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# Racial Stereotypes, Respectability Politics, and Running for President: Examining Andrew Yang's and Barak Obama's Presidential Bids

By Vinay Harpalani

Race and the Law Prof Blog  
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During his bid for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, Andrew Yang received more national media attention than any prior Asian American political candidate [1]. Although not a major contender for the nomination, Yang—who is Taiwanese American—was an engaging and entertaining presence, capturing the imagination of many observers. He gathered a following known as the “Yang Gang”—a group that included people of various political orientations and all racial backgrounds. Even after his campaign ended in February, Yang remained visible as a CNN political commentator. And as the COVID-19 pandemic spread and shut down the U.S. economy, Yang’s signature policy proposal—the Universal Basic Income (UBI)—garnered more attention as a means to provide economic relief. Then, in the wake of the pandemic, Yang’s response to anti-Asian American violence sparked more debate.

Yang was not the first Asian American presidential candidate. Hawaii Senator Hiram Fong won votes for the 1964 Republican presidential nomination from the Hawaii and Alaska delegations. In 1972, Representative Patsy Mink, also from Hawaii, became the first Asian American to seek the Democratic presidential nomination [2]. More recently, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal sought the Republican nomination in 2016; and in 2020, California Senator Kamala Harris and Representative Tulsi Gabbard sought the Democratic nomination along with Yang. But Fong and Mink ran in an era when primary campaigns were shorter and received less media coverage. Harris was a nationally visible candidate, but both she and the media emphasized her Black identity much more than her Asian Indian (Tamil) American heritage. To the extent that Gabbard received attention, it was largely for her unorthodox political views and her criticism of other candidates rather than her American Samoan heritage [3]. And while Jindal’s Asian Indian (Punjabi) American roots did receive some attention, [he deliberately de-emphasized them and embraced assimilation as an ideal.](#)

Yang, in contrast, did not hide from his Asian American identity and even highlighted it at times. By December, he was the only candidate of color who qualified for the Democratic primary debates. When asked about this, Yang lamented the absence of

Kamala Harris and Cory Booker, and he acknowledged that Black Americans and Latina/o Americans face more challenging barriers than he ever did. Nevertheless, Yang also recounted the racial epithets and insults he encountered during his childhood, connecting his experiences to the broader struggles of people of color.

But Yang misfired in his [April 1 Washington Post op-ed](#), which addressed COVID-19 related hate crimes against Asian Americans. He asserted that “Asian Americans need to embrace and show our American-ness in ways we never have before ... step up, help our neighbors, donate gear, vote, wear red white and blue ... show without a shadow of a doubt that we are Americans who will do our part for our country ... [.]” Yang noted that Japanese Americans volunteered for the military during World War II, but he neglected to mention the injustice of their internment. Rather than placing blame squarely on the perpetrators of hate crimes, Yang’s op-ed seemed to emphasize the responsibility of Asian Americans to overcome racism and xenophobia.

Several Asian American celebrities and commentators criticized Yang’s op-ed. Responding in a [letter to the Washington Post](#), David Inoue, Executive Director of the Japanese Americans Citizens League, accused Yang of “blaming the victim” and “fail[ing] to recognize the fundamental reality of the racism” that leads to hate crimes. Actor George Takei, of *Star Trek* fame, [tweeted](#) that “Yang is way off the mark” and that Asian Americans “don’t have anything we need to prove[.]” Vox writer Li Zhou [discussed](#) how Yang’s comments embody “[respectability politics](#)”—attempts by members of marginalized groups to show that their values, norms, and behaviors coincide with those of mainstream society and thus are not threatening to it. More starkly, in a [subsequent Washington Post op-ed](#), Columbia University student Canwen Xu called Yang a “white-people pleaser.”

During his tenure in office, President Barack Obama found himself mired in similar controversy. Obama was accused of promoting [respectability politics](#) during his May 2013 commencement address at Morehouse College, when he asserted “that too many men in our [Black] community continue to make bad choices” and elaborated on this theme. Various critics reacted sharply to these comments. Columbia Journalism Professor Jelani Cobb bemoaned Obama’s speech as “[confirm\[ing\] the long and ugly tradition that conflates blackness with laziness and poverty, and whiteness with virtue and wealth.](#)” Writer Ta-Neishi Coates accused Obama of “[singularly ... scold\[ing\]](#)” Black Americans in a way that he did not hold other groups accountable. Beyond the Morehouse speech, Temple University Professor Marc Lamont Hill has [observed that Obama employed respectability politics in policy initiatives](#) such as [My Brother’s Keeper](#). And in an [essay that actually defends respectability politics](#), Harvard Law Professor Randall Kennedy [noted that at the same time Obama “scolds” Black America, he “has assiduously cultivated a persona that is racially nonthreatening to many whites \[.\]”](#) In that vein, Obama too was a “white-people pleaser.”

But in order to be elected, Obama had to cultivate that non-threatening persona. He had to ensure that White voters were comfortable voting for him. And to accomplish this, Obama also had to show the masses of White people that he was the exception to the negative stereotypes that many of them held about Black people. His background as the [first Black Editor-in-Chief of the Harvard Law Review](#), among

many other accomplishments and his polished, [“articulate”](#) speaking style, quelled most doubts about his intelligence. Also, in contrast to stigmatized images of Black single parenthood, Obama presented himself as family-oriented—an image buttressed by the strong presence of First Lady Michelle Obama, along with their daughters, Malia and Sasha. Even if Obama had not preached respectability politics, he had to be “respectable” himself.

Obama also made White people feel comfortable by joking about racial stereotypes. When asked if Bill Clinton was the “first Black President”—as Nobel laureate Toni Morrison had once stated—Obama quipped: [“I would have to investigate more Bill’s dancing abilities ... before I accurately judged whether he was in fact a ‘brother’\[.\]”](#) Additionally, Obama was forgiving when White politicians made racially insensitive remarks towards him. He chose Joe Biden as his running mate, even after [Biden had clumsily referred to him as “articulate” and “clean.”](#) Later, [Obama forgave similar comments by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.](#) Through these actions, he made White Americans feel less discomfort about stereotypes they held or accidentally expressed.

Andrew Yang also had to navigate America’s racial landscape. Like Obama, he made White audiences more comfortable by forgiving anti-Asian American comments, such as [those made by Saturday Night Live comedian Shane Gillis.](#) Yang himself drew jokingly on stereotypes, even more than Obama did. During one rally, he referred to his own campaign as [“the nerdiest presidential campaign in history\[.\]”](#) [pledging to use PowerPoint during his State of the Union address.](#) He also joked that [“I am Asian, so I know a lot of doctors”](#); and that [“the opposite of Donald Trump is an Asian man who likes math.”](#) “MATH”, which stands for Make American Think Again, was Yang’s campaign slogan: he wore a “MATH” pin as his signature, playing to the notion that Asian Americans excel at math, science, and academics generally. Unlike Obama and other Black candidates, Yang could benefit from the [“model minority”](#) stereotype. People did not question his intelligence—if anything, they assumed he was smart.

At the same time, Yang also wanted to defy racial stereotypes. Although he poked fun at the notion of Asian Americans as “nerdy”, he was cool, poised, and humorous during his debate appearances. Asian Americans are also [stereotyped as passive](#), and some voters on the campaign trail thought that Yang was [“too nice” to beat Trump.](#) But during his rallies, Yang would play Mark Morrison’s [“Return of the Mack”](#) as his walk-out song—evoking a stereotypic masculinity that is [not typically associated with Asian American men.](#) In subtle ways, Yang tried to show that he was not only smart, but also had the personal characteristics to lead.

But Yang delved into respectability politics when he addressed the most visible stereotype of Asian Americans: the idea that we are [perpetual foreigners](#) rather than Americans [4]. Even for Asian Americans born in the U.S., many people assume that we cannot speak English well, are unfamiliar with American customs, and are more loyal to our ancestral countries than to the U.S. [Implicit bias research shows that Americans tend to perceive faces with epicanthic folds \(or single eyelids\) as being foreign rather than American](#) [5]. [Such eyelids](#) are common among certain Asian American groups. Just as [dark skin has come to denote criminality](#), single eyelids

have come to represent a menacing foreignness—marking Asian Americans as targets for COVID-19 related hate crimes.

The perpetual foreigner stereotype is also reinforced by the tendency to lump different groups of Asian Americans together [6]. Non-Asian Americans often cannot distinguish between Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, Taiwanese Americans, and Korean Americans (all of whom are East Asian Americans), and sometimes also conflate these groups with Thai Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and Laotian Americans (all of whom are Southeast Asian Americans). Because members of these groups commonly have single eyelids, perpetrators of COVID-19 hate crimes see them as the same. Conversely, Asian Indian Americans, Pakistani Americans, Bangladeshi Americans, and Sri Lankan Americans (all of whom are [South Asian Americans](#)) are less likely to have single eyelids and have not been victimized by COVID-19 hate crimes as frequently. However, [South Asian Americans, along with Arab and Middle Eastern Americans, have been stereotyped as terrorists and targeted for anti-Muslim hate crimes. Superficial similarities in physical appearance or dress again form the basis for racist scapegoating.](#)

The idea that some groups are perpetual foreigners is deeply engrained in American society. Single eyelids are among the most prominent racial markers of foreignness in America, but other physical features, such as darker skin and hair color, can also denote foreignness. Additionally, people can be marked as foreigners based on name, dress, accent, and other cultural referents. Besides Asian Americans, other groups such as Latina/o Americans and Arab Americans can be tagged as foreigners. Barack Obama experienced this when “birthers” questioned whether he was American. And in spite of his many efforts to make White people feel comfortable, many White people were still uncomfortable with Obama. That is one reason why Donald Trump was elected.

All of this brings to mind what renowned Black scholar W.E.B. Du Bois called that “peculiar sensation” of “double-consciousness”: “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals ... [.]” People of color in America are often aware of racism and know that it cannot be overcome by individual will, displays of patriotism, or catering to White comfort. These things can actually obscure the reality of racism. At the same time, to be professionally successful in a White-dominated society, people of color often have to be “white-people pleasers.”

This is even more so for politicians—and especially presidential candidates, who need large numbers of White voters to support them. Just as Obama had to be non-threatening and [counterstereotypic](#) to be elected, Andrew Yang had to prove that he was patriotic and “American” to be a viable candidate. And while Yang sometimes played up stereotypes such as the “model minority”, he simultaneously worked to counter stereotypes about Asian Americans’ passivity, social ineptness, and foreignness. Yang thus employed a strategic “double-consciousness” where he both adopted and defied racial stereotypes. Asian Americans ourselves had [conflicting views on Yang’s navigation of racial stereotypes.](#)

People of color often have to balance such “warring ideals.” This can cause a lot of internal dissonance about what to say and how to act in certain situations. Perhaps Yang was projecting part of that dilemma in his Washington Post op-ed. But to

address racism effectively, it is America, not Asian Americans, that needs to change. And unfortunately, this nation still has a long way to go. It will be a while before America is ready to accept a President who looks like Andrew Yang.

## Notes

[1] In addition to “Asian American”, the terms “Asian Pacific American” (APA) and “Asian/Pacific Islander” (API) are also commonly used. There is no firm consensus on which ethnic or national groups should come under the rubric of “Asian American.” For an overview of those issues, see Vinay Harpalani, [\*Why I am not “Asian” and Other Reflections on Asian American Identities\*](#), Race and the Law Prof Blog (July 19, 2017).

[2] Hiram Fong was the child of Chinese (Cantonese) immigrants, and Patsy Mink was a third generation Japanese American.

[3] Gabbard is one-half American Samoan (Pacific Islander) and one-half German. [Although some would include Pacific Islanders as Asian Americans, the U.S. government classifies them separately.](#)

[4] For more on the stereotype of Asian Americans as foreigners, see Neil Gotanda, *Comparative Racialization: Racial Profiling and the Case of Wen Ho Lee*, 47 UCLA L. REV. 1689 (2000). Compared to stereotypes of Black Americans, many of the noted stereotypes of Asian Americans are subtle and under-acknowledged. I often find that when I mention these stereotypes to non-Asian Americans, the response is something like “I never thought of that, but I see it now ... [.]” There are a plethora of reasons for this: 1. Asian Americans are not as visible in the media as Black Americans; 2. Asian Americans do not face the same level of racism or stereotyping that Black Americans do; 3. Asian Americans ourselves have not been as vocal in pointing out these stereotypes and their consequences; 4. Asian Americans are under-theorized and not discussed enough (or only discussed in limited ways) as part of the broader discourse on race and racism in America.

[5] There is no consensus on how to describe this eye shape. The term “almond-shape” is sometimes used but is also considered pejorative by some. See generally Kat Chow, [\*Why Do We Describe Asian Eyes as ‘Almond-Shaped’?\*](#), National Public Radio – CODE SWITCH (Sept. 16, 2013). In addition to eye shape, other facial features such as nose shape can also influence the perception of certain faces as foreign. Nevertheless, because of derogatory terms such as “slanted eyes” and related imagery, eye shape has a larger symbolic linkage to foreignness.

[6] [Use of the term “Asian” to denote Asian Americans can reinforce the perception that we are foreigners. In addition to lumping together 4.5 billion people under one label, the “American” part is especially important for groups who have long been considered un-American.](#) Nevertheless, while some Asian Americans feel this way, others have embraced “Asian” as shorthand for “Asian American.”