago Bulls jerseys. By contrast, their own indigenous “black” populations, in countries such as the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia,<sup>1</sup> were nowhere to be seen, and a very strong “white bias” was evident, particularly in the Philippines and Japan, where billboards invariably show phenotypically white Asian women selling various skin-whitening agents.

What were the reasons for this love of African American culture and this ground-in bias against darker phenotypes? Why did Asian attitudes toward African Americans appear to be so different in Asian countries than in the U.S.? Was it a result of economic competition, or cultural mimicry, or of the inward turning typical of first-generation immigrant communities that made for black-Asian conflict in today’s urban America? Were there no elements of commonality between blacks and Asians in America? What historical forces shaped their interaction? This book is the result of this curiosity.

It was clear from the start that the “truth” could be found neither in a simplistic paradigm of unbroken conflict, nor in a rosy view of working class commonality superseding ethnic differences. There must be elements of both conflict and commonality in Asian-black interaction in America, and those elements must perforce have some historical roots—both in the conflict generated by competition for the same low-skilled jobs and in the commonality generated by the downward leveling of socio-racial status characteristic of the American racial tradition. It was equally clear from the start that I should not

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1. These include the Aetas and the Batak in the Philippines, and the Semang of southern Thailand and Malaysia. Cf. Edward L. Powe. *The Negritos of the Philippines*. Madison, Wisconsin: Armchair Travelers, 1999. Charles P. Warren. “Minority Student Responses to the Anthropology of Asian Black Populations.” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*. 10 (1982): 211–224.

even attempt to answer all these questions from my individual perspective, but weave the story from a variety of informed viewpoints.

My approach was to begin by reviewing the history of Asian-black relations in America and then, on that basis, to assemble a diverse group of knowledgeable persons in the field who could provide original contributions from their own viewpoints. This was done through a workshop, which I organized at George Mason University in February 2003, to discuss the general issues and set the broad themes along which various contributors would prepare their essays. My own chapters and the contributors' essays were then complemented and rounded out by a fairly representative set of well-known articles and book chapters touching on the various key issues. It is through the contributions of all these individuals that the story of the "crossings" between Asians and African Americans is told, and prospects for their future interaction sketched out without pessimism or naiveté.

My first acknowledgment goes to the support and enabling environment provided by George Mason University and particularly the Provost, Dr. Peter Stearns, who provided financial support for the project, through a Provost's Faculty Award grant. I also thank Dr. Harold Gortner for his valuable advice about the Fenwick Fellows Program, which also offered financial and logistical support. I thank Dr. John Zenelis, Director of the Fenwick Fellows Program, and Kevin Sanders, Fenwick Library, who always cheerfully and efficiently provided library support. Also at Mason I thank the very competent and patient staff of the Internal Resources Center: Joann Wray, Director, Jason Kott, Saph Khan, Jim Kenny, and Kamyar Jalali. I also thank Deb Hill, who was invaluable in helping me to coordinate my teaching while I also was involved in completing the manuscript. Special thanks to Danika Myers, for her superb editorial assistance, and to Collette Lawson, for her computer assistance.

Thanks also to Chai Siribongkot, of Bangkok Blues, Falls Church, Virginia, for his time and insights into the African American musical influence in Asia. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dean Frank Wu, Wayne State University Law School, Detroit for his erudite and sensitive Foreword. My life is richer for all the many gracious and interesting Asian friends I "discovered" and who "discovered" me during my years in their midst. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the scholarship of Rene G. Ontal and Cherry Montejo, who invited me to participate in the production of their path-breaking documentary on David Fagen,<sup>2</sup> an African

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2. David Fagen is also spelled as "Fagan." One explanation for the different spellings is provided by, William Schroder, author of *Cousins of Color*, who writes, "while researching *Cousins of Color*, I found Fagen's name spelled both ways. . . . Military records of the day (more likely accurate than newspaper accounts) consistently refer to him as 'Fagen.'"

American member of the U.S. Army during the Philippine-American War (1899–1902). Fagen was one among several African Americans who defected to the Philippine cause, and he later served as an officer in Emilio Aguinaldo's army. His story and that of other African Americans, in similar circumstances, has been long lost to history. But it stands as an early and unparalleled example of the many "crossings" between African Americans and Asians.

And, of course, I owe the greatest thanks to my family for their support: My husband of thirty-six years, Rino Schiavo-Campo, our son Rino Jr., daughters Pia, Mara, son-in-law Tommie L. Porter, and daughter-in-law Zara, granddaughter, Jianna Hazel, and the newest and youngest member of our family, grandson Rino Vittorio.

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# Contributors

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Julian Madison is an associate professor of History at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Connecticut. He earned his Ph.D. at the University of Washington. He and his Filipina wife, Riezl, are the parents of Maria, Julian III, and Philip.

Sunaina Maira is Associate Professor in Asian American Studies at the University of California, Davis. She is the author of *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York*, Temple University Press, 2002 and the co-editor, with Elisabeth Soep, of *Youthscapes: Popular Culture, National Ideologies, Global Markets*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. She co-edited (with Rajini Srikanth) *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America*, Temple University Press, 1997 which won the American Book Award in 1997.

Kavita Mittapalli holds a Masters degree in Sociology from George Mason University, Fairfax VA. She is currently enrolled in the doctoral program at the same university in the Department of Education. Since 1998, she has worked in the areas of public relations, health and interpersonal communication, and education research and evaluation both in the U.S. and India. Her prime interests are in survey research, research methodology and minority education. She currently works as a research assistant for a federal contracting company engaged in education research, evaluation and technical assistance.

Frank Wu is currently Dean, Wayne State University Law School, Detroit, MI. He was a visiting professor at the University of Michigan in 2002–03, and he received the Teacher of the Year award from the Black Law Students Alliance while there. Professor Wu's *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*, was published in 2002 by Basic Books. His co-authored textbook, *Race, Rights and Reparation: Law and the Japanese American Internment*, was published in 2001 by Aspen Elective Series. His more than 200 articles have appeared in such periodicals as the *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *National Law Journal*, *Legal Times*, and *Asian Week*.