

Yellow fever and letting go of shame

By [Mihee Kim-Kort](#)

March 10, 2015

*Yellow Fever:*

1. *An infectuous tropical disease carried by mosquitoes.*
2. *A term usually applied to white males who have a clear sexual preference for women of Asian descent. (From [Urban Dictionary](#))*
3. *Feeling shame about one's asianness. (My definition)*

A friend of mine lamented that his girlfriend did not know who Emmett Till was when it came up in conversation. Something about TMZ and Lil Wayne. I have no clue. He told me he could barely pick his face up off the floor—much less his jaw—when he tried to explain that the story of this black boy is a huge part of American history, *and how could you not know him???*

But. Would people say that about [Vincent Chin](#)? If I were to ask you to name five Asian Americans who have made a significant impact on American consciousness and identity could you name someone besides Jeremy Lin or Lucy Liu?

For the longest time I struggled with racial identity. Actually, that's not accurate. I avoided it. I ignored the contradictions I felt in and around me. I pretended nothing was wrong. People often express surprise when I share this piece of my story.

- "But, you're Asian! It's not like your Black or Hispanic." (*Wow. Not even sure where to begin...*)
- "Asians are rich and successful!" (*Have you heard of the model minority myth?*)
- "I don't see you as Asian. I see you as American." (*That isn't really helpful.*)
- "Your English is so good. There's not a trace of an accent. What's the problem?" (*Sigh.*)

And for the longest time perhaps the most difficult piece for me to acknowledge was how church—i.e. white, conservative, middle-class, evangelical Christianity—perpetuated this feeling of *being less*. Trying to put language to this less-ness was next to impossible, and there certainly was no space in Christianity to put flesh and blood on it because the illegitimization of it was so subtle and insidious I had

internalized it. I was ashamed of my Asianness because it not only made me less of a human being, but a second-class Christian. And if I brought up anything contrary to the nice, neat narrative of white, evangelical Christianity then that was a sin.

The gospel and I discovered each other in the least likely of places. In critical race theory, in feminism, in post-modernism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism, in the social histories of marginalized peoples, in liberation theologies.

I remember how it felt to read about the internment of Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese (because they all look the same) during World War II. To read about Korean women brought over by U.S. American soldiers after the Korean War and being abandoned by their American husbands, abandoned by the U.S. government who saw those marriages as invalid, abandoned by the South Korean government who saw them as used goods. To read about the L.A. Riots and the scapegoating and pitting of African Americans against Koreans. To read about how those sorts of riots happened also in Brooklyn and Detroit. To read about Vincent Chin's brutal murder and the injustice that surfaced in the community. People actually blamed him for his own death. People sided with the murderers. People didn't care about the family he left behind or that his fiancé would never know "happily ever after."

In the same way that event catalyzed a movement and mobilized Asian Americans in huge ways all across the country, I felt the first time I read these stories jump start my heart, and shape my desire to articulate why experiences of racism towards Asian Americans are unique—they don't fit the black-white paradigm of race—and most of all, how church needs to work toward reconciliation with all those who are the Other.

I write about being "yellow," being Asian, being Korean feeling like a disease and an illness and so it was *yellow fever* because I felt shame for this sickness—my skin color and cultural heritage. I became angry. Tears-of-rage and tantrum angry. All the memories of how I was belittled and silenced while my family was ridiculed and stripped of dignity and agency flooded my waking moments. What seemed innocuous and innocent was painful. But what hurt most was when I didn't say anything. Eventually during seminary I was able to work through that anger, which incidentally was a process that occurred during my first year of . . . marriage. To a white man. To another minister like me. To a recent seminary graduate. *To a white man*. I do not recommend this scenario or timing. But eventually I started to embrace. And celebrate. And remember. May is [Asian American Pacific Islander](#)

[Heritage month](#). But for the sake of my children, my little *Hapas*, every month is AAPI Heritage month. I want them to know themselves. I want them to love themselves. And I want them to face and counter injustice in all its forms.

I've been healed of my yellow fever—being ashamed and allowing myself to be shamed by the dominant culture. That happened and continues to be nurtured by God, my creator, redeemer, and sustainer even as I struggle with social and political realities of faith being co-opted by the dominant culture and used as a vehicle of power.

My hope is that yellow fever isn't hereditary, and that my little ones will never have to go through a process of letting go of it. There's too much good to advocate for in them, and not a second needs to or should be wasted on what's destructive, ugly, and mean. Rather I want us to pour our lives and love into following and trusting that the one called God-with-us knows in his bones what it means to be rejected as the foreigner (he certainly was from waaaaaaay out of town), stranger, and Other. Because that story matters the most and as long as it is the one they carry in their bodies they're going to be stellar.

Originally posted at [Kim-Kort's blog](#)