



# And Neither Are We Saved: Asian Americans' Elusive Quest for Racial Justice

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## Abstract

Derrick Bell, Civil Rights activist, legal scholar, and a founder of critical race theory, dedicated much of his life and scholarship to the pursuit of racial justice. Twenty-six years ago, in his work *And We Are Not Saved*, he recognized that racial progress has been stalled and racial equality would not be a reality in his lifetime. Bell passed away in October 2011, and we are reminded that there is still much work to do. He presented a conundrum that race scholars have said all there is to say about racial problems in the United States; yet, he encouraged scholars to keep moving the work forward. At the time *And We Are Not Saved* was written, much of the racial scholarship was centered on the Black–White paradigm. In the 26 years since Bell wrote it, there has been a growth of Asian American research. This essay surveys some critical racial analysis of Asian Americans. There have been major contributions to the literature extending racial scholarship beyond the Black–White paradigm. Additionally, intersectional scholarship extends the discussion into other systems of oppression, highlighting how racism can be veiled in different systems. Critical race scholarship is imperative to keep Bell's dream of racial equality alive.

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“Progress in American race relations is largely a mirage, obscuring the fact that whites continue, consciously or unconsciously, to do all in their power to ensure their dominion and maintain their control.”

Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (1987)

Derrick Bell, Civil Rights activist, legal scholar, and one of the founders of critical race theory (CRT), dedicated much of his life and scholarship to racial justice. Twenty-six years ago, in his work *And We Are Not Saved*, he recognized that racial progress was nothing more than a pipe dream with the embedded structural barriers and failure of the government to enforce civil rights legislation. Bell (1987) lamented:

I recognize that most of what can be said about racial issues in this country has been said, and likely more than once. Over and over, we have considered all the problems, tried many of the solutions, and concluded – reluctantly or with relief – that, while full racial equality may someday be achieved, it will not be in our time. (p. 4)

With Bell's passing in October of 2011, racial equality truly was not achieved during his time. Each day, we are inundated with news of acts motivated by racial hate. In the very same month of Derrick Bell's death, a crime motivated by anti-Asian sentiment also claimed a life. Private Danny Chen, 19, committed suicide in his Army post in Afghanistan. Born in New York City, Chen was the son of two Chinese immigrants. In a personal journal and letters he had sent to his loved ones, Chen complained of constant racialized taunting and physical abuse by his superiors (Gonnerman 2012; Semple 2012). Just hours before his suicide, eight fellow soldiers “pulled Private Chen out of bed and dragged him across the floor; they forced him to crawl on the ground while they pelted him with rocks and taunted him with ethnic slurs” (Semple 2012).

The eight soldiers were charged in connection with his death, but sentences were a mere “slap on the wrist” with the longest length of jail time being six months and the shortest, just thirty days (Mataxas 2012). This incident demonstrates that Bell and his activism and scholarship are not necessities of the past. In fact, racism is now clandestinely embedded in discourse making it even more imperative to continue critical race scholarship to help uncover how it is hidden in society. In the pursuit of racial justice, public sociologists committed to racial and ethnic studies should position their sociological lens through a critical race theory perspective because the focus remains on power and domination, as it lurks covertly in social institutions. In this article, we offer the major tenets of critical race theory and survey existing social science literature on Asian Americans. By analyzing the Asian American experience, we can connect how racism can operate similarly or differently for various racial groups. We also differentiate studies that utilize a CRT perspective from those that do not so the reader can understand the differences between the two.

The Chin incident and the many more anti-Asian incidents<sup>1</sup> that have occurred in recent years exemplify Asian Americans’ continuing struggle for racial equality. Asian Americans are often constructed as “model minorities” or “honorary whites,” but those constructions mask the discrimination they face, and do not capture the dehumanizing gendered and racialized stereotypes that are imposed on these men and women (Chou and Feagin 2008; Chou 2012). Other racial minorities are also facing racial discrimination and stereotypes. Through a CRT lens, we can identify the connections that Asian Americans have with other people of color and destroy the “mirage” of which Bell spoke. Critical race scholars continue their work without a definitive end to racial inequality in sight. Bell (1987) bemoaned that “library shelves creak under the weight of serious studies on racial issues.” While Bell was certainly correct about the extensive discussion of racial issues, until more recently, they were largely focused on the Black–White paradigm. In the 26 years since he wrote *And We Are Not Saved*, we have seen additions to the shelves moving beyond it. Critical race scholars keep working even though we have learned from Bell (1987) that “both history and experience tell us that each new victory over injustice both removes a barrier to racial equality and reveals another obstacle that we must, in turn, grapple with and – eventually – overcome” (p. 257). Even with additional obstacles, many critical race scholars keep hope alive that someday racial equality will be achieved. Expanding Asian American CRT research allows us to continue to grapple with, and hopefully overcome, racism in the United States.

While much race scholarship is beneficial in addressing racial inequality, some can fail to interrogate power and domination. In fact, some social science research can come from the dominant ideology that perpetuates inequality, like the controversy surrounding the recent work of sociologist Mark Regnerus. Regnerus was funded by conservative think tank, The Witherspoon Institute, and published an article with questionable methods and analysis asserting that gay parents were not as effective as straight parents (Davidson 2012). Utilizing the dominant ideology within social science to support the racial status quo happens in Asian American research as well. In this article, we review existing race scholarship that centers Asian Americans and argue that much more critical race theory centered work is necessary. Some research has perpetuated inequality, and others scratch the surface in interrogating power and domination. CRT research not only highlights the racial oppression faced by Asian Americans but also provides all people of color, and their White allies, tools to dismantle White supremacy. We assert that by using a CRT perspective, scholars can better illuminate how White supremacy operates in major institutions (i.e. education, law, and work) than those who do not. Bell contended that it is only through this lens, through real narratives where oppressive forces are identified and named and the perspective of those who are not heard, that we make real advancement to resolve these issues.

## Literature review: the search for critical Asian American research

The major tenets of critical race theory (CRT) are (i) Racism is an ordinary, fundamental aspect of society. It is embedded into American society; (ii) A large segment of society has little incentive to change because they benefit from it; (iii) Race and racial organization are not biological, genetic, reality, inherent, or fixed. Race is a sociohistorical construction; (iv) Race and racism are connected to a material reality; Bell specifically connects it to capitalism; (v) Racism is connected to the labor needs of the labor market.<sup>2</sup> The literature we discuss will either center these major tenets when analyzing Asian American trends and experiences or fail to do so. Critical race theorists acknowledge that because we live in a White supremacist society, people of colors' perspectives are not part of the dominant narrative. The dominant narrative shapes policy, law, and media, and Asian American perspectives are largely absent in these arenas. Some of the contributions of scholars that we discuss offer alternatives to the dominant racist ideology, while others come up short. In this article, we present the major contributions to Asian American research examining history, the "model minority" stereotype, identity, higher education, and mental health. We then discuss implications and future directions of critical race theory and Asian American research.

## Critical historical Asian American research

While there are a number of studies documenting Asian American assimilation, immigration, entrepreneurship, and labor force trends, scholars less frequently use a critical race lens. Some of the most critical work in Asian American research has been the historical mapping of institutionalized racism. While there is some record of Asian Americans in the United States as early as the mid-1700s, the first large wave of immigrants did not arrive until the mid to late 1800s to fulfill labor needs on sugar plantations throughout the Pacific, mine for gold in California, and work on the transcontinental railroad.

This history is well documented by the late historian Ronald Takaki. These early Asian immigrants were largely men, and they were preferred over European immigrants because they could be paid substantially less. When a group of Asian laborers would protest working conditions or wages, new groups of Asians would be brought in from a different country to break the strikes (Takaki 1998, 2000). In his work, he thoroughly connects the relationship that Asian bodies have to resources and the labor needs of the capitalist structure, distinctly making his work CRT. While the Chinese were the first large groups of Asians brought in, they were also the first to suffer from laws restricting and eventually prohibiting them from immigrating. Japanese Americans were next on the chopping block, along with Asian Indians, Koreans, and Filipinos. The 1924 Immigration Act denied virtually all Asians entry into the United States. These policies were centered on the needs of White Americans, and Takaki's analysis is coming from a critical race perspective.

Critical scholarship on Asians in North America has addressed Asian experiences with racial hostility and discrimination over a long history of immigration and relates these phenomena to capitalist labor needs and White supremacy. CRT scholars have examined more than 150 years of Asian immigration and shown that Asian workers have regularly been pitted against White workers. Yen Le Espiritu (2007, 2008) has published numerous works that connect labor needs to Asian immigration to the United States and explain the continued exploitation of these laborers. The first major immigrant group was Chinese. Between the 1850s and 1880s, Chinese contract laborers migrated in large numbers to the West Coast to do low-wage work in construction and other economic sectors. The preference that White employers had for Chinese workers fueled tensions in the racial hierarchy, often pitting White workers against Asian workers (Feagin and Feagin 2008). In Espiritu's *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws,*

*and Love*, she argues that the policies had negative consequences for Asian American families and intimate relationships. The restrictive immigration laws in the United States were impacting couples and families transnationally, and “split households” left women in Asia caring for their families without the help of their husbands. Espiritu (2008) asserts, “The split-household arrangement, enforced and maintained by racist and gendered U.S. immigration policies, made possible the maximum exploitation of male workers (p. 33).” Espiritu’s work is consistently positioned from a critical race theory perspective; tyrannical power and an unequal structure create unlevelled dynamics within the system.

### **Asian American identity and experience literature**

In order for scholarship to be considered critical race theory, history and power must be centered in the discussion (Williams 1991). Much social science work can give us tools to understand social phenomenon by placing things in sociohistorical context. Yet, some social science work is merely descriptive, failing to interrogate or implicate the social forces at work. Often times, by using a non-CRT lens, power is reified by going unnamed. When doing sociological research, ignoring the unequal structure supports unlevel dynamics within the system. To demonstrate this, in this section, we review sociological studies that have either challenged Asian American stereotypes or left them undisputed.

### **The creation of the “model minority” myth: racist dominant ideology perpetuated**

Numerous social scientists and media commentators have regularly cited the educational and economic “success” of a particular Asian American group without placing the group in historical context. Often times, Asian Americans are described as the “model minority,” as an indication that Whites no longer create significant racial barriers for them (Takaki 1985). This model image was created not by Asian Americans but by influential Whites for their public ideological use (Peterson 1966). One example is a 1960s *New York Times* article entitled “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” This major media article praised the hard work and morality of Japanese Americans, and its analysis implied that if Black Americans possessed such virtues, it would not be necessary to spend “hundreds of billions to uplift” them (Peterson 1966). From this report, the “model minority” myth was born and used as a lightning rod issue to promote the segregationist agenda. Their argument was that if Japanese Americans could perform so well in school while remaining separate from Whites, so could other racial minorities. However, Peterson failed to utilize tenets of critical race theory because he did not center the narrative of Japanese Americans themselves. Unfortunately, following this article, false assumptions and stereotypes about Asian American success and freedom from racism have persisted (Chou and Feagin 2008). A great deal of research specifically addresses “model minority” stereotyping of Asian Americans, and much of it does not work to dismantle the myth. However, several researchers have specifically targeted the model minority stereotype.

### **Critical race theory and the “model minority:” attempts to destroy the myth**

In contrast, Janice Tanaka (1999) utilizes the tenets of CRT and uncovered in her documentary, *When You’re Smiling*, that Japanese Internment during World War II had such a profound effect on Japanese Americans that the community faced an increase in suicide, depression, and alcohol and substance abuse. Tanaka’s research participants were the same Japanese Americans that William Peterson researched for his *New York Times* piece. Tanaka found that the elders in the Japanese American communities responded to the racism by encouraging their children to perform well in school as a protective measure from further racism. Peterson (1966) missed the mark by using a dominant White perspective to analyze Japanese Americans from

an outsider position. Unfortunately, this non-CRT sociological perspective has remained firmly stuck in the dominant racial ideology, and the “model minority” stereotype persists (Chou and Feagin 2008). Many scholars have been trying to make a correction ever since (Lee 1996, Prashad 2003).

Several researchers have challenged the rosy view of Asian American success in the complex assimilation process forced on them in the United States. These researchers have shown that Asian immigrants and their children have long faced discrimination and other serious difficulties in adapting to US society. Some have also explored how the societal conditions of Asian Americans are racialized (Chou and Feagin 2008; Lee 1996; Nishi 1989; Tuan 2003; Wu 2004). One early analysis was that of the innovative legal scholar Mari Matsuda (1996), who suggested that Asian Americans might be positioned as a “racial bourgeoisie,” a racial middle status between Whites and other people of color. This protects the White position at the top by diffusing hostility toward them and sets up Asian Americans to be a “scapegoat during times of crisis.” Vijay Prashad (2003) has shown how Asian Americans are termed model minorities and thus come “to be the perpetual solution to what is seen as the crisis of black America.” Prashad (2003, p. 6) adds that for Asian Americans, “it is easier to be seen as a solution than as a problem. We don’t suffer genocidal poverty and incarceration rates in the United States, nor do we walk in fear and a fog of invisibility.” Ironically, he evokes part of the model minority stereotype yet does not note that this stereotype creates an invisibility cloak hiding severe problems of racism faced regularly by Asian Americans (Chou and Feagin 2008).

Legal scholar Frank Wu (2004) has done much to dispel model minority stereotyping. In his work, he has explained the benefits that Whites enjoy because of that labeling. Reviewing the long history of anti-Asian discrimination, he notes, “non-Asian Americans can discriminate against Asian Americans by turning us into noncitizens, either officially by prohibiting even legal long-term residents from naturalizing or informally by casting doubt on our status. . . . The alien land laws, passed to drive Japanese immigrants out of farming, are the prime example (p. 75).” Wu centralizes the law as an institution in which racism has been rooted. His emphasis on racism embedded in the legal structure characterizes his work as critical race theory. We critique just one area of his work. While he accents decades of anti-Asian discrimination, Wu regularly uses vague terms such as “non-Asian Americans” and thereby skirts around using the word “Whites” for those doing such intense discriminating. While in many of his analyses Wu recognizes how anti-Asian racism is institutionalized, at times he seems to play down certain aspects of White racism: “Other than among a few idealists, as a nation we accept discrimination on the basis of citizenship as necessary. But except among a few extremists, as a society we reject discrimination on the basis of race as immoral” (2004, p. 91). Wu here seems to neglect the societal reality that many Whites still do find it acceptable to engage in racial discrimination against Americans of color, yet may find it no longer fashionable to discriminate openly or assert racist views publicly.

These often pioneering Asian American scholars have moved social science analysis of the adaptive barriers faced by Asian Americans in very important directions. Still, some of them tend to avoid explicitly naming and analyzing fully the role of Whites (especially elite Whites) as central protagonists in creating anti-Asian racism today – often preferring instead to name vague social agents such as “non-Asians,” “the law,” “the government,” or “the larger society” as generators of contemporary racism. Such analytical practices can be found as well among many scholars researching the racialized situations of other Americans of color. They too are often reluctant to name Whites specifically as the key actors in past or present dramas of US racism (For example, Wu (2004) and Prashad (2003)). White domination remains obscured with the failure to name them or the role of White supremacy. However, scholars like Wu and Prashad do utilize tenets of critical race theory.

One of the few researchers to examine in critical detail the contemporary impact of systemic racism on Asian American communities is sociologist Claire Jean Kim (1999, 2003). Examining periodic conflicts between Korean American merchants and African-American patrons in a few cities, Kim shows that these conflicts should be understood in the context of Whites' long-term discriminatory actions against both groups. She illustrates how Asian immigrants have come to be positioned, mainly by White actions, between White urbanites and Black urbanites, and how these Asian Americans are given a negative evaluation by Whites on both the axis of superior/inferior racial groups and the axis of insiders/foreigners. Such intergroup conflict involves more than just stereotyping by African-Americans or Korean Americans of the other group, but instead reflects the White-imposed racial hierarchy and its effects on both racially subordinated groups. Like other Americans of color, Asian Americans serve as pawns in the racially oppressive system maintained at the top by Whites. Some White Americans may prize Asian Americans relative to African-Americans in certain limited ways so as to insure White dominance over both. Whites may place or consider Asians as "nearer to Whites," a relative valorization, because of Asian American achievements in certain educational and economic areas. Yet this middling status is possible only because other Americans of color, such as African-Americans or Mexican Americans, have been allowed fewer opportunities by Whites. Whites' use of Asian Americans as a measuring stick for other Americans of color is highly divisive, for it pits groups of color against each other, as well as isolates Asian Americans from White Americans.

Kim (2003, 45) underscores the price paid for becoming the White-proclaimed model of a successful minority: "By lumping all Asian descent groups together and attributing certain distinctively 'Asian' cultural values to them (including, importantly, political passivity or docility), the model minority myth sets Asian Americans apart as a distinct racial-cultural 'other.' Asian Americans are making it, the myth tells us, but they remain exotically different from Whites. Beneath the veneer of praise, the model minority myth subtly ostracizes Asian Americans." In this process of exoticizing and of civic ostracism, Whites treat Asian Americans as foreigners not fully assimilable to White culture and society. Exoticized and celebrated for docility, Asian Americans have relatively little political clout and as yet are less involved in the US political process. As Kim's data demonstrate, this lack of political involvement at the local level is often not a voluntary choice but results from active discrimination and exclusion in the political realm by Whites. Claire Jean Kim utilizes tenets of critical race theory to center the Asian American narrative and analyze their experiences in relation to a sociohistorically contextualized racist society.

Discrimination persists in many institutional areas. Scholar Gary Okiihiro (2000, 75) sums up the contemporary Asian American situation this way: Whites have "upheld Asians as 'near-whites' or 'whiter than whites' in the model minority stereotype, and yet Asians have experienced and continue to face white racism 'like blacks' in educational and occupational barriers and ceilings and in anti-Asian abuse and physical violence. . . . This marginalization of Asians, in fact, within a black and white racial formation, 'disciplines' both Africans and Asians and constitutes the essential site of Asian American oppression." Okiihiro ties the model minority stereotyping to White supremacy and highlights their relationship to other African-Americans, and this positions his work as critical race theory.

This section introduces the major sociological contributions either contesting or reifying the "model minority" stereotype. While some scholars have left the stereotype unchallenged or out of sociohistorical context, others have utilized tenets of critical race theory to illuminate how White supremacy continues to operate in the United States. In the next section, we present arguments examining Asian American assimilation and racial-ethnic identity from both CRT and non-CRT perspectives.

## Asian American assimilation and identity research

Several social scientists have focused on Asian American adaptation to the dominant culture and society using traditional assimilation theories. For example, drawing on interviews with young Asian American professionals, Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim (2002) report that the respondents have highly assimilated socially and culturally, with significant friendship ties to middle-class Whites and significant assimilation to White folkways. They found that these Asian American professionals are bicultural, with strong assimilation to “American culture,” but expressing a strong national-origin or pan-Asian identity as well. An earlier study of Korean immigrants by Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim (1984) reported similar findings, in that their respondents demonstrated what they term “additive” or “adhesive” adaptation – that is, assimilating substantially to the new economy and society, yet maintaining a strong sense of their ethnic and racial identities. Both research studies discuss difficult identity choices of their respondents, and like most contemporary researchers looking at immigrant assimilation, they do not examine in depth the harsh racial realities surrounding these choices. While these studies do offer insight into Asian American experiences, they do not utilize the tenets of critical race scholarship.

In a study of second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans, social scientist Nazli Kibria (2002) has also explored the formation of identities. Assessing the adaptation of Asian immigrants and their children, she distinguishes between an “ethnic American” model and a “racial minority” model of assimilation. The old ethnic assimilation model, asserted by scholars and others, has set the framework for Asian assimilation into the core society yet creates significant problems because it assumes that an ethnic immigrant group is White. In Kibria’s view, as Asian immigrants and their children accent a new umbrella identity of “Asian American,” they are updating the old ethnic assimilation model to include their racial minority experience. While Kibria recognizes that her respondents are set apart, discriminated against, and stereotyped as foreigners or model minorities, she keeps her analysis of the perpetrators of this stereotyping and discrimination rather vague and provides no in-depth analysis of the systemic racism context in which these Asian Americans are forced to adapt. Her Chinese and Korean respondents report on some “lessons about race,” “race socialization,” and not being accepted “by others,” yet in her analysis, Kibria does not assess the central role of the White racism embedded in society that is forcing such hard lessons. In critical race theory, the subject must be part of the discussion to implicate individual actors in that structure. By failing to implicate Whites, or the privileges of whiteness in this system, Kibria’s work does not align fully with critical race theory.

## Asian American racial and ethnic identity through a CRT lens

Claire Jean Kim (2003) suggests that in order to develop a strong Asian American identity not sabotaged by excessive conformity to whiteness, one must at least have access to a strong Asian American community. Many upwardly mobile Asian Americans do not have such easy access and often find themselves in more isolated, predominantly White spaces where asserting a strong Asian American identity becomes very difficult. Kim further suggests that understanding the reality of societal racism can awaken Asian Americans and move them out of a stage of identifying so heavily with White ways.

Adopting to White ways can appear to award Asian Americans protection from racial discrimination, but it can come with physical or emotional costs (Chou and Feagin 2008). Additionally, “honorary White” status can create conflict intra-ethnic conflict within the Asian American umbrella group and with other people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2004; O’Brien 2008). William Julius Wilson (1978) asserted that many of the barriers of racial discrimination against African-Americans would be alleviated by a rise in class status. That same argument has been

used to assert that because Asian Americans often have higher median incomes than those of all racial groups, including Whites, they face little or insignificant amounts of discrimination. However, Feagin and Sikes (1994) demonstrate that class and race can operate separately in the lives of middle-class African-Americans. Even with middle or upper class income levels, they face overt racial discrimination in their daily lives. Similarly, research has found that class status does not protect Asian Americans from racial discrimination (Chou and Feagin 2008).

Researchers have used educational attainment as a variable to measure success. Asian Americans are often compared with other racial minorities and Whites. Some social scientists suggest that they do not face much discrimination in education because of their high levels of attendance in colleges and universities, but this is far from the reality (Chou and Feagin 2008). In this next section, we detail studies that reveal that higher levels of educational attainment do not protect Asian Americans from racism.

### **Asian Americans and higher education**

One of the few analysts of Asian Americans to explicitly name White discriminators as central is sociologist Mia Tuan (2003). Interviewing nearly 100 third- and later-generation Chinese and Japanese Americans, she found that although most were well assimilated into the dominant culture, most also had a strong sense of a racialized identity because Whites constantly imposed the identity of “Asian foreigner” on them. They reported being caught between feeling perpetually outside, as “forever foreigners,” and sometimes being given greater privileges by Whites than other people of color. They spoke too of the difficulty they had in viewing themselves in terms of their national origin when they were constantly being defined in “generically racial terms” as “Asian Americans” or as “Orientals.” Though offering a probing analysis that assesses well racial-ethnic identity struggles and recognizes Whites as having a privileged status, Tuan does not in our view provide enough in-depth analysis of the anti-Asian racism that surrounds, and imposes oppressive predicaments on, Asian Americans. Her use of CRT tenets could be strengthened.

Explicitly utilizing critical race theory in higher education research is Robert Teranishi. In Teranishi’s book, *Asians in the Ivory Tower*, he provides evidence that the assumptions about Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) students as largely high-achieving model minorities are inaccurate and that there are a number of factors that complicate generalizations about this population. Teranishi (2010) challenges the mythologies surrounding this student population by asserting, “AAPIs are treated as though one percent of their enrollment can tell the story for the rest of the 99% of the college going population (p. 105).”

His extensive quantitative and qualitative data convincingly make the case that the actual AAPI experience is far from that of being a mythologized “model minority.” His use of critical race theory provides evidence of the structural, foundational, systemic racism that has existed within the educational system. Teranishi critiques what he considers the “blatant exclusion in some instances and ambiguous positioning in other instances (p. 14)” of AAPIs within educational equity debates, and he insists that we move beyond a Black–White racial paradigm. Teranishi argues that the existing racial structure and systemic racial inequalities in education do in fact impact AAPI students. He calls for the need to move beyond an individualistic lens and the dominant scripts of hard work and strict parenting that focus on family and culture and tend to ignore institutional practices and inequalities across Asian American and Pacific Islander groups in the United States. Teranishi highlights the diversity of the population and uncovers the deep structural obstacles that exist for people of color when it comes to higher education, both public and private.

The groundbreaking work of Tuan and Teranishi helped to fill major gaps in education scholarship examining Asian American experiences. Their contributions offer a clearer picture of Asian American oppression that is often dismissed because of high rates of attendance at colleges and universities in the United States. Using CRT to examine Asian Americans and education is still uncommon, and there is a great need for more research. Another academic sphere with a dearth of Asian American research is mental health. Yet, great racial disparity exists in this area.

### **Mental health research**

Few researchers have probed Asian American mental health data in any depth. One mid-2000s study of Korean, Chinese, and Japanese immigrant youth examined acculturation to the core culture, but only briefly noted that some of these youth experienced substantial “cultural stress, such as being caught between two cultures, feeling alienated from both cultures, and having interpersonal conflicts with whites”. Another study examined only Korean male immigrants and found some negative impact on mental health from early years of adjustment and some mental “stagnation” a decade or so after immigration. Yet, the researchers offered little explanation for the findings. One recent study of US teenagers found that among various racial groups, Asian American youth had by far the highest incidence of teenage depression, yet the report on this research did not even assess the importance of this striking finding (Hurh 1990; Medicaid 2002).

In the modest statistical analysis that exists, Asian American statistics on suicide and alcoholism stand out. Elderly Chinese American women have a suicide rate ten times that of their elderly White peers (Browne and Broderick 1994). Although Asian American students are only 17 percent of the Cornell University student body, they make up fully half of all completed suicides there (Harder 2005). A study of Japanese American men who had been interned during World War II found that they suffered high rates of alcoholism and that 40 percent died before reaching the age of fifty-five (Tanaka 1999). Eliza Noh (2007), a researcher who has done much research on suicide and depression issues for Asian American women, recently reported that among females aged fifteen to twenty-four, Asian Americans have the highest suicide rate of all racial groups. Suicide was found to be the second leading cause of death for these Asian American females. Noh concludes from the data that Asian American women live under greater pressures to achieve, including in education, than even their male counterparts, pressures that create the great stress underlying much depression and suicide. In a recent media report, Noh has commented that “pressure from within the family doesn’t completely explain the shocking suicide statistics for young women” and that “simply being a minority can also lead to depression.” Yet she fails to pursue the implications of this last comment – the likely connection between their stress and depression and the racial hostility and discrimination they face daily because of this White-imposed minority status. Indeed, in the relatively rare situations where such data on depression or suicide are examined, researchers and other commentators usually cite background (“Asian”) cultural factors and culturally related pressures to achieve in education and the workplace as the reasons for Asian American mental health problems – and not their problems with the pressures of racism.

The studies detailing mental health disparities for Asian Americans are important, yet most of them lack any critical analysis. Chou and Feagin (2008) tie racism to Asian American mental health in their qualitative study, but much larger samples must be examined to further elucidate this public health issue. The shortage of CRT in this type of research is truly costing lives, and we suggest an increase so that we may have a better

understanding of the role that racism plays in the health of, not only Asian Americans, but all people of color.

### **Moving forward, the need for intersectional analysis**

To advance Asian American research, an intersectional lens is essential. Social scientists who one dimensionally analyze social phenomenon can fail to get a holistic picture of how oppressive forces are interrelated and effect multiple parts of individual identity. Asian Americans are often simplified as a monolithic group. They represent numerous countries of origin, and the diversity of cultures and ethnicities is vast. However, the racist controlling images in the media construct them one dimensionally (Chou 2012). All Asian Americans face a reality of imposed stereotyping regardless of nation of ancestry, class, sexuality, or gender. Unpacking these multiple aspects of identity is no easy task, and intersectional theorists work to further understand the multilayered experiences of Asian Americans.

Asian Americans, while perhaps stereotyped as “nearly White,” are not free from gendered, racialized treatment. This racialized and gendered process is not static. The sexual stereotyping of people of Asian descent has mutated throughout American history, changing based on the needs and interests of Whites (Chou 2012). By evaluating constructions of Asian American gender and sexuality, intersectional scholars can inform us on how racism, specifically White supremacy, works in the United States. Thus, intersectional analysis is a logical tool to use for critical race theorists. The externally imposed meanings placed upon Asian and Asian American bodies as gendered and sexualized beings unveil the new racism in this supposed “post-racial” United States.

Asian Americans have experienced a unique history where immigration, land, and labor laws have had an effect on gender relations (Espiritu 2007, 2008). Asian American men face a particular placement on a gendered hierarchy and deal with battles against hegemonic masculinity that can and do operate differently than their Latino or African-American male counterparts. Asian American women also have a different perspective and life experience than White women and other women of color (Praso 2006). While Asian American men and women may share similar experiences facing White hegemony, their gender identity may cause differences in how that racism manifests. David Eng (2001) argues that racial analysis of Asian Americans is inadequate without the consideration of how their sexuality has been constructed.

There is great variation within masculinity and femininity, although the scope seems narrow when presented as a hegemonic ideal in the media. There is a White, middle-upper class, heterosexual standard that is pervasive, and any variations from these images of hegemonic masculinity or emphasized femininities occupy subordinate positions of interlocking social hierarchies (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Race intersects with these constructions of gender and sexuality; for Asian Americans, this is further complicated by the various ethnicities that are incorporated under the umbrella term. Asian American masculinity and femininity are also quite varied. There are many different stereotypes of Asian American men and women based on perceived country of origin, class, education, religion, and sexuality. Examining this interwoven dynamic through a critical race lens is imperative to understand the way racial oppression operates across systems.

### **Conclusion**

In the past few decades, there have been major contributions to the literature extending racial scholarship beyond the Black–White paradigm. Asian Americans have been racially othered and negatively stereotyped by Whites since the arrival of the first Chinese immigrants in the

1800s. Discrimination was often institutionalized in racist policies and practices. More recently, scholars have focused on Asian American identity and how seemingly positive stereotyping them as “model minorities” actually reifies the racial hierarchy and masks racism faced daily. Additionally, intersectional scholarship extends the discussion into other systems of oppression, highlighting how racism can be veiled in different systems. The contributions have been substantial thus far, and theoretical dialogues are imperative for racial progress. Nevertheless, the scholarship must continue.

Bell (1987) urged us to “find solace and strength in the recognition that black people are neither the first nor the only group whose age-old struggle for freedom both still continues and is worth engaging even if it never results in total liberty and opportunity” (p. 257). Critical race scholarship allows us to be dialogical and inclusive of all people of color. Racism is also detrimental to Whites, and by using critical race theory to understand the role of Whites and whiteness, we can hopefully have real racial progress. Engaging in an academic dialogue is essential even if racial equality may seem impossible to obtain in the near future or even in our lifetime. Even though he was unable to see the true fruits of his labor actualized, Bell (1987) encouraged us to remember the contributions of the men and women before us that have taken up this fight and to “take up their legacy of faith and carry it forward into the future for the sake not alone of ourselves and our children but of all human beings of whatever race or color or creed” (p. 257).

There have been numerous scholars examining Asian Americans who have taken up the legacy of preceding race scholars. Their work can be carried forward into the future, and with a CRT perspective, the role of power and domination moves to the center of the discussion. While some scholarship has been used to validate racist practices and policies, social science research that uses a critical lens contradicts these claims. As racism has become more covert, it is even more imperative for scholars to use critical race theory and intersectionality to uncover how it is embedded into society. Additionally, we must further examine the intersections of class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality. These systems of oppression collide with the racial structure and interact in reifying White supremacy.

Critical race Asian American research is an essential part of the quest for racial justice, and the literature has grown substantially since Bell wrote those words in 1987. However, this quest remains elusive. While Bell (1987) lamented that we’ve said “most of what can be said about racial issues” and have “tried many of the solutions,” we must not yield in our quest, even if racial equality will not be achieved in our time. What choice do we have? Without utilizing a critical race theory perspective, tyrannical power will never be named, and racial equality will persist. A small portion of the Asian American research meets CRT criteria, and much more is necessary. We survey major contributions to Asian American scholarship and determine which contributions can be classified as CRT. Our hope is that by identifying the Asian American literature that uses a critical race theory lens, we can have the tools to see through the “mirage” of racial progress and make real strides toward racial equality.

## Short Biographies

Rosalind S. Chou is an assistant professor of sociology at Georgia State University. Her research examines the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. She coauthored the book, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*, in 2008 with Joe R. Feagin. She completed her PhD in sociology in May 2010 at Texas A&M University and was the Samuel Dubois Cook Postdoctoral Fellow at Duke University in 2010–2011. Her second book, *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality*, was published in 2012.

Susan Choi is a doctoral sociology student at Georgia State University. Her research examines Asian Americans and intimate relationships.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include UCLA student Alexandra Wallace's anti-Asian YouTube viral video and the 2013 Duke Asia Prime party controversy.

<sup>2</sup> We draw heavily from Wendy Moore's conceptions of critical race theory from her graduate course of the same name (2009).

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