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Relationship Counseling for the U.S.: Understanding White America's Role in Asian American Experiences

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Relationship Counseling For the U.S.:

Understanding White America's Role in Asian American Experiences

For a country that prides itself on being the “Great American Melting-Pot,” the U.S. is strangely notorious for marginalizing, discriminating against, and completely shutting out massive groups of people who are perceived as ‘too different.’ Perhaps this is because it is easier to blend in when the new ingredients match the color, texture, and flavor of what was already in the pot -- in other words, while the melting pot might work fantastically for people of European descent, who already match the dominant group in our society, it appears that we often let those who belong to a racial or ethnic minority simply sink to the bottom, where they will inevitably get burned. And then we pat ourselves on the back for doing such a great job mixing when the new substance remains just as milky-white as before. Proponents of assimilation would simply argue that it is the job of minority groups to mix themselves in; instead, I argue that it is dominant white America that holds the spoon, and thus we are just as, if not more, to blame for the lack of mixing found in modern American society. The ultimate cause of racial and ethnic divisions is not the minorities themselves, but rather American society's systematic rejection of all those who are deemed ‘different.’ By engaging in a longstanding system of oppression and privilege, oftentimes unknowingly, white Americans are driving Asian Americans to the margins of society by refusing to admit them into a whitewashed common culture, causing them to seek out a sense of belonging within their ethnic communities. The answer to creating a more inclusive, integrated society is not encouraging homogeneity and citizens' conformity to norms; rather, we all—white Americans especially—must make an effort to become aware of the social

systems that label and reject difference, and then work to usurp those systems and fully accept the unabridged, unique identities of all individuals.

Racial and ethnic divisions in everyday society are most visible in the makeup of the communities that people form with one another. Ethnic enclaves, for instance, are found all over the U.S., in the form of “Chinatowns” and ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods; these unique pockets of people with similar backgrounds provide a safe, welcoming space for minority groups to congregate and nurture a shared culture. Yet, despite the obvious benefits of forming relationships with people who understand one’s background, culture, and experiences, some fear that this congregating of individuals of the same race or ethnicity further alienates them from the larger society and promotes divisions. One advocate of assimilation—the adopting of an American identity and culture in order to better fit in to American society—argues that “immigrant clusters...[and their] inevitable mobilization behind an ethnic agenda...directly [threaten] our nonsectarian assimilationist values” (Salins 105). In other words, surrounding oneself with similar individuals cuts one off from other groups and ideas, directly contributing to the racial and ethnic divisions that plague the U.S. today. Assimilation advocates would thus argue that erasing these divisions requires Asian Americans to try harder to mix with the rest of society instead of settling in homogenous groups. They would say that America is ready to welcome them, if they would just step out of their comfort zones.

However, upon analysis of the relationships Asian Americans form with one another, one finds that it is quite the opposite case—Asian Americans in fact turn to members of their own ethnicity because they find white society to be *unwelcoming* to outsiders. After all, American society has been constructed around the lives of white people for centuries; their language,

religion, appearance, and general culture are all considered the ‘norm,’ leaving everything else with the label of ‘different.’ For migrants like Ashima, a recent Indian-American migrant in the accredited film *The Namesake* who is unfamiliar with Christianity, American English dialect, and popular American culture, these labels make it extremely difficult to create a place for oneself in American society. With no concept of 24/7 gas or how to operate a washing machine, an initially limited understanding of English, and sacred naming traditions that are immediately rejected by rigid hospital policies, Ashima began to despair and eventually expressed that she did not want to raise her son “in this lonely country” (Nair). Turning to an Indian-American community for support became Ashima’s only option, and it ended up becoming a stand-in family that helped her navigate adjusting to a vastly different way of life, as well as providing the comfort of familiar traditions in a space away from the scrutiny of common culture (Nair). As outsiders in a foreign land, such relationships are critical for immigrant individuals to feel a sense of belonging when the rest of society would not have them.

This trend of gravitation towards similarity is not restricted to immigrants or ethnic enclaves, either; in the graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, a young Chinese American named Jin ends up becoming best friends with the other Asian American boy in his class, Wei-Chen, as opposed to forming close relationships with his white classmates. Wei-Chen first asks in Chinese if Jin is Chinese and if they could be friends (Yang 37-38). Initially, Jin tries to reject him, telling him, “You’re in America, speak English,” and claiming that the popular white kids are already his friends—but when they continue to ignore him, he and Wei-Chen begin a conversation in Chinese, and quickly develop a strong friendship (40). In this moment, a shared understanding of language and culture catalyzes their relationship in a manner that could not have worked with the

white students, who have little interest in learning who Jin really is. Jin's situation, though a work of fiction, is common throughout America: a study of Asian and European American college students reflects Jin's elementary school experience, finding that students of Asian background significantly preferred friends and partners of similar descent, especially those of the same nationality (Chuansheng). Although Asian Americans only made up 35% of the school population, other Asian Americans made up 66% of their close friends (Chuansheng Table 2). This reveals that even in some of the most liberal and diverse places in the nation—college campuses—Asian Americans consistently form more relationships with other Asian Americans than with their white peers. This gap is even more profound nationwide, as people of Asian descent only make up 5.67% of the U.S. population as of 2016 and still gather in homogeneous groups (U.S. Census Bureau). On a national scale, Asian Americans are being pushed out of white society and instead turning to those who understand and welcome their identities.

Some might interpret these staggering statistics as an indication that Asian Americans are giving up on trying to integrate into society—perhaps fitting in is just too hard, so they take the easy route and form comfortable groups at the first obstacle they encounter. However, trends of congregating with like individuals do not necessarily mean that Asian Americans aren't *trying* to fit into American society; in fact, by studying the unique relationships between first and second-generation Asian Americans, one finds that instead of giving up when faced with an unwelcoming culture, Asian Americans are willing to change their entire identities to fit the ideal American standard and gain admittance to society. A general trend that I have noticed in many works of Asian American literature suggests that second-generation children often undergo a period of strain in their familial relationships, where they attempt to reject their ethnic ancestry in

favor of an American identity. When they find that this new identity also fails to create a space for them in society, they turn back to their families for support and become much closer with them. Instead of immediately joining ethnic groups, it is only *after* their efforts to assimilate are *still* deemed unsatisfactory that Asian Americans return to their original identity and cultural community.

Initial tension between first and second generation Asian Americans is evident in *The Namesake* when Ashima's son, Gogol, begins to reject Indian tradition in favor of a more American identity. He not only dresses in t-shirts, listens to American music, and immediately prefers to speak English, but he also makes the radical decision to replace his given Bengali name with the Americanized version, "Nick" (Nair). Believing that he has the power to earn a place in American society by acting more white, Gogol forgoes his original identity and grows angry with his parents for sticking to their traditions. Becoming "Nick" would supposedly give him access to the American Dream, as an American name on credit cards and resumes means more economic and social opportunities in a whitewashed society. However, Gogol eventually realizes that acting white is not enough, as he continues to feel a disconnect from the rest of America no matter how much he tries to assimilate. Because of his brown skin, he is never taken seriously as a "real American." As a result, he gains a greater appreciation of his Bengali heritage and culture, ultimately changing his name back to "Nikhil" and forming closer relationships with his family and the Bengali community because they accept him for simply being himself. Essentially, Gogol completely revised his sense of self in an effort to assimilate, and white America still did not accept him. It is no small wonder that he finally chose to be with people who accept him for who he is instead.

The same progression of Gogol's relationships with his family and identity is consistent throughout many works of Asian American literature. In nearly every case, try as they may to act "American," characters eventually realize that their families are the only ones who will accept their multi-cultural identity. Therefore, the complex stages of these relationships suggest that Asian American's gravitation toward each other is not born out of laziness or unwillingness to join the rest of society, but rather comes from a desire to belong and be understood. American society continuously excludes Asian Americans no matter how hard they try to fit in; thus, they cannot be blamed for distancing themselves from white society, as it would not even admit them in the first place.

Because this is a common experience for so many Asian Americans across the nation, the constant discrimination against them is not the result of the actions of a few individuals, but rather of a deeply ingrained system of prejudice that has been perpetuated by the government, media, and other social institutions in which we all participate. In fact, the marginalization of Asian Americans by white people began generations ago and has been festering in American society through the present day. The treatment of Japanese Americans during WWII is a prime example of discrimination that was perpetuated by the government itself, as historian Ancheta argues "popular sentiment [blurred] any distinctions between loyal Americans of Japanese Ancestry and wartime adversaries of the Japanese empire," allowing lawmakers and courts to justify the cruel internment of Japanese Americans in the name of war because they were not seen as fully American (31). During this period, Japanese persons were not even regarded as fully human; popular media was pumped full of racist anti-Japanese propaganda that depicted people of Japanese descent as beasts, rapists, and grotesquely exaggerated stereotypes. One such

poster portrayed the “Jap Beast and his plot to rape the world,” where exaggerated Japanese soldiers were shown massacring innocent white American women (Yam). Such messages served to dehumanize Japanese Americans for the public, allowing everyday white Americans to turn a blind eye to the injustice of the internment camps, and lose no sleep over it. Through these actions, the government and the public showed Japanese-Americans time and time again that they did not belong. George Takei, a Japanese-American who grew up in the internment camps, reflects, “As with many traumatic experiences, [Japanese Americans] were anguished by their memories and haunted by shame for something that wasn’t their fault” (140). He mentions this shame often, as Japanese-Americans began to believe society’s messages about them and blamed themselves for what happened. Hated by society, they started to see themselves as outsiders in their own country, and these feelings burdened them for the rest of their lives. Though the war ended decades ago, many of the consequences of these messages have carried into today’s world and continued to divide white and Asian Americans.

Today, the same fear-mongering tactics of the internment era are used to justify the shutting out of other people of Asian descent from American society, or even from entering the country at all. In a post 9/11 America, for instance, the label of “terrorist” surrounds anyone who looks remotely Muslim—Changez, a Pakistani man in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* who has experienced the scrutiny non-whites are subjected to in the U.S. points out, “It is remarkable, given its physical insignificance...the impact a beard worn by a man of my complexion has on [Americans]” (Hamid, 130). Despite his American clothes and fancy American job in finance, he can no longer walk down the street without feeling eyes upon him, reminding him that he is perpetually an outsider and a terrorist in the minds of his peers, no matter how “American” he

tries to be. For simply looking like they do not belong, Asian Americans are being accused of some of the worst crimes against humanity—being alienated, threatened, and even assaulted—all in the name of protecting a country that they, too, are a part of. Similarly, in light of today’s coronavirus pandemic, Chinese Americans have become the target of more fear and abuse. Thanks in part to President Trump calling it the “Chinese Virus,” Asian Americans—not just those of Chinese descent—are experiencing a striking rise in discrimination incidents, as virus hotspots in California and New York have begun to make up 31.8 and 12.9 percent of harassment incidents nationwide, respectively (Kelley). They not only have to protect themselves from the virus, but also from their fellow citizens, as Asian Americans are once again the scapegoat for a national crisis in which they truly played no part. Such aggressions born of fear reveal to Asian Americans that no matter what they do, they “still have to constantly prove they are truly loyal American” (Zhou 7). It matters not whether they are first, second, or tenth generation; white America sees non-white, and thus non-American.

In this analysis of nationwide discrimination on the part of white America, we must recognize that most *individual* white Americans are not blatantly bigoted racists—however, that does not mean they aren’t still actively participating in this centuries-old *system* of prejudice. Poet Samira Ahmed reminds us that oftentimes, the kindest, friendliest people carry hidden prejudice when she writes, “Sometimes the enemy is a smiling neighbor ashamed to reveal herself except behind the dark curtain of a ballot box” (21-23). The same person who claims to be an ally will vote time after time against her Asian American neighbors, effectively keeping them from holding the same positions as white people and showing them that even their friends do not see them as equal. Or, perhaps even more subtle, you have laughed at a SARS or

Coronavirus joke about an Asian American classmate, turning their heritage into a punchline based on inaccurate stereotypes and showing them that they are seen as a virus-carrying outsider instead of a mere fellow American. Maybe you have innocently asked a person of Asian ethnicity, “Where are you from?”, which speaker Riz Ahmed points out only serves to alienate Asian Americans further by implying that they are not truly “from” the country they call home. We have surely all done some variation of these, whether consciously or unconsciously. Even the best of us. Unknowingly repeated over and over again, such actions and comments continuously mark Asian Americans as outsiders in their own country, perpetuating cycles of racism and reminding them that they do not belong. The issue isn’t just certain individuals being unapologetically racist; rather, the entire structure of American society has conditioned us to respond negatively to otherness without even being aware of it. As soon as this discrimination is recognized as a system, it becomes clear that no amount of conformity to white society will change the fact that Asian Americans are perpetually perceived as other by white America.

If it is the fault of our prejudiced societal systems for pushing them out of society, then we can no longer argue that Asian Americans just have to “try harder” to assimilate or “become more like everyone else.” Instead, we must engage in large-scale systemic change to combat the structures that push Asian Americans away from the rest of society and then create a society that is welcoming and accepting of all people and their diverse identities. Asian American literature offers some steps that society can take to accomplish this task. One is positive media representation of Asian Americans, exemplified by George Takei’s role in *Star Trek* as a pan-asian officer who was a “strong, sharp, and likeable character,” a stark contrast to Hollywood’s “long history of unflattering stereotypical depictions of Asian men” (187). This

character not only allowed young Asian Americans to see themselves reflected by a positive role model on television, but it also broke down stereotypes of Asian people for all of its audience by presenting a character that is authentic, respectable, and unquestionably belongs in his universe. By the same token, understanding different points of view helps people to better relate to one another, which is why it is vital for us to tell and listen to stories about Asian Americans' experiences. Storytelling allowed characters with a variety of backgrounds to relate to one another in *The Boat People*, as hearing the stories of a Sri Lankan refugee's life helped Canadian lawyers and judges to set aside their original fears of terrorism and begin to understand that most refugees simply want the same things as everybody else: a chance to have a better life for themselves and their children (Bala). The final, and perhaps most crucial step toward a more inclusive society is education. We must become more aware of the misinformation and stereotypes that warp our perceptions of others, and learn to overcome the prejudice that is so deeply ingrained in our society. Through working with all of these texts in a classroom setting, I gained an important perspective on my role in society, my own bias and privilege, and what I can do to help others; if every American could learn just a sliver of what I did, the world would likely be a more welcoming and accepting place. Ultimately, openness and understanding are the keys to building a society that asks people not to conform to some standard, but rather to bring themselves as they are.

The bottom line is: America can be better. *We can do better.* As we continue to stir the melting pot in our favor, now is the time for someone to grab the spoon out of our hand and point it at us like a frustrated parent, saying, "Hey! You know better than that!" We might be resistant at first, like any foolish child who whines, "I didn't do anything!" and then stomps away,

embarrassed and ashamed. But instead of slamming the door and hiding away in our room, we need to turn around and face our mistakes head on. It takes courage to admit that we're wrong; it takes courage to understand our role in unfair systems, and it takes even more courage to decide to do something about it. America will likely never be perfect, and that isn't what we're aiming for anyway. We simply need to open our eyes to injustice and find our own ways to combat it—until, one day, our divisions begin to melt away.

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