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Andrew Yang is Wrong: Respectability Politics Won't Save Asian Americans from Racist Violence

Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang at the Sept 12 Democratic primary debate in Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. (Photo Credit: Win McNamee/Getty Images)

Earlier this week, [the FBI released a report](#) detailing the attempted hate crime murder of an Asian American family — including the brutal stabbing of a two-year-old and a six-year-old child — by a man who blamed his victims for the COVID-19 outbreak. The attack is part of an alarming nationwide surge in racist anti-Asian violence currently being documented both [by the FBI](#) and [Asian American community activists](#), and ranging from incidents of racist harassment and slurs to violent physical assault.

Most Asian American progressives have spent the last few weeks working tirelessly to address the growing epidemic of anti-Asian racism. We have been working to [document the attacks](#), [amplify](#) stories of victims and survivors, [draw connections to Asian American history](#), and create resources to support the traumatized — all in an effort to raise awareness about the current anti-Asian racial climate, and to urge the country to not give in to dangerous, hateful racism.

Andrew Yang has a different take.* Implying that Asian American progressives have been overly “negative” in calling out racism, the former presidential candidate wrote a painfully insensitive op-ed [yesterday in the Washington Post](#) (paywall).

In it, Yang instead suggested that the current pattern of anti-Asian violence is how people are “wired”. But, says Yang, Asian Americans can prevent hate crimes against us by “embrac[ing] and show[ing] our American-ness in ways we never have before.” Barring that, Yang suggests Asian Americans rush to find a cure for the novel

coronavirus so that “any racism would likely fade”.

Yang could not possibly be more off-base about the Asian American community, Asian American history, or the current political moment; so much so that it baffles the mind that for nearly a year, so many young Asian Americans looked to Yang as the next leader of the Asian American Movement. Yang is no thought leader for our people; if his latest writing is any indication, Yang instead needs remedial studies in Asian American history and politics — and he needs it as soon as possible.

Asian Americans are not responsible — *in any way* — for anti-Asian hate crimes against our community. We have not invited or incited violence against our bodies. We have *nothing* to apologize for.

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Yang’s suggestion that Asian Americans emphasize our “American-ness” with acts of civic duty and patriotism is not just a clarion call for respectability politics; more specifically (and damningly), it reinforces perpetual foreigner stereotypes of Asian Americans alongside a not-so-subtle indictment of our “Asian-ness”. Yang would have Asian Americans volunteer, donate, and wear red-white-and blue in order to ingratiate ourselves with whiteness; without these acts, Yang suggests it understandable (if not acceptable) that Asian Americans be viewed with hostility and suspicion.

To buttress this self-apologetic view of his Asian American identity, Yang invokes the [Fighting 442nd](#), a regiment comprised of infantry men drawn primarily from WWII Japanese American incarceration camps. While the 442nd are undeniably heroes, the decision by 442nd infantrymen to enlist in the US military — to fight for a government that was actively imprisoning them and their families — was fraught, both then and now. Many incarcerated chose not to enlist, including many who presciently understood that history would one day see the moral and legal wrong of Japanese American incarceration and who chose to instead resist the US government. That decision did not render incarcerated somehow less heroic, or somehow more deserving of incarceration, than the members of the 442nd.

Respectability politics doesn’t work. For the camp survivors, nothing shielded from racist violence: anti-Japanese racism and violence devastated the Japanese American community regardless of any individual act of patriotism or resistance, large or small. Racists didn’t care; they attacked Japanese Americans, and their homes and businesses, all-the-same. Respectability politics argues that we don’t deserve the right to be protected from racism; instead, that we must earn protection from racism through good behaviour.

Asian American history (and indeed the history of all non-white people) teaches the error of this faulty logic time-and-time again: being suitably respectable, culturally assimilated, or intellectually gifted is no protection from racism. Fred Korematsu was still jailed. Wen Ho Lee was still imprisoned. Vincent Chin was still murdered. Asian American history abounds with more examples than I can possibly list here.

And yet, Yang fails to understand how racism works; or perhaps, more specifically, he fails to see racism as a systemic problem. Yang suggests we work individually to prove ourselves loyal and friendly to the racists who would attack us. This does not challenge racism, at best, it might only temporarily deflect or delay it. It doesn’t say “Racism is wrong”; only, “Don’t hurt me — I’m one of the ‘Good Ones’. Hurt them.” This is model minority reasoning, miniaturized. It operates only by casting some Asian Americans as acceptably patriotic and exceptionally talented, while castigating others as disloyal and insufficiently American — and therefore more deserving of scorn, skepticism, and attack.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Yang gave comedian Shane Gillis a pass for his litany of anti-Asian slurs: in his op-ed, Yang argues not that we should challenge racists, but that we should challenge and change everything about ourselves that racists hate.

Fuck that.

It is perhaps not surprising that Yang would be the one to downplay a politicized Asian American identity so as not to render non-Asian Americans uncomfortable. After all, that’s what his presidential campaign was all about.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Yang gave comedian Shane Gillis a pass for his litany of anti-Asian slurs: in his op-ed, Yang argues not that we should challenge racists, but that we should challenge and change everything about ourselves that racists hate.

Fuck that.

Call me negative for saying that anti-Asian racism is wrong. Dismiss the work that I and other Asian American progressives do. But, when push comes to shove, you’ll find us declaring in voices loud and proud that racist violence is wrong. You will find us calling that shit out — every fucking time.

Our American-ness is not up for debate. Our Asian-ness is not an excuse for racist violence. I am Asian and I am Asian American, and I have nothing — nothing — to apologize for. My identity is not fodder for anyone’s shitty, lazy racist jokes. I’m not here to absolve the racists who attack us, or to ingratiate myself to them. I will not erase who I am to make myself more palatable for those who hate us for who we are.

Racists are wrong for attacking Asian Americans over COVID-19. I will never, ever, be made to feel shame for saying so.

* – I am so, so, so tired of talking about [Andrew Yang’s troubling racial politics](#).

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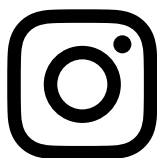
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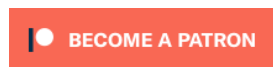
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