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The Model Minority Myth: (Benevolent) Racism against (Asian) Americans

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Introduction

Asians and Asian Americans are considered the most well-to-do racialized groups in twenty-first century U.S. Their identity and ontology are incontrovertibly influenced by the model minority myth, a stereotype that envelops them as successful and as overcoming racial discrimination. This paper argues that the model minority myth exemplifies how putatively benevolent racial tropes are nonetheless racist against all communities of colour. Thus, Asian Americans are positioned as the 'model minority', as opposed to certain 'problem minorities', in order to further subjugate Black and Brown bodies. The myth is also problematic for Asian Americans themselves, demonstrating that to exist as an Asian resident in the U.S. is to live a life still marked by marginality, a life where one's self-worth and ability must be navigated through the model minority paradigm, and a life as an ethnic sub-group included under the all-encompassing umbrella of Asian Americanness as little more than an afterthought.

Mainstream media is credited with giving rise to and congealing the role of Asian Americans as the 'model minority' – that is, a racial minority group whose members epitomize the American Dream; they are conceptualized as transcending racism through docility and diligence to experience meritorious social mobility (Wong & Halgin, 2006). This is what is referred to as the model minority (stereotype), which has since been popularized as the model minority myth (henceforth abbreviated as MMM in this essay) by Asian American scholars and theorists (Wong & Halgin, 2006). Rather than attempt to account for the ostensibly unprecedented repertoire of achievements predominantly attributed to Asian Americans in the modern era, this paper aims to debunk the myth altogether. While there might in fact be some cultural, social, and historical factors precipitating this identity group's ascent, the emphasis shifts from 'why' and 'how' to

'who' and 'what'. In other words, the ultimate objective is to problematize the model minority myth rather than focus on the veracity of the stereotype itself because to do so would further give credence to it. In lieu of entertaining its assumptions, then, this paper unpacks them as misguided, universalizing, and beneficial to upholding the white supremacist agenda, therefore concretizing the MMM as racist, albeit superficially benevolent, a notion which will be later discussed.

Emergence of the Model Minority Myth in Tandem with a Racial Hierarchy

In order to delineate the position that the MMM occupies in current sociopolitical contexts as well as its implications, it is imperative to trace the genealogy of the societally agreed upon notion while limiting the scope and its effects to the United States. 'Model minority' was first coined in a 1966 *New York Times* essay entitled "Success Story, Japanese-American Style" by sociologist William Petersen. He identifies Japanese Americans as overcoming coalescing oppressive forces, particularly in a post-World War II era. Rather than become the 'problem minority' that Black Americans[1] are pinpointed as, Petersen (1966) describes their commendable resistance to racial prejudice, especially considering their subdual in World War II internment camps. Indeed, he observes that the intersecting factors of subpar education, socioeconomic disadvantage, and high crime rates, for example, failed to enable self-defeat among Japanese Americans as they did with Black Americans.

Petersen (1966) notes that despite being denied white-collar and even manual professions, Japanese Americans settled for menial jobs. They were similarly barred from owning land but secured it through deceit and eventually cultivated an otherwise barren California into a fertile agricultural landscape (Petersen, 1966), as Garcia (2012) explicates. The latter writes about Harry

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[1] While Petersen designates them as Negroes, this paper elects to refer to them as Black individuals or Americans.

Kubo, a second-generation Japanese American farmer and agri-activist in the 1970s, who embodied the claim that American capitalism – associated and conflated with meritocracy – empowered even the most racially disadvantaged to acquire success (Garcia 2012). As Kubo narrativized Japanese Americans' ability to overcome oppression in the form of Executive Order 9066 (the displacement of Japanese communities to internment camps), Garcia (2012) pinpoints his "self-promotion as an antidote to Mexican and Filipino farmworkers and the black urban poor" (p. 96). As such, the MMM exemplified one group's ascent to criticize others' enduring oppressions.

Following Petersen's seminal article, similar think pieces were written, namely the *U.S. News and World Report*'s (1966) essay on Chinese Americans and *Newsweek*'s (Chang, 1971) article on the legitimacy of meritocracy (à la the American Dream) via Asian Americans' adoption of a Protestant-esque work ethic. Some scholars even identify that the inception of the MMM coincides with the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (Museus, 2014). They contend that conservatives harness the myth to pose Asian Americans' supposed transcendence of racial prejudice as arising from their inaction with regards to racial justice efforts. In other words, the MMM serves conservative ideologies well by pitting communities of colour against one another to dismiss the collective concerns and uproar of particular racialized groups (Museus 2014). This utility demonstrates that the myth has insidious undertones beneath its superficially complimentary nature.

The fact that African immigrants outperformed many, if not most, racial and ethnic groups in the United States promulgates the thesis that the MMM is aptly described as an axiomatic legend awaiting contradiction. According to a U.S. Census Bureau study, African residents in the U.S. attained the highest level of educational achievement of all immigrant communities in 1997 – at

48.9 percent having earned a bachelor's degree, compared to 44.6 percent of Asian immigrants (JBHE, 2000). African immigrants were also overrepresented in the attainment of a graduate and/or Ph.D. degree (JBHE, 2000). However, this highly educated population was unable to secure a comparable socioeconomic status, considering that their median household income was 36 percent lower than that of white Americans, despite the latter having achieved only approximately half the educational clout of the former (JBHE, 2000). As such, the media-propagated and sociopolitical inattention surrounding African immigrants' distinguished performance is questionable; what can be held accountable for such widespread neglect of evidence that contradicts centuries-old racial tropes that devalue Black people's intellect, educational achievement, and work ethic? To note that this phenomenon, the refusal to overturn the Black American problem minority (and concomitantly, the Asian American model minority), is intriguing would be an understatement.

Benevolent Racism: Fact or Fiction?

Perez Huber and Solorzano (2015) identify discourse as the constellations of knowledges, values, and perspectives adopted when discussing a particular subject. It is also the normalizing lens that (un)consciously shapes individual's perceptual understandings, meaning that communication is not restricted to language but extends to the socializing process by which the sedimentations of such constellations occur (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). The MMM is so pervasive that the proposition of an Asian American interacting in the modern American sociocultural landscape without having their racially organized epistemology and ontology informed by the myth is implausible, if not impossible. Indeed, their sense of identity and self is discursively constituted, thus capturing the MMM as imposing demands that reveal themselves to not be as benevolent as they appear to be.

This is partly precipitated by the proclivity to employ an oversimplified view of racialized disparity, particularly in the post-Civil Rights era. As Singh (2012) contends, although there has been incipient intersectional theorizing and unique histories of Asian and Latinx[2] Americans, these are often considered more so alternative histories and schools of thought, as they are unable to outweigh the monopolization held by Black-white critical race paradigms. It can be argued, thus, that the MMM (un)consciously capitalizes on this fixation on Black-white relations to further obscure the multilayered sociopolitical conditions under which Asian Americans live. Although this appears to be accomplished through the use of positive descriptors and complimentary ascriptions, a question of how to differentiate between the properties of being racial and racist emerges, a point that Singh (2012) raises.

While this paper does not attempt to make a generalizable distinction between the two, it does apply a similar framework to the MMM, from which the crux of the matter materializes ("Is the model minority myth racist even if it is benevolently so?") to which I respond that it is a form of benevolent racism, which still articulates the myth as innately racist. Benevolent racism is similar to other varieties of racism, with the exception that it is characteristically pleasant and positive on the surface. The MMM exemplifies the pervasiveness of ostensibly complimentary racial projects, but it is ultimately a permutation that relies on racialized tropes for a project of meaning- and value-making. By perpetuating the myth, it solidifies false ontologies that supplant the actualities of being Asian American.

Obscuring the Realities of Being Asian American

Marginality in Spite/Because of Minority Status?

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[2] The 'x' in Latinx denotes gender neutrality, as opposed to Latino and Latina. Latinx encompasses those who do not adhere to the gender binary and/or those who use gender neutral pronouns.

Winant (2000) explicates his racial formation theory as conceptualizing race and racialized identities as politically contested. In other words, race is not an epiphenomenon from which all other social relations arise; it is more meaningfully captured as racialization, or an active social process that (re)constitutes itself (Winantm 2000). With regards to the MMM, racialization forges a universalism of certain bodies and is thusly predicated on the obscuring of characteristics and ideologies that do not conform to this homogenizing assemblage of knowledges and raced designations. The MMM is just that – a stereotype that flattens the variable modalities of Asianness or Asian Americanness for the sake of a premeditated image with which identity group members are expected to align. Indeed, the myth promulgates the archetypal successful Asian American to obscure the realms in which they are still discriminated against, namely their exclusion from the protection of affirmative action provisions for racialized groups, along with governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations under-funding Asian American-specific programs (Suzuki, 1977). Similarly, Suzuki (1977) demonstrates that although Asian Americans' median number of years of formal education and household income surpassed those of the nationwide population in the 1970s, white Americans' per capita income greatly exceeded that of Asian Americans when examining racial equivalents with an equal number of schooling years. To further dismantle the MMM, the fraction of Asian Americans living below the poverty line significantly outweighed that of white Americans (Suzuki 1977). It appears that being the model minority almost presupposes a non-minority status, which constitutes a racist mechanism that fails to capture the reality of their existence in their sociocultural and sociopolitical matrices. There is little benevolence in this obscuring racial project.

Evidently, the proliferation of the MMM implicates Asian American students, in particular. While some regard school in a positive manner due to the widely held belief that education will

allow them to secure upward social mobility, both high- and low-achieving student members of the identity group admit their anxiety revolving the MMM-resultant demands enforced on them (Lee, 1994). Those who perform subpar (at least according to the prototypical Asian American standards) academically reportedly feel ashamed and sometimes depressed. Lee (1994) maintains that such embarrassment often precludes them from seeking requisite educational assistance. Similarly, high-achieving Asian American pupils are under pressure from social and cultural expectations, particularly from their parents and relatives, to maintain their supposedly characteristic intellectual prowess (Lee, 1994).

These various reactions to the MMM reinforce Perez Huber and Solorzano's (2015) description of the social mirroring phenomenon – that immigrant children develop identities based on societal perceptions. Although a sizeable portion of Asian Americans are second-generation or have an even longer history in the U.S., the myth indeed has an indelible impact on Asian American ontology/ies. Questions such as "Is someone 'less Asian' because they are not academically superior?" and "What does it mean to be Asian if one is not academically inclined or conventionally successful?" arise, setting into place the contradictions that trigger the unravelling of the MMM as little more than Trojan Horse-like benevolent racism.

Ethnic and Racial Diversity: Not All Asian Minorities Are Models

While unpacking the misleading nature of the statistics along a decidedly Asian-white colour line, a deeper intra-group analysis burgeons. Considering the expansiveness of the Asian American identity, encompassing East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Indian subcontinental communities, I would be remiss to not delve into the variabilities present between ethnic and even

racial groups[3] subsumed under the universalized umbrella of Asian Americanness. By examining educational attainment levels and poverty rates, among other metrics of success and assimilation, the disparity between Asian identities is rendered salient. For instance, secondary school dropout rates are alarmingly high, at forty percent of Hmong, thirty-eight percent of Laotian, and thirty-five percent of Cambodian students (The White House, n.d.). Moreover, although the group-wide proportion of Asian Americans living in poverty are at 12.6 percent – marginally above that of the nationwide 12.4 percent – 37.8 percent of the Hmong population in the U.S. are designated as poor (The White House, n.d.). Similarly, 29.3 percent of Cambodian Americans and 16.6 percent of Vietnamese Americans live below the poverty line (The White House, n.d.).

These striking numbers call into question the *Maclean's* article "Too Asian?" about the widely held belief that some universities (more so in the U.S. but with similar trends in some Canadian schools) are considered to be over-populated by Asian (American/Canadian) students, resulting in a hyper-competitive environment with feeble school spirit and a lacking social scene (Sintos Coloma, 2013). By considering these statistics on Southeast Asian students, Sintos Coloma's (2013) analysis of the reliance on familiar racist tropes of Asians' unparalleled work ethic and intellect can be supplemented; these alarmingly low educational and socioeconomic levels challenge what an institution of higher education that is 'too Asian' looks like if only a familiar subset of Asian American/Canadian students prevail. Evidently, the reality of being encompassed by the MMM while failing to achieve its characterization of Asian Americanness – that is, of wealth and higher education – is to not only live a life of precariousness, but to also live one that undermines the tenacity and veracity of the myth. As such, the model minority myth is a

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[3] Some individuals technically falling under the category of Asian American identify as Brown in addition to or in lieu of their Asianness.

mechanism of homogenizing the entire gamut of Asian identities residing in or having ties to the U.S. In short, a noteworthy and regrettable outcome, among many others aforementioned, is the invisibilizing of socioeconomic and educational discrepancies between racial and ethnic groups – communities that have been epistemologically and ontologically subsumed under the banner of 'Asian American'. Therefore, benevolent racism is ultimately and unwaveringly precisely that: racist.

Conclusion

In examining the ideological and material implications of promulgating the model minority myth, a number of its racializing projects are visibilized – namely, the concretizing of a racial hierarchy to quell Black anti-racist activism (instead identifying compliance to existing racial logic as the logical solution), the shrouding of Asian Americans' enduring disempowerment, and the amputation of ethnic and racial (sub-)identities. In conjunction, these mechanisms serve to uphold white supremacist dogmas to resubordinate *all* racialized communities, with the fringe benefits of persuading Asian Americans of their transcendence of racism and of fomenting interracial tension between people of colour. Thus, the aforementioned ideological and material implications demonstrate that racism can never be benevolent; while the model minority myth has allegedly positive connotations, it is ultimately undergirded by impossible demands and it plays on familiar racial tropes. In short, the rich heterogeneity, whether it manifests along racial/ethnic lines or merely in yearning to exist beyond a stereotype, of Asian Americanness is threatened. This demoralization can never sincerely be considered benevolent – only the pinnacle of sugarcoated racism.

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