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Sueshin Sarah Moon
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Asian/Americans: Model Students, Disempowered Citizens

Sueshin (Sarah) Moon

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Heather Pool

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Department of Philosophy, Politics, and Economics

INTRODUCTION

The American Dream that anyone can achieve their dreams - however big and ideal they may be - in the United States is no longer possible; these days, the American Dream has become only a *dream* that cannot be attainable. The US is no longer a meritocratic society, or even more precisely, it has never been a truly meritocratic society for racial minorities. If merit is actually a priority Americans as a whole care about in their society - that the smartest, the most talented, and the most diligent should be in positions of power - then the absence of so many minority races, even those who have accomplished unimaginable things, in positions of power cannot be explained. This implies that there is something else that Americans, specifically white Americans,¹ have prioritized throughout history that determines who ought to have the actual power in American politics.

This research explores why and how educational, economic, and political power is distributed among various racial groups in the United States, specifically examining the experiences and voices of Asian/Americans.² Asian/Americans are often at the top of academic achievements and are praised for being the model students in schools, but as soon as they leave academic environments, they are no longer visible. Even with higher incomes and wealth compared to other minority races, Asian/Americans have not been able to secure political voices for decades. In other words, the model minority³ performs exceptionally well as students but becomes largely disempowered as citizens.

¹ I will be using lowercase “w” when referring to white Americans because white Americans have secured Whiteness as a dominant, universal, and commonly-accepted concept in the United States.

² I use the term “Asian/Americans,” specifically with a forward slash in between Asian and Americans to talk about any Americans of Asian descent.

³ The concept of model minority was first introduced in *The New York Times Magazine* article entitled “Success story: Japanese American style” on January 9, 1966 by sociologist William Pettersen to describe Asian Americans’ high academic achievements despite racial discrimination in the US.

Asian/Americans in the United States are not only perceived as model students but also associated with higher socioeconomic status than other colored races. Since they perform remarkably well both in academic settings and in professional environments, they are, *in theory*, models that white Americans look up to. By assuming Asian/Americans as a model minority group in schools, white Americans learn how to develop as better learners and further advance as more competitive candidates in the job market. Hence, it seems logical to think that white Americans would welcome Asian/Americans because they uplift white people by motivating them to strive further. If meritocracy was real, then white Americans should welcome Asian/Americans who value education and economic achievement, both of which can only benefit white Americans and the US as a whole in a positive way.

Yet white people have not welcomed Asian/Americans with open arms despite the presence of Asian/Americans in the US being instrumental in the academic and economic success of many white Americans, especially in the political sphere. While the household median income for Asian/Americans increased by 4.6% from 2017 to 2018, 38% greater than the national median income,⁴ Asian/Americans' political representation has barely changed since the first Congress in 1789. Nowhere in United States politics, whether federal or state governments, can we expect active engagement from Asian/Americans. Out of the 50 US States, only nine have elected an Asian and/or Pacific Islander to the United States Senate House of Representatives; without Pacific Islanders, the number of Asian/American

⁴ "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2018." *United States Census Bureau*, September 10, 2019.

elected officials decreases even further.⁵ Among a total of 12,421 people elected to the US Congress, less than 10 were Asian/Americans.⁶ In more than 230 years the US federal government has existed, less than 1% of its Congressional elected officials have been Asian, even though Asian/Americans currently make up 7% of the US population.

This severance of political power from economic success among Asian/Americans is in direct contrast with the traditional road to political success that the majority of white American politicians take. US senators and House members - most of whom are white Americans - have an estimated net worth of over \$500,000, or roughly five times the median U.S. household net worth.⁷ While some accumulate wealth after being elected, most of them have sufficient financial resources to campaign, run for the positions, and ultimately be elected; in other words, white American politicians, primarily male, are already equipped with adequate capital that enables them to join politics in the first place.

This implies that there is a significant gap between economic and political success specifically for Asian/Americans that has not been bridged since the first Congress in the late 1780s. Despite being considered a model minority student group and successful wealth-holders who contribute to the overall economic development of the US, the Asian/American population as a whole has been lacking a political voice for decades. To find a solution to this problem, I attempt to answer the following research questions throughout the paper: Why does neither academic achievement nor economic resources grant Asian/Americans the power to be model *citizens* of the United States, unlike white

⁵ "Total Members of the House & State Representation." *United States House of Representatives History, Art & Archives*, January 5, 2022.

⁶ Budiman, Abby and Neil Ruiz. "Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population." *Pew Research Center*, April 29, 2021.

⁷ Stebbins, Samuel and John Harrington. "Here are the members of Congress with the highest estimated net worth." *USA Today*, October 25, 2019.

Americans in high socioeconomic positions who attain Congressional representation? Why have Asian/Americans continued to be excluded from the political debate even after various legal cases that guaranteed their legal rights to citizenship and equality? What role do white Americans play in denying Asian/Americans the necessary and sufficient right as equal citizens and political power to drive real changes in US institutions? To what extent does being an Asian play a role in determining one's socioeconomic and political success in the US?

To begin formulating answers to these research questions, I first examine various ways in which race has been defined in the United States, and where and how Asian/Americans fit in if they do belong to a specific class. By utilizing concepts such as the model minority group and the Racial Triangulation, I explain how white Americans have positioned Asian/Americans in a way that would not only limit their political access but also oppress other minority races from climbing up on a social hierarchy. I introduce another central concept "Whiteness⁸ as Property" as a way to uphold and maintain white supremacy and racial discrimination against Asian/Americans. After that, I provide a historical analysis to offer an overview of the path that Asian/Americans in the US have gone through first as immigrants and later as citizens, focusing on changes in immigration laws, policies, and major court cases. Then, I explore how these institutional developments have shaped the current status quo of Asian/Americans, especially students, as a model minority group in academic settings as well as in professional environments after college. Finally, I conclude that the absence of adequate political voice from Asian/Americans has

⁸ The word "Whiteness" will be used with the capital "W" from onward to signify that it is an exclusive property created and dominated by white Americans. It is different from the phenotypic whiteness that does not entail political significance.

been maintained and aggravated by the active dissent of white Americans who intentionally left Asian/Americans out of political discussions.

This research examines fundamental challenges that Asian/American students face as a “model minority” group and how those challenges have been exacerbated by the existing legal and institutional framework in the United States. While many Asian/American students tend to perform better than average in academic settings - due to their cultural norms and societal expectations (i.e. Confucianism beliefs and tiger moms) - they are often denied access to equal rights and actual political power to make greater changes because of the way the US institutions are set up. By positioning Asian/Americans in the middle of the Triangulators between white and Black Americans,⁹ white Americans utilize Asian/Americans to establish a set of expectations of a *model student* but at the same time deny full citizenship by restricting the political power they deserve.

METHODOLOGY

Race as a Philosophical Investigation

Throughout history, the concept of race has been dichotomized between Black and white Americans due to the US long being a slave state that oppressed Black Americans. While prominent theories and historical events like Critical Race Theory and the Civil Rights Movement draw people’s attention to the inequalities Black Americans have been enduring,¹⁰ they do not necessarily address discrimination against other minority races.

⁹ I use the capital ‘B’ when referring to Black Americans because their race is *unique* in that it has been created, shaped, and maintained only through the dominance of white supremacists.

¹⁰ By referring to racial discourse as a dichotomy between Black and white Americans, I do not mean to degrade or neglect Black Americans’ struggles nor the efforts they have arduously put into deconstructing racial inequality. However, such black or white categorization of racial issues has reduced the continuum of racial discourse.

Therefore, minority races other than Black Americans, including Asian/Americans, Pacific Islanders, American Indians/Alaska Natives, and Hispanics have not deserved any voice or space to engage in racial discourse despite being an even smaller minority in American society for decades. This is problematic because racial dichotomization diminishes the diverse origins and backgrounds of various racial groups in the US. Hence, it is necessary to identify ways to begin racial discourse from a more fundamental and universal perspective.

To derive race thinking from the foundational principles of humankind, Paul Taylor, in *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*, argues that a philosophical inquiry is critical to understanding race. A philosophical investigation augments the limitations and implications of empirical data by studying the reason and rationale behind why and how the racial conversation is structured in certain ways. While Taylor concedes that empirical data can produce a collective result on how Americans as a group engage in racial conversation, philosophical investigation delves into the real experiences of racism (Taylor 2013, 8-23). The philosophical inquiry further allows us to ask questions about the underlying assumptions of racial discourse and reflect on the uses, history, and structure of race. Through the process of framing and answering philosophical questions, we can develop a greater outlook on the prospects and implications of racial discourse. Often, these philosophical discussions begin from particular values and views about race, so it is important to determine where and from whom racial conversation begins (Taylor 2013, 8-23). Thus, both philosophical investigation, as well as aggregate data, will be employed in this research.

Asian/Americans: Model Minority and the Triangulators

When the term “model minority” was first introduced, it was used to describe the hard-working character of Asian/American students in academic settings and praise their success despite being the minority race who had to endure extra challenges to perform well in classes. As the model minority, Asian/American students are expected to accomplish above and beyond academically, avoid engaging in bad behaviors, and serve as role models for other students (Pettersen 1966). Asian/Americans are expected to excel academically, particularly in mathematics and science, and are even questioned about their *true* academic interests and career choices if they choose to follow non-conventional paths by engaging in humanities, such as philosophy and political science.

Yet while Asian/American students often serve as role models in academic settings, they are not positioned at the top of the societal hierarchy once they leave school. That is, white Americans, as the majority, are the ones who thrive the most at the top of the racial hierarchy and are the only race who have the actual political power to drive changes. Despite their academic excellence, Asian/Americans remain largely invisible and disempowered when it comes to being members of the elite in American society - whether in politics, wealth, culture, or visibility.

This, I argue, is primarily because Asian/American students are only entitled to equal rights and liberties by law, while in reality, they are not entitled to the necessary resources to attain equal, fair access to political power. Asian/American students are viewed as ideal figures that white Americans look up to in terms of cultural values and academic success, yet they are not as equally represented or granted equal political rights to access other resources in society. “Their characterization as the ‘model minority’ masks

their real victimization and the violence they experience in the twenty-first century” (Ball and Hartlep 2017, 1-2). By labeling Asian/Americans as the model minority and situating them in the middle of the Triangulators, white Americans utilize them as a means to advance their career and devalue the work and experiences of Black Americans.

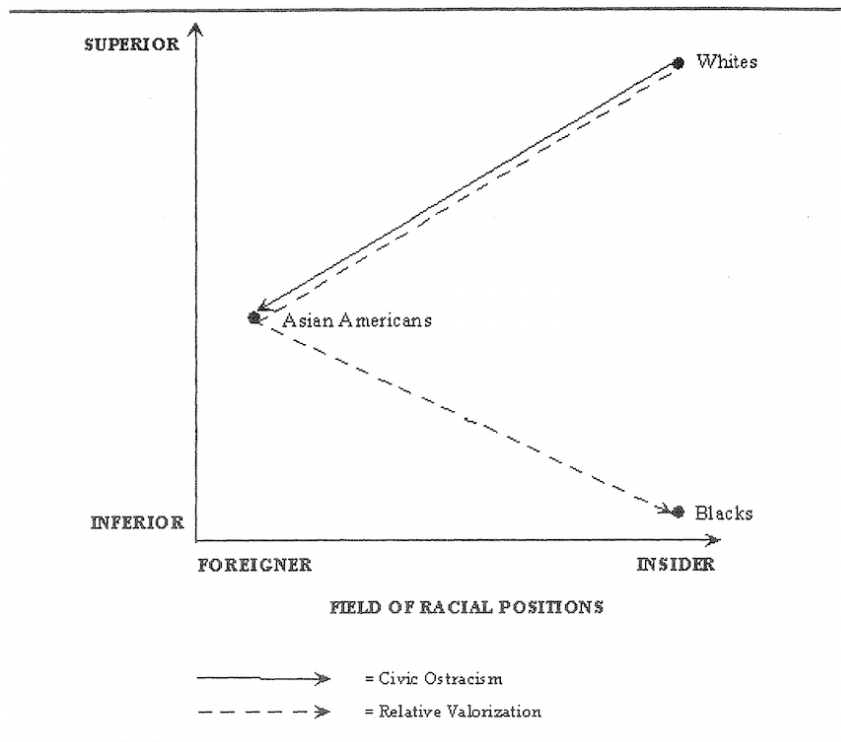


Figure 1: The Triangulators (Kim 1999)

As the Racial triangulation (Figure 1) depicts, Asian/Americans are effectively placed inferior to white Americans, but superior to Black Americans by the dominant white majority. Asian/Americans at the same time are considered much more foreign in terms of their racial categorization compared to Black Americans (Kim 1999). This implies that while Asian/Americans are “superior” to the Blacks, they are not accepted by the white dominant society; they are outsiders, expected to be apolitical and less politically active than Blacks who are still insiders despite being inferior. Ultimately, the model minority

label and the Racial Triangulation limit the opportunities and experiences of Asian/Americans beyond academic environments; Asian/Americans should remain “good” students as foreigners, so they do not deserve equal political rights.

Critical Race Theory

When asked to examine racial issues in the United States, many scholars point to Critical Race Theory - a legal and academic framework that analyzes race as a social construct inherently built into the American society and the interdependence between race and every aspect of living experiences, including housing, health care, and education (Delgado and Stefancic 2013). Similarly, Omi and Winant define racial formation as a sociohistorical process in which racial categories are formed, reinforced, and destroyed (Omi and Winant 2015, 183). They further claim that “we utilize race to provide clues about who a person is” (188-189) because race is a political construct that has been invented and categorized by actual human beings, not a simple biological concept. In a similar vein, Shaw et. al claim that race is not just a phenotype, but more of a sociocultural construct, a substantive and symbolic concept that shapes opportunities for each individual (Shaw 2015, 4). Thus, racism serves as a tool to rank which groups deserve what rights based on their race, inevitably resulting in the dichotomy of domination and subordination (13).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the realm of education attempts to shed light on how racial discourse is structured in academic settings and dives deeper into how students’ academic experiences both in and outside of classrooms are shaped by intrinsically racial educational, legal, and political institutions (Teranishi 2010, 146). Furthermore, CRT scholars dissect how educational laws, regulations, and policies have been utilized by white

Americans as a means to “subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups” (Solorzano 1998, 6). Therefore, scholars of CRT provide critical insight into viewing and understanding race as a social construct introduced, revised, and sustained by the majority race in the US - white Americans - to structure the educational experiences of minority races.

However, even the scholars of Critical Race Theory have failed to incorporate racial discourse specifically for Asian/Americans because often, the discussion about race in the US revolves around the poles of Black vs. White. As argued by Chang, “Critical race theory, which claims that race matters but which has not yet shown *how different races matter differently*, is inadequate to fully address the needs of Asians” (Chang 1993, 1248). Chang further points out the significant gap between the resources that Asian/Americans receive and those that Black Americans receive in the educational and legal fields because Americans do not consider Asian/Americans a minority racial group anymore. For example, Chang writes that “Government officials have sometimes denied funding for social service programs designed to help Asian Americans learn English and find employment. Failing to realize that there are poor Asian families, college administrators have sometimes excluded Asian-American students from Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP), which are intended for all students from low-income families” (1261). On top of that, Chang is concerned that Asian/Americans are no longer perceived as a minority race because as models, they are already considered academically and economically advantaged that do not need extra support. “At a recent conference of the Association of American Law Schools, Judge Posner asked two rhetorical questions: ‘Are Asians an oppressed group in the United States today? Are they worse off for lacking sizable representation on the faculties of American law schools?’” (1261).

If Asian/Americans have not been included in the racial discourse of CRT and are not considered an “oppressed group” nor “worse off lacking sizable representation,” why does the Asian/American population lack meaningful political power in driving changes in US political institutions? Although Chang does not provide alternative tools to understand the academic experiences of Asian/American students, he still emphasizes that academic and legal scholars should incorporate diverse perspectives and narratives to hear the voices of Asian/Americans. Recognizing the need to provide spaces for Asian/Americans is the first step because from whom and from what perspective the story comes matters in CRT. In this regard, the lack of political representation of Asian/Americans seems like a more pressing issue: who is projecting the voice of Asian/Americans if they do not have sufficient political representation?

Critical Race Theory for Asian/Americans

Another issue that CRT neglects is that white Americans have continued to position Asian/Americans between them and Black Americans in the racial hierarchy to denounce Blacks for being *the inferior* and limit the political power that Asian/Americans can earn. While Asian/Americans are considered a *model* minority group, performing extremely well in academic settings as exemplars that Black Americans should take lessons from, they are never equal to whites in terms of political power and representation. Asian/Americans are positioned between the two poles of Black and White in the US, somewhere in the middle. White Americans are at the top of the Racial Triangulation, putting themselves at the highest rank in the hierarchy above any other racial group in the US (Kim 1999). Black Americans - historically treated as slaves and thus *properties* that white Americans have the

ownership of - are placed at the bottom of the pyramid; they are the “inferior” race to the superior whites. Asian/Americans, then, are placed somewhere in between those two races in the US, slightly superior to the Blacks, but never equal to the whites because White is the only superior racial group in the US. In this regard, white Americans are capitalizing on Asian/Americans by recognizing them as a *model* minority group that both white and Black Americans should learn from, but at the same time by oppressing them as a *minority* group who does not deserve the rights and privileges. “Whiteness” then becomes a powerful tool to design, build, and maintain the hierarchical racial structure in the US which serves as a foundation that shapes one’s experience living in the US, including access to education, economic opportunities, and political power.

Critical Race Praxis: An Alternative Pathway for Racial Equality

Acknowledging the lack of practicality of the Critical Race Theory, especially in providing narrative space for Asian/Americans, Yamamoto suggests an alternative theory to implement change in practice - Critical Race Praxis (CRP). The rationale behind CRP is similar to CRT in that it aims to lay out the framework to understand and examine racial inequality in the US; however, it is more practical and progressive in that it “combines critical, pragmatic, socio-legal analysis ... to *practice* justice by and for racialized communities” (Yamamoto 1997, 820). In introducing CRP, Yamamoto discusses three main implications and how the limitations of CRT can be overcome by focusing on the actual practice. First, he argues it is necessary to explore the *real* challenges and adversities that racial minority communities are going through in the context of anti-subordination struggles. Second, he suggests that the studies of racial justice and jurisprudence

incorporate the historical and current voices of those being oppressed because the current legal institution and principles are the reflection of cultural and traditional practices that have developed through the centuries. Third, most importantly, CRP not only scrutinizes the perpetuation of white supremacy and dominance as a primary reason for racial injustice but also emphasizes justice inquiry beyond the dichotomy between White and Black, examining the experiences of different racial minority groups, including Asian/Americans (Yamamoto 1997). Therefore, CRP provides valuable insight into understanding racial injustice from a theoretical perspective as well as from a practical and pragmatic perspective - what are the actual day-to-day experiences of Asian/Americans? How are their struggles obscured by the positive academic and economic success and the *more severe* discrimination that Black Americans have to endure?

To sum up, Asian/Americans' struggles for political equality have been blindfolded for the following two main reasons. First, white Americans only highlight the academic and economic success that Asian/Americans bring to the US by labeling them as model minority students who remain largely apolitical. White Americans purposefully suppress Asian/Americans by classifying them as an academically and economically outstanding minority group who has been successful in their own fields even without political participation. By continuously reminding them that they can outperform other minorities in academic and professional settings, white Americans actively shift Asian/Americans away from political engagement (Kim 1999). Second, Black Americans, as the insiders, have become more vocal, advocative, and thus influential through large-scale, visible movements, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement. While the struggles and challenges of Black Americans are starting to be revealed to the outside world, those of Asian/Americans still

do not deserve as much attention, relatively putting less public attention on the hate crimes against Asian/Americans. Therefore, to practice justice and advocate for equal rights, the voices of Asian/Americans that have long remained silent need to be heard.

BODY

I. What is Race?

Race as a Biological and Social Construct

According to Shaw et al. in *Uneven Roads: An Introduction to US Racial and Ethnic Politics*, race refers to the specific groups of people that have similar phenotypic and cultural characteristics, including language and family customs. Race is not only a historical reflection of US history that does not and cannot go away because of its substantive and symbolic significance but also a critical factor that determines structural opportunities and the experiences of how people are treated with words, actions, and public opinion in the current American society (Shaw et al. 2015, 4). In this regard, race is different from ethnicity because the initial categorization of race mostly relied upon physical, visible characteristics while the categorization of ethnicity is based upon “cultural practices or national or regional ancestries” (10). For example, those in the same ethnic groups may share a common proper name, a common ancestry, a set of shared historical memories, a sense of solidarity, and a link with a homeland, but the race is a broader concept that does not require such historical ties between one another (10-11).

Another important aspect of race that distinguishes it from ethnicity is that race is a social construct shaped by both biological features *and* society or the people around them. In addition to the phenotypic features that define what race one belongs to, race is

externally constructed and imposed, for example, “Black,” a race that has been shaped and reinforced by the dominant Whiteness. The problem of race being a societal product is that racialization - making assumptions about others’ races based on their appearances and characteristics - associates specific features of certain races with the societal roles and expectations of those people, provoking racism. Racism utilizes race as a means to put different groups of people in rank and order; it limits minority races from accessing certain rights and opportunities they would have had had they been a part of the dominant race (Shaw et al. 2015).

Shaw et al. add that the initial US institutions, including government and law, have also played an influential role in sustaining racism and subordination of people of color. For instance, the framers of the US Constitution defined black slaves as three-fifths of a whole person, suggesting subhumanness of Black Americans. Slaves were considered “valuable” properties both economically and culturally. Nowhere in the Constitution of the United States had ‘slavery’ been explicitly mentioned until 1863; Congress did not ban the import of slaves either (Bourne 2008). In 1860, more than four million people, the one-eight of the total population of the United States, were held as slaves in the Southern states (Bourne 2008). Slaves were dehumanized with violence; they were treated as instruments to achieve their owners’ goals and traded like animals. They were not guaranteed basic rights; they were not allowed to learn and/or marry (*Lumen Learning*).

Even in Abraham Lincoln’s proclamation to emancipate slaves in 1863, Lincoln utilized slaves as a political incentive to benefit the United States, an exclusive white territory. To maintain continuous political support, Lincoln did not emancipate slaves in the border states that were already under the Union’s control unless they decided to join the

Confederate States. Moreover, by urging the Southern States to free slaves, Lincoln knew that the slave owners would suffer economically due to the lack of resources and labor force to domesticate animals and maintain farmlands. Therefore, even Lincoln who initiated the emancipation of slaves utilized slaves as a means to achieve political success to unify the Union and the Confederates as one state (*National Archives* 2017).

Even after the 13th Amendment, *de facto* racial discrimination against Black Americans still persisted. Black Americans, who used to be slaves or have slave ancestry, had limited access to education and voting and had to tolerate the inherent bias toward them as “former slaves.” Many of them were left behind in terms of socioeconomic standing because they were indebted to merchants for living and working expenses, leading to a vicious cycle of work-without-pay. Three years later after the 13th Amendment was passed, the 14th Amendment granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States including freed slaves. The 15th Amendment followed a year later, guaranteeing the voting right to African American men (*United States Senate*). On the surface, it seems like these amendments have served as important turning points for Black people in America, yet Black people still suffered from unjust oppression and experiences even after gaining freedom and equality by *legally* becoming citizens of the United States.

As Shaw et al. discuss the four outcomes of racialization, they claim that the minority groups in America have endured and are still undergoing uneven “roads” to the inconsequential stage of racialization. While there are some minority groups like white American Jews who have gained equal citizenship rights and opportunities to other white Americans, minority racial groups, primarily Asian/Americans are still in insufficient or even decisive stages of racialization because they lack that political voice to lead changes

that can address the inherent inequality rooted in the US institution (Shaw et al. 2015). All the current racial discriminatory behaviors against minority races, most of which do not even deserve media coverage, demonstrate how the polity still has weak laws, actions, and institutions in protecting minority races from injustice.

Whiteness as Property: the Dominant Narrative

Cheryl Harris, in her *Harvard Law Review* article “Whiteness as Property,” discusses how modern concepts of race and identity are rooted in law by defining Whiteness as property. She defines Whiteness as a property right with privileges and opportunities exclusive to whites that cannot be acquired by other minority races because of the way the US racial hierarchy has been structured (Harris 1993, 1721). First of all, Whiteness is considered a traditional form of property as it fits with the initial broader concept of property; in the founding era, property meant something people attach value to and have a legal right to. In this sense, Whiteness, or “the right to white,” exhibits characteristics of a traditional form of property that entails values specific to white Americans (1725-1728). Whiteness is also considered a modern property because it defines social relations and interactions between white Americans and other races. Unlike the traditional form of property, the New Property focuses on the functions of property and incorporates social relations revolving around the property. Whiteness, just like a modern property, embodies both the relative power relations between whites and people of color as well as the social hierarchy resulting from those power relations (1728-1729).

On top of all the theoretical characteristics of the property, Whiteness also serves the functional principles of property as it includes the right of disposition, the right to use

and enjoyment, the form of status property, and most importantly, in the context of white supremacy and racial hierarchy, the absolute right to exclude. The inalienability of Whiteness strengthens the value of Whiteness as something that can only be possessed by whites. This exclusive Whiteness is only used and enjoyed by whites whenever they want to take advantage of it (1731-1737). Since Whiteness is limited and available only to whites, it also reinforces its reputation and simultaneously devalues other races, leading to racial subjugation and subordination of Black Americans, as well as Asian/Americans. Since Whiteness has always been considered a property exclusive to whites, it has been established as the basis of racialized privilege in American law that further justifies the domination of Black and Native American people. By enslaving “Negroes,” white Americans decided to restrict membership and attributed freedom only to themselves. Similarly, the conquest of Indians and neglecting their possession was legitimized under the rule of law because the law not only defended conquest and colonization but also established “Whiteness as a prerequisite to the exercise of enforceable property rights” (1724). Whiteness as property has been rooted in American society since its founding and has since been reinforced by legal institutions.

Drawing on significant legal cases, including *Plessy v. Ferguson*, *Brown v. Board*, and numerous court decisions on affirmative action, Harris asserts that antidiscrimination law has not been helpful in dismantling racism or Whiteness as property. More specifically, while the court decision on *Brown I* rejected *de jure* White privilege, it did not require *de facto* desegregation or integration of students of different races. In a similar vein, *Brown II* directed the schools to desegregate “with all deliberate speed,” but not immediately, and did not specify the role of government in eliminating inequalities in school resource

distribution (1745-1757). Similarly, the court cases involving affirmative action demonstrate how whites still utilize Whiteness as property. They argue an affirmative action is a form of reverse racism as it unfavorably allocates the “burden” to those who were not involved in initial discrimination to rectify the past injustices. Whites feel as though they deserve access to all the open spaces, whether political, economic, or academic, and that any reservation of a space for someone not white is a violation of the white right to everything because they are the superior race who are entitled to all of the properties of the US (1777-1791).

Then, where are the spaces for minority races who have not even had the opportunities to be a part of those spaces in the first place? Minority races deserve what they would have deserved had there been no racism, which can only be redressed through rectificatory justice. Although anti-discrimination law symbolizes desegregation, integration, and rejection of Whiteness as property, it has not successfully dismantled Whiteness as property that has already permeated the legal system. Having firmly established Whiteness as a private, restrictive property that no other races can have access to, white Americans were easily able to exploit it to position other minority races below them.

Race then is a social, political, and legal construct so inherently interwoven in American society that it negatively affects the experiences of minority races in the current days. Clarissa Hayward, in *How Americans Make Race: Stories, Institutions, Spaces narratives*, contends that after identities are created by stories, they are reproduced and reinforced by American political and legal institutions. Although stories may change as time evolves, the identities that have been reproduced do not easily alter because they are already built into

politics, laws, and rules that govern society (Hayward 2013). Since the Colonial Period, Americans have constantly narrated their stories about race and categorized themselves into distinct classes based on race, political authority, and socioeconomic status. Narratives in the US have been selective, interpretive, and evaluative, and racial narratives have specifically been dominated, institutionalized, and objectified by white Americans. Since white Americans were the primary narrators of racial stories, they have shaped the stories as they wanted them to be shared, which has further aggravated material inequality and transformed underperformance and racial injustice into people of color's problems.

These prejudiced narratives that have been reproduced by institutional rules and laws not only distort past experiences but also influence and prompt future actions. Since the racial narratives are already institutionalized, they cannot be easily discredited despite changing the stories of racism. Further, Hayward notes that the "stickiness of identity" makes it particularly difficult for both white American civil rights activists and people of color to challenge the unjust concept of race in the first place (Hayward 2013, 188). Thus, neither resistance to the norms nor uncoordinated subversion are sufficient. "Identitarian change... requires telling stories that are extraordinary - stories that take collective identity narratives as their subject matter, and then work to explain, to criticize, and/or to revise them. But change requires extraordinary stories of a very particular type. It requires stories that motivate both institutional redesign and the construction of material forms" (189).

Then, the underlying problems and challenges of powerful racial discourse that can actually deconstruct the racial hierarchy are that 1) racial conversation has mostly been centered around white Americans who reinforced their Whiteness as a traditional and modern property and 2) those narratives have survived and persisted to an extent that

other minority races, primarily Asian/Americans, do not have adequate resources and platforms to engage in political debates. Before we dive into how we can understand and amplify the voices of Asian/Americans, we first have to examine *how* and *why* Asian/Americans have come to be where they are right now.

Asian/Americans in the Racial Discourse

Asian/Americans, unfortunately, do not have proper standing in the racial discourse because the racial paradigm in the United States has not only been dominated by the property-owners, white Americans, but also centered around a dichotomy between white Americans and Black Americans. While I admit that white Americans have more responsibility to rectify the wrong they have committed against Black Americans, I also believe that the struggles of Asian/Americans are different but analogous to those of Black Americans. Being the model minority compressed in between the superior white and inferior Black, Asian/Americans were continuously exploited by white Americans to justify their racist behavior toward minority races. Moreover, by labeling Asian/Americans as the model minority that other minority races should learn from and behave like, white Americans reiterate that Asian/Americans, despite being mostly apolitical as a whole race, have prospered and will continue to do so. White Americans then are exploiting the *model* minority myth to idolize Asian/Americans to discourage Asian/Americans as well as other minorities from engaging in politics: “Asian Americans have ‘much to lose if they decide to join other politically active minority groups’” (Kim 1999, 119). So other minority groups should stop participating in politics and spend more time outperforming Asian/Americans.

In other words, American politics should only be dominated and governed by the Whiteness as property holders: the white Americans.

II. Educational Road toward Model Minority

Historical Overview of Immigration Laws and Policies

In the early 18th century, the United States as a nation did not have strict regulations on immigration, and Americans were generally open to accepting immigrants from different parts of the world because of the global movement of labor and lucrative benefits that immigrants contributed to the economic development. It was not until after the Civil War in 1876 that the Supreme Court engaged with the federal government's responsibility to restrict the number of immigrants. While the number of European immigrants continuously increased, "reaching 5.2 million in the 1880s then surging to 8.2 million in the first decade of the 20th century",¹¹ the number of Asian immigrants started to rise more slowly due to the new immigration legislation that limited Asian American immigrants, specifically the Chinese. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 is often referred to as a "watershed" decision in US history because it was not just the first law in the US to restrict immigrants, but "the first to restrict a group of immigrants based on their race and class" (Lee 2022, 36). Since then, it has served as a powerful precedent in shaping future laws and legal decisions against Asian/American immigrants.

Following the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the Bureau of Immigration was established in 1899 to effectively monitor immigrants and enforce numerous legislations - primarily the Chinese Exclusion Act - that have been put into action. Although World War I

¹¹ Mintz, S., and S. Mcneil. "The New Immigrants." *Digital History*.

in the early 1900s reduced immigration from Europe, mass immigration emerged after the War concluded as people lost their permanent homes and resources. In order to respond to a huge surge in immigration from all around the world, the US Congress decided to implement a new immigration policy in 1924 to restrict the number of immigrants from each country by setting a quota on specific national origins and rigidifying borders between states.¹²

Though European immigration (in particular eastern and southeastern Europeans) had previously been supplying the labor force necessary for the U.S.'s industrialization, the U.S. simply did not require this much labor by the 1920s. Economic growth and advancement became dependent upon technological advances, rather than this supply of immigrant labor. Alongside this was the rise of a wartime nationalism that resulted in a strong anti-immigrant sentiment centered mainly around German Americans. This wartime nationalism also gave rise to an "antiradical current" that "associated Jews with Bolshevism and Italians with anarchism" (Ngai 2014, 19). Americans against this immigration often associated European immigrants with urban slums and class conflict, describing them as "unassimilable backward peasants from the "degraded races" of Europe, incapable of self-government" (19). Altogether, the war bolstered the support for nativist sentiment and led to the reinterpretation of borders and territorial integrity, allowing measures that actively sought to deter and control immigration to be put into law and into common practice. The economic justification that immigrants' labor was no longer needed in the U.S.'s industrialization and growth further provided a basis to enact anti-immigration practices.

¹² "Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)." *National Archives*, February 17, 2022.

Furthermore, the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 favored Europeans, or more specifically Northwestern Europeans, as opposed to Asians and thus established a racial hierarchy among immigrants. Quota laws limited the number of immigrants from specific countries because as Ngai wrote, “if a country has a quota of N, immigrant N is legal but immigrant N + 1 is illegal” (61). Anything over this assigned quota created illegal aliens - those without formal legal status and who might have just been that +1 unfortunately in the wrong queue. Most importantly, while the law allowed people to immigrate from, for instance, China, it did not allow someone who was Chinese to immigrate from China. Only people eligible for citizenship who could legally naturalize were permitted to legally immigrate.

Following the Immigration Act of 1924, the legal status of persons was further reduced to an abstract construction, “having less to do with the experience than with numbers and papers” (61). Whether one was allowed in under the quota, and/or had the correct visa and papers started to determine their status as a legal person in the United States. Quota laws, in essence, led to this production of illegal aliens, and their presence in the interior. The illegal alien became the social reality of the US because it was inevitable to have those immigrants without legal status within the US, further weaving them deeply into American society. However, as illegal aliens, they simply did not exist under the law; by holding no formal status, illegal aliens were physically present but legally absent.

As Ngai wrote, “illegal immigrants inherited the worst of both propositions: they were subject to both deportation, under which proceedings they still lacked constitutional protections, and separate criminal prosecution and punishment” (60). As physical residents, they held no rights or privileges granted to those with formal status, making

their existence in the U.S. a contradiction between legal and social spheres. From this emerged an emphasis on control of land borders, which hid the “unavoidable slippage” from the quota laws into the US interior. Additionally, this led to a discourse of “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants, in addition to “just” and “unjust” deportations, constructed from ideas of “social desirability, in particular with regard to crime and sexual morality, and values that esteemed family preservation” (57). To ensure that the Immigration Act was under strict control, the US government executed deportation whenever necessary so that “the contaminants of social degeneracy” (59) did not disrupt the US society.

Legal reform in this field pushed for some administrative discretion in the determination of deserving and undeserving immigrants. Tension arose from state sovereignty to protect its borders, while as a democracy, allowing for all those without US citizenship to have some rights and representation. Were the N+1, 2, 3... the ones who “disobeyed” American sovereignty and immigration laws undeserving of these rights? In order for either sovereignty or democracy to succeed, one had to lose; and in this case, democratic representation for all fell as state sovereignty rose. This tension still remains in the current American society as illegal aliens have become an inevitable part of the social fabric of the US yet remain legally unseen, leading to this tension between sovereignty and democracy.

Continuing immigration restrictions, Congress also passed the harshest immigration act of that time, requiring literacy tests for admission to the literacy tests. As Congress replaced the Immigration Act of 1924 with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 to attract skilled workers, the number of applicants for immigrants increased, primarily from Asia and Latin America instead of European countries. The new Act still limited the number

of immigration visas each year, so even though the number of Asian immigrants increased, the US government was still regulating how many would be accepted to the US. Later in 1996, the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) was passed to control and prohibit illegal immigration at the border, for example by strengthening border controls and fences. All of these measures to lawfully restrict immigration, specifically from Asian countries, strengthened *de jure* enforcement to actively oppose and deny Asians from entering the US.¹³

Significant Court Cases

Historical landmark decisions on race can be traced back to the “separate but equal” doctrine brought about by the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Homer Plessy - a seven-eighth Caucasian who appeared White - bought a train ticket to Louisiana and had to be on a racially segregated train. The railway conductors - who were charged with sorting passengers and were fined if they did it incorrectly - decided to locate Plessy specifically at the whites-only car so that they could challenge the law. When Plessy was forced to move to a car for Black Americans, Plessy resisted and was arrested and charged with violating the Separate Car Act. When the decision was brought to the Supreme Court, the majority opinion not only rejected Plessy’s argument that constitutional rights were violated but also stated that a law that “implies merely a legal distinction” between whites and Blacks is not unconstitutional. The majority justices also claimed that “to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority” is wrong. They thus yielded the famous “separate but equal” doctrine,

¹³ “The Immigration Act of 1924.” *Office of the Historian*.

providing justification for racism under the law (*Plessy v. Ferguson* 1896). Although *Plessy v. Ferguson* specifically addressed racism between Blacks and whites in the US, it served as a critical precedent that affected future legal decisions involving Asian/Americans, as well.

About 30 years after the decision, in 1927, *Gong Lum v. Rice* interpreted the constitution in a way that unfairly discriminated against Americans of Asian descent, specifically Chinese. Gong Lum, the father of Martha Lum – a native-born US citizen of Chinese descent residing in Mississippi– filed a lawsuit as his daughter was denied from the white school due to her Chinese descent. While the Mississippi Supreme court made the decision in favor of Gong Lum that Martha should not have been considered a “colored” student, the United States Supreme Court reversed the decision based on Mississippi’s law regarding marriage that Asians could not marry Whites and cited the decision earlier made for *Cumming v. Richmond County Board of Education* (1899). In ruling against Martha (0-9), the Supreme Court cited the precedent *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 and claimed Martha Lum’s constitutional rights had not been violated because she still had access and the option to attend another public school for nonwhite children (*Gong Lum v. Rice* 1927).

In 1954, another landmark case - *Brown v. Board of Education* (Consolidation of 5 cases Wilmington, DE; Clarendon County, SC; Prince Edward County, VA; Topeka, KS; Washington, DC) - struck down the “separate but equal” doctrine. The Supreme Court of the United States unanimously agreed that segregated public schools violate the 14th Amendment Equal Protection clause; separating some groups of students in access to education may generate a feeling of inferiority - directly opposing the decision made 61 years earlier in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Yet although the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision symbolized a great move forward to racial inequality in education, it did not address the *de*

facto school segregation that Black students were experiencing, not to mention Asians who were not even in consideration. The Supreme Court did follow up with its second opinion in 1955 to order desegregation to proceed “with all deliberate speed” yet was not successful in bringing about real, institutional changes to tackle racism in school environments (Brown v. Board 1954).

About 20 years later in 1972, Kinney Kinmon Lau, a Chinese student, filed a lawsuit against Alan H. Nichols, the president of the San Francisco School Board, for not providing equal access to education. Lau argued the lack of language support for students who are not fluent in English violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and section 601 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Supreme Court unanimously decided that the school district’s failure to provide English-language support for Chinese-speaking students violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964, alluding to section 601 that states public schools receiving federal funding should provide equal access to education for all students. Although the Supreme Court rejected the argument that the school board violated the Equal Protection Clause without further elaboration, *Lau v. Nichols* made significant progress in advancing the rights of immigrant students, primarily Asian/Americans who are not fluent in English to have equal access to education with necessary accommodations (Lau v. Nichols 1974).

Asian/Americans as Models

Despite all the legal and institutional barriers, in addition to the lack of ESL support illustrated by court cases, Asian/American students have successfully set themselves as models that other racial groups should learn from. In this section, I will explore three main reasons why Asian/American students have prospered: 1) East Asia’s long Confucian

emphasis on education, 2) students' desire to study hard and secure promising jobs to compensate for their immigrant parents' sacrifice, and 3) societal pressure and stereotypes that expect Asian/Americans to be "smart."

First of all, many Asian/Americans have specific cultural backgrounds tied to Confucianism - which emphasizes the need for education and expects high student achievements. Confucius believed that everyone, despite differences in intelligence and abilities to attain new knowledge, is educable especially if sufficient effort is put into the process. Such emphasis on education has been reinforced since ancient China when academic scholars and experts were positioned as the upper-most class in the social hierarchy (Leung 1998, 28). Older generations of parents and teachers who are accustomed to Confucian belief then continued to prioritize education and achievements over other aspects of their lives, such as health and social interactions. As one of the most famous Chinese proverbs states, "diligence compensates for stupidity," Confucius's values further strengthened the belief that anyone, regardless of their abilities, can succeed academically as long as they try hard.

These Confucian values are closely related to other factors that motivate Asian/American students to excel in academic settings and secure promising jobs as immigrants. Asian parents, most of whom are immigrants to the United States with Confucian priorities in mind, demand their children meet their high expectations because they want their children to compensate for their sacrifice. They push their children harder so that they can show off their "bragging rights" over other parents and confirm their narratives about their children's success. In *The Asian American Achievement Paradox*, a thirty-four-year-old second-generation Chinese male explained what "doing well in school"

meant for his parents when he was younger. “You got an A-minus and my parents would ask, ‘Why couldn’t you get an A?’ You got an A. ‘Why couldn’t you get an A-plus?’ So, yeah, we were expected to be very high-achievers.” (Lee and Zhou 2015, 56). On a more personal level, many Asian/American students are first-generation immigrants, or immigrants themselves; hence, they are more passionate about attaining economic success instead of gaining political equality. For many immigrants, success is defined by economic terms rather than political power (Amy Chau 2011).

Not only are Asian/American students expected to thrive due to cultural and familial pressures, but they are frequently labeled as “All-A” “smart” students by others regardless of race. They are always the model student group that other races look up to and learn from, which puts more pressure on Asian/American students to have good grades and behave well. Asian/American students are expected to confirm the stereotype promise: “the promise that one will be viewed through the lens of a positive stereotype, which enhances performance by leading one to perform in a way that confirms the positive stereotype” (Lee and Zhou 2015, 124). Once again, these Asian/American students as a group are not only viewed as the model but also expected to confirm such stereotypes to continuously keep up with the societal pressure. Altogether, the Confucious beliefs, desire to succeed economically, as well as family and societal pressures to be the model, have motivated Asian/Americans to be the top academic performers at school, while deviating from the political sphere.

III. From Model Minority to Economic Success

High Academic Performance to Securing Jobs

As Asian/American students are expected to perform well in academic settings due to societal pressures and are motivated to achieve high academic performance for personal and cultural reasons, they, along with Pacific Islanders, ranked the highest share of college students amongst the US population, with over 51% (Figure 2). Compared to the US share with bachelor's or higher of around 30%, with white Americans slightly over 30%, and Black Americans only around 20%, Asian/Americans have accomplished significantly well in attaining college degrees, despite the language and institutional barrier discussed in earlier sections (i.e. lack of ESL/EFL support).¹⁴

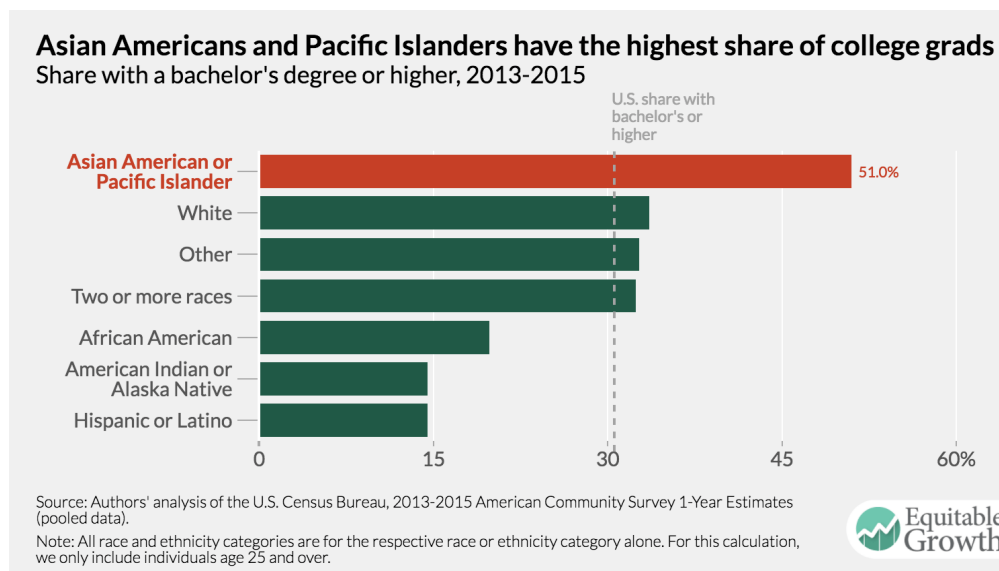


Figure 2: Asian/Americans and Pacific Islanders' College Graduation Rate (Edlagan 2016)

¹⁴ ESL (English as Second Language) students refer to students whose mother tongue is not English due to their familial backgrounds but who still learn English usually through academic environments. EFL (English as Foreign Language) students refer to those who are learning English as a foreign language because they live in a country where English is not their primary language.

More than 20-30% of these Asian/Americans graduate from colleges and universities with STEM degrees, mainly computer science, data science, engineering, and statistics. There is barely 1% of those who graduate with majors like Forestry, Arts and Music Education, and Agriculture, unlike white Americans who are more spread out through a myriad of academic disciplines (Figure 3 & Figure 4).

5: TOP 10 MAJORS BY CONCENTRATION OF ASIAN BACHELOR'S DEGREE HOLDERS^Δ

	Percent White	Percent African-American	Percent Hispanic	Percent Asian	Percent Other Races & Ethnicities
Computer Engineering	54	4	9	33	<0.5
Statistics and Decision Science	61	8	1	30	<0.5
Neuroscience	67	5	1	27	<0.5
Biomedical Engineering	68	0	5	26	1
Other Foreign Languages	67	3	3	26	1
Electrical Engineering	64	6	7	22	1
Military Technologies	61	4	14	22	<0.5
Biochemical Sciences	68	5	6	20	1
Applied Mathematics	66	6	8	20	1
Pharmacy Pharmaceutical Sciences and Administration	71	5	4	20	<0.5

^Δ Due to rounding, these may not add to 100 percent.

Figure 3: Asian College Students' Top 10 Majors (Gus 2011)

9: TOP 10 MAJORS BY CONCENTRATION OF WHITE BACHELOR'S DEGREE HOLDERS^{Δ*}

	Percent White	Percent African-American	Percent Hispanic	Percent Asian	Percent Other Races & Ethnicities
Forestry	93	1	4	2	1
Natural Resources Management	92	2	3	2	<0.5
Agriculture Production and Management	92	2	3	3	<0.5
Plant Science and Agronomy	92	2	4	2	<0.5
Nuclear Engineering	91	4	4	1	<0.5
Animal Sciences	91	3	4	1	<0.5
Soil Science	91	<0.5	3	6	<0.5
Miscellaneous Agriculture	90	3	5	2	<0.5
Agricultural Economics	90	5	3	1	1
Art and Music Education	90	4	4	2	<0.5

^{*} There was a tie for last place, and we are representing some, but not all, of those majors that tied.

^Δ Due to rounding, these may not add to 100 percent.

Figure 4: White College Students' Top 10 Majors (Gus 2011)

Although college majors do not necessarily translate into specific jobs, it is important to note that the majority of Asian/Americans graduate with STEM majors that, in general, allow them to secure higher-paying employment after graduation.

Asian/Americans are thus most represented in technical occupations, including software developers and computer engineers, with an annual mean wage of \$100,900, compared with \$55,260 for non-STEM occupations.¹⁵ This suggests that Asian/Americans' noteworthy educational achievements lead to better job opportunities as well as higher incomes, positioning them at the higher socioeconomic hierarchy compared to other minority races.

On top of that, the desire and ambition to achieve higher degrees and professional jobs imply that Asian/American students are trying to meet the "success frame and success at all costs" (Lee and Zhou 2015, 176) crafted by their families, peers, and society. Sometimes, the costs and sacrifices to achieve success are willingly relinquished by Asian/American students themselves to fit into the "success frame." Asian/American students are further swayed by their peers of similar racial backgrounds to compete against one another to confirm the model minority myth as a group, and ultimately uplift the Asian/American population as the more successful race of various racial minorities. And to the majority of these students, success means educational and financial power; it had to be gained at all costs to meet societal expectations and compensate for their parents' sacrifice.

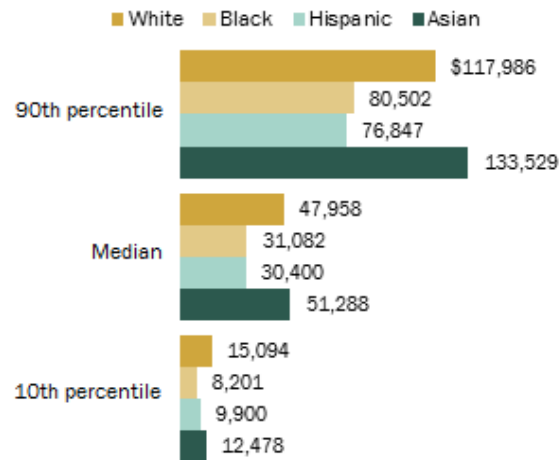
¹⁵ Smith, Morgan and Cabriel Cortés. "These are the highest- and lowest-paying STEM jobs in the U.S." *CNBC*, April 7, 2022.

High Incomes of Asian/Americans

According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Asian/Americans have the lowest unemployment rate of all race and ethnic groups in the US, even lower than that of white Americans. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2021, the unemployment rate among Asian Americans was 5.7%, lower than the national average of 6.1%.¹⁶ Moreover, Asian/Americans have the highest earnings amongst the US population, with the 90th percentile earning an average income of \$133,529, which is about 1.7 times the amount that Black American high earners make (Figure 5).

Asians have the highest earnings, except among lower-income adults

Incomes at selected percentiles, by race and ethnicity, 2016



Note: Whites, blacks and Asians include only single-race non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Asians include Pacific Islanders. Income is adjusted for household size and expressed in 2016 dollars. See Methodology for details.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2016 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

"Income Inequality in the U.S. Is Rising Most Rapidly Among Asians"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 5: Income Difference Between Racial Groups in the US (Kochhar and Cilluffo 2018)

¹⁶ "THE EMPLOYMENT SITUATION — APRIL 2021." *Bureau of Labor Statistics U.S. Department of Labor*, May 7, 2021.

Moreover, Asian/Americans who are at the 90th percentile of the income group had their income increase the most compared to any other race group in the US, including Hispanics, Black Americans, and white Americans (Figure 6).¹⁷

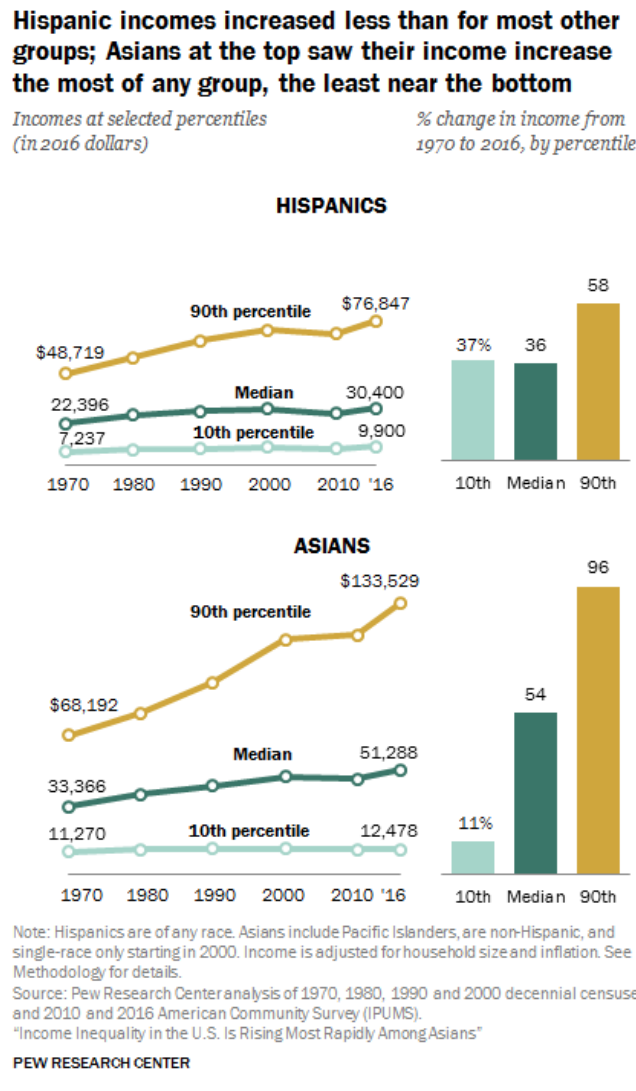


Figure 6: Comparison of Incomes Between Minority Races in the US (Kochhar and Cilluffo 2018)

¹⁷ While I acknowledge the fact that Asian/Americans at the bottom saw their income increase the least of all racial groups in the United States, income inequality among Asian/Americans will not be explored further in this paper. The main idea of this graph is to demonstrate the continuous and sharp increase in the average earnings of Asian/Americans, which is 2.6 times the value of the nation's median.

Shares of whites and Asians with a given level of income, 2016

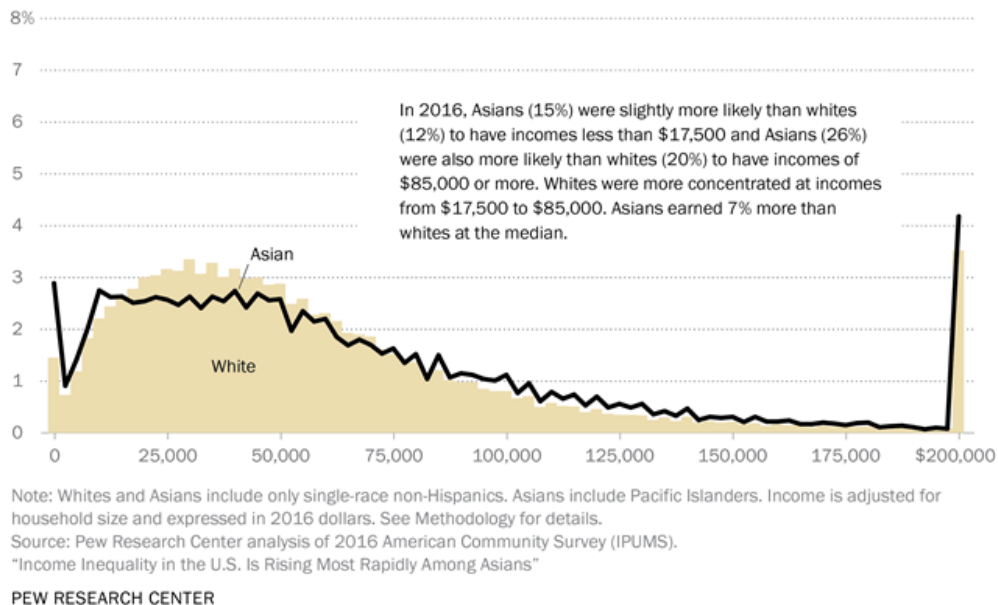


Figure 7: Shares of Incomes Between Whites and Asians (Kochhar and Cilluffo 2018)

Compared to the 20% of white Americans, 26% of Asian/Americans were more likely to have higher incomes, specifically, \$85,000 or more. The median incomes of Asian/Americans were also 7% higher than those of white Americans (Figure 7). All of these statistics and data confirm that Asian/Americans are not just earning higher incomes than other racial minorities, but more importantly, the highest incomes, even more than the average incomes of white Americans. Therefore, the high academic performance of Asian/Americans as the model minority group, as well as their college degrees primarily in STEM majors, have contributed to securing their jobs - most of which are high-paying and promising professions.

Asian/Americans: the Wealthiest But the Weakest

We have seen in the previous section that Asian/Americans have the highest earnings in the US by race, including white Americans, even earning 7% more than the median of white Americans in 2016.¹⁸ Considering that Asian/Americans are a minority race in the US, they are performing extremely well at the top of the economic ladder, at times even above white Americans. Despite being labeled as a model minority under the societal and racial pyramid that white Americans have sustained, Asian/Americans have persisted and remained in a better economic position than white Americans.

Then, Asian/Americans as the wealthiest in the US, mostly in the upper-middle class, have arguably become the *Dream Hoarders*. As Richard Reeves claims, these people in the upper-middle class are hoarding American dreams and opportunities that could have been shared with other socioeconomic classes as they not only choose to pass down wealth and access to privileged resources to their children (Reeves 2017, 75). According to Reeves, “Children raised in [the upper-middle class families] are on a different track than ordinary Americans, right from the very beginning” (36) because particular skills and attributes that can be inherited predict one’s economic success (77). According to the Intergenerational Earnings Elasticity (IGE) value calculated by Reeves, parents’ income now has about a 50% impact on their children, which delineates that the specific stage parents have set for their children will determine how successful these young children will be from their birth. In general, these children will have better access to health care, education, and occupation, which altogether put these children in a privileged socioeconomic position. If the majority

¹⁸ Budiman, Abby and Neil Ruiz. “Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population.” *Pew Research Center*, April 29, 2021.

of Asian/Americans are at the top of the American economic hierarchy as the upper-middle class, it is logical to assume that such financial power would have passed to future generations. Then, the competitive economic power within the Asian/American population against other races should have been sustained, or even expanded.

Yet despite being the wealthiest and the highest-earning group, Asian/Americans have become the weakest or the least powerful in politics. This is in direct contrast with what white Americans have been experiencing because, for them, high financial power opens up their road to political power. US senators and House members - most of whom are white Americans - have an estimated net worth of over \$500,000, or roughly five times the median U.S. household net worth.¹⁹ While some accumulate more wealth after being elected, most of them have sufficient financial resources to run for the positions from the beginning. In other words, white American politicians, primarily male, are equipped with adequate capital that motivates them to join politics in the first place.

Although the amount of wealth that the majority of white American politicians possess is much greater than that of Asian/Americans, it is also true that the top percentile of Asian/Americans earns much more than that of white Americans. Moreover, Asian/Americans are positioned in the upper-middle class, securing a huge portion of economic resources. If Asian/Americans had no other obstacle on their way to political success, they should have attained as much political power as white Americans. Then, what makes such a huge disparity between white Americans and Asian/Americans in gaining political power?

¹⁹ Stebbins, Samuel and John Harrington. "Here are the members of Congress with the highest estimated net worth." *USA Today*, October 25, 2019.

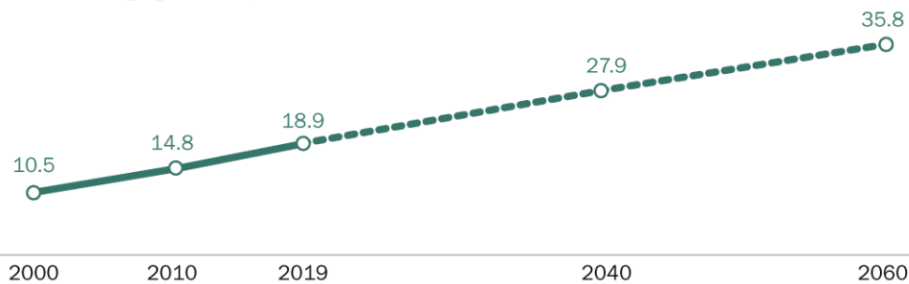
IV. Asian/Americans as the “Apolitical” Race

Asian/Americans in the US Federal Government

Despite a steady increase in the US Asian population since 2000, now reaching 18.9 million and expected to pass 35 million by 2060 (Figure 8), Asian/Americans representation in the United States has barely changed since the late 1700s. Since the first Congress in 1789, there have been a total of 12,421 people elected to the US Congress. Among them, only 40 were AAPI representatives, with less than 10 Asian/Americans; only 0.08% have held official positions in Congress over the 230 years the US federal government has existed.²⁰ A total of 41 states out of 50 have never elected an Asian Pacific Islander to Congress, decreasing the number even more when excluding Pacific Islanders.²¹ Such a minuscule number clearly demonstrates the lack of Asian/American representation in US politics despite the continuous increase in US Asian Population.

The U.S. Asian population is projected to pass 35 million by 2060

Asian American population, in millions



Note: Asians include those who report only being one race and are not Hispanic.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. intercensal population estimates for 2000-2009, U.S. Census Bureau Vintage 2019 estimates for 2010-2019, and Census Bureau 2017 population projections for 2020-2060.


Pew Research Center 

Figure 8: The Projected Growth of Asian American Population (Pew Research Center 2021)

²⁰ “Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2018.” *United States Census Bureau*, September 10, 2019.

²¹ “Total Members of the House & State Representation.” *United States House of Representatives History, Art & Archives*, January 5, 2022.

Uneven Road Toward Racial Inclusion

Shaw et al. claim that race is an uneven road because minorities often have to travel different and more difficult "roads" in life than white Americans. These uneven roads are shaped by three primary factors - society, the polity, and minority communities themselves. The interplay of these three factors leads to an outcome or "destiny" that cannot be easily altered or reformed. Shaw et al. further explicate the four outcomes of racialization - absolute, decisive, insufficient, and inconsequential - to highlight where Asian/Americans stand even after legal improvements that should have granted more equal rights. The first level of racialization - absolute - occurs when race is considered everything when a minority race does not have any citizenship rights or opportunities due to racial hierarchy. Due to a high barrier in society, minorities have barely any means of empowerment, and political institutions do not have much power or interest in helping minority groups to overcome high social barriers. For instance, during slavery, Black slaves had no fundamental human rights because they were treated as properties to be exploited by white owners (Shaw et al. 2015, 26-27).

The second level of racialization is a decisive stage where race starts to matter. Although a strong barrier to societal opportunities still exists, the minority community at least has limited citizenship rights and opportunities. During Jim Crow segregation, Black Americans were not treated as slaves but still had very limited access to resources. The third level of racialization is still insufficient because minority races do not yet have equal access to resources. While minority racial groups have some fundamental citizenship rights and opportunities, the residue of inequality persists in various aspects of social and political organizations. During the Obama administration, the government tried to

empower minority communities by driving changes through laws, but racial minorities were not considered completely equal to whites. The last level of racialization is when race or ethnicity does not matter at all: the inconsequential stage. This is an ideal situation in which racial and ethnic minorities have equal citizenship rights and opportunities because there is no racial hierarchy within society. There are barely any barriers to acquiring full citizenship rights, and polity protects minority communities with institutions just like it would for the racial majority (Shaw et al. 2015, 26-29).

Being a Legal *and* Political Citizen as an Asian/American

Asian/Americans have come a long way in terms of attaining academic resources and career opportunities. Yet unfortunately, they are still wandering on the uneven road, under the third level of racialization trapped in the insufficient stage, if not the second level of racialization where race is just starting to matter. The primary reason for the persistence of inequality and discrimination is that Whiteness has always been and still is an exclusive property that can only be enjoyed by whites. Asian/Americans, despite having the “same” citizenship as white Americans, can never fully become Americans. Racism has been so persistent that white Americans have already established Whiteness as a distinct identity exclusive to themselves that cannot be dismantled. Whiteness as a property, as an exclusive and dominant identity, has been established and reinforced by political and legal institutions as a supreme value inherently woven into the American discussion of race.

Therefore, the symbolic representation of equal citizenship and the law that granted more access to educational resources and career opportunities have become largely ineffective. Even after gaining equal rights as citizens, Asian/Americans to this day are still

facing discrimination, not to mention all the hate crimes that have put them in fear, frustration, and danger. As COVID-19 started to surge around the world in 2019, more Asian/Americans have been targeted and blamed for causing and bringing the virus to the US from Asian countries. As Kimmy Yam, a Chinese-American journalist for NBC News notes, “the compilation of hate crime data, published by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, revealed that anti-Asian hate crime increased by 339 percent last year compared to the year before, with New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and other cities surpassing their record numbers in 2020.”²²

Furthermore, the high academic and career achievements of Asian/Americans have not only limited their political engagement but also inevitably yielded consequences that would disfavor other minority races, primarily Black Americans. One of the most dangerous implications of Asian/Americans becoming models in academic and professional settings is the rejection of other minority races as deserving of support and resources. As Kristof writes, many white Americans denounce the efforts of Black Americans and their less successful outcomes: “This stuff about white privilege is nonsense, and if blacks lag, the reason lies in the black community itself. Just look at Asian-Americans. Those Koreans and Chinese make it in America because they work hard. All people can succeed here if they just stop whining and start working” (Kristof 2015). By attributing the lack of efforts as the primary reason for Black Americans’ lack of power and success in the US, white Americans are once again oppressing both Asian/Americans and Black Americans from political spheres. Asian/Americans, in order to continue their academic and career success, should

²² Yam, Kimmy. “Anti-Asian hate crimes increased 339 percent nationwide last year, report says.” *NBC News*, January 31, 2022.

remain “apolitical.” Similarly, Black Americans should also become less political and focus more on educational attainment to be as successful as Asian/Americans at the very least.

Asian/Americans should no longer remain invisible and silent in American society because they are not “apolitical”; they are not foreigners in the United States.

Acknowledging that the United States, from its beginning, has been a country of diverse origins and backgrounds, Asian/Americans should continue to fight for equality and justice to stay empowered. Just like any other minority race and white Americans themselves, Asian/Americans deserve equal legal and political rights to protect themselves from educational, socioeconomic, and political inequality. To achieve such political success as the model minority, Asian/Americans should directly challenge the model minority myth and their apolitical label by white Americans through strengthening community ties and values. To move us from educational privilege and economic wealth into political engagement, we must be active citizens of the democratic society by uniting with one another, instead of whitizing our identities. Only by protecting our cultural values and identities can we be the true voice of ourselves.

CONCLUSION

Asian/Americans: Model Students, Disempowered Citizens

“Race still matters in substantive ways” (Shaw et al. 2015, 4) because it not only determines who gets what opportunities in American society but also limits the experiences of minority races, “their education, housing, health, and so on” (4). From the Colonial Period to the 21st century, Americans have never been free from race because race has always been the core element that has divided and separated them into different

categories. The legal and political institutions around racial classification and discrimination have already been established, produced, and strengthened by white Americans as they purposefully neglected the voices of Asian/Americans by limiting their political engagement. Due to these original institutions that have survived through history, white Americans have utilized this concept of race to advance their experiences and opportunities while denouncing the experiences of other races.

While it is impossible to go back to history and rebuild the entire American institution, I assert that white Americans who have founded these unjust institutions should actively take responsibility and listen to the narratives of people of color to rectify the past injustices. Also, the role of government in assisting minority communities to overcome barriers on their journey toward full citizenship rights and opportunities is significant because it represents both substantive and symbolic changes. However, without eliminating white Americans' perception of Whiteness as an exclusive property, they will continue to regard themselves as the one-and-only superior race that ought to govern American society. Therefore, even though it might take a long time and effort, dismantling Whiteness as property from the very foundation by incorporating both corrective, distributive, and rectificatory justice seems like the most plausible way to eliminate racism.

We must also attend to when, why, and how race matters as they inform us about the "contour, construction, and context of the uneven roads" (Shaw et al. 2015, 6) traveled by different racial minorities in the US, including Asian/Americans. Understanding when race matters provides us with the context, specifically the time and place setting, of which group is most likely to experience advantages and disadvantages at a specific time period. Delving into the reason why race matters allows us to dive deeper into society's distribution of

resources among these different racial populations. In order to understand these experiences of minority races, we need to start listening to the invisible and oppressed voices of Asian/Americans by providing platforms for mutual understanding and discussions. Through mutual respect, guarantees of liberty and security, and care, I hope one day everyone, regardless of race, can be optimistic about the American Dream to flourish and reach their highest potential.

Future Research and Considerations

Although my research has primarily focused on the educational, economic, and political experiences of Asian/Americans living in the US, it is important to consider how other minorities are neglected in different societal spheres. Asian/Americans are considered to have superior academic and economic achievements but remain silent and disempowered in terms of political engagement. On the other hand, while Black Americans have not been labeled “apolitical” as they have been relatively active in political mobilizations through movements such as Black Lives Matter, they still lack educational or economic power. Hence, it is not a mere coincidence that all of these different racial minority groups in the US are suppressed one way or the other, which altogether limits their advancement to the top of the socioeconomic and political hierarchy.

Another point that I have yet to consider in my research is the differences in culture, traditions, and values within Asian/American communities. Although my primary research interest has been probing into Asian/Americans as one racial group, it is worth acknowledging that the biggest limitation during my research was looking into specific data and statistics on different nationalities within the Asian/American population, let alone

separating the Asian/Americans from Pacific Islanders. The Census Bureau defines a person of the Asian race as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam...”²³, and the list goes on. Then, categorizing such a diverse group of people into one single race - Asian - is not only problematic but also ignorant of the unique history and traditions each “original person” has.

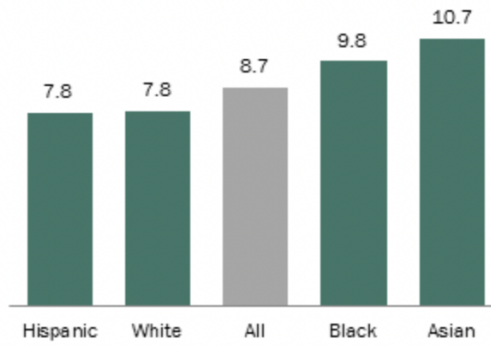
Hence, while it is true that some Asian/Americans excel not only in academic achievement but also in professional settings, it is a hasty generalization to conclude that such success is uniform among *all* Asian/Americans. As Kocchar and Cilluffo discuss with their findings on income inequalities across various Asians in the US, income inequality is highest among Asians despite a rapid income increase from 1970 to 2016 as the whole race (Figure 9).²⁴ This implies that educational attainment varies within the Asian population depending on their origins and access to resources. Even though the primary focus of my research has been how Asian/Americans as a group generally perform in the United States, it is worth exploring more specific behaviors and experiences of Asians from various countries because the disparity within the Asian/American population suggests that the success frame and the model minority myth only apply to some, not all. Also, the continuous widening of income inequality among Asian/Americans indicates that some groups of Asian/Americans not only lack political power but also economic means and educational opportunities to even reach that political sphere in the first place.

²³“About the Topic of Race.” *United States Census Bureau*, March 1, 2022.

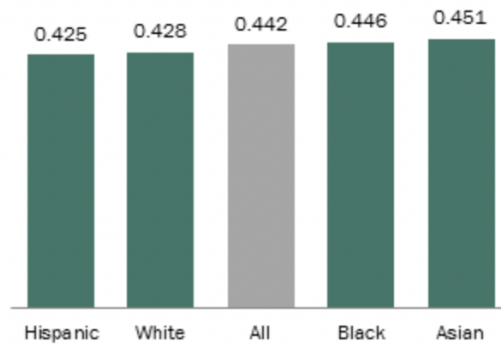
²⁴Kocchar, Rakesh and Anthony Cilluffo. “Income Inequality in the U.S. Is Rising Most Rapidly Among Asians.” *Pew Research Center*, July 12, 2018.

Income inequality is highest among Asians

Ratio of income at the 90th percentile to income at the 10th percentile (90/10 ratio), by race and ethnicity, 2016



The Gini coefficient, by race and ethnicity, 2016



Note: Whites, blacks and Asians include only single-race non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Asians include Pacific Islanders. Income is adjusted for household size. See Methodology for details.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2016 American Community Survey (IPUMS).
"Income Inequality in the U.S. Is Rising Most Rapidly Among Asians"

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Figure 9: Income Inequality among Asians (Kochhar and Cilluffo 2018)²⁵

²⁵ The higher the Gini coefficient, the more unequal the income distribution is within the specific racial population.

Similarly, other minority identity groups such as LGBTQI+ and those with disabilities do not have equal access to political rights, not to mention the access to some of the basic resources and necessities in their daily lives. Taken together, minority groups living in American society, whether race, gender, sexuality, and disability, are disempowered on multiple axes as their experiences are oppressed and neglected by the privileged white Americans, specifically rich, white males. My research about “Asian/Americans: Model Students, Disempowered Citizens” can be used as a starting point to understand the underlying institutions and structures that have perpetuated structural inequalities. By adopting my research as a framework to investigate other areas of suppression and inequalities in US society, other scholars may be able to find a common thread between different forms of injustice and discrimination. Only after we identify the fundamental cause behind disempowerment can we make efforts to dismantle all the negative -isms.

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