

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Amidst pandemic and racial upheaval: Where Asian Americans Fit

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Abstract

As racial tensions flare amidst a global pandemic and national social justice upheaval, the centrality of structural racism has renewed old questions and raised new ones about where Asian Americans fit in U.S. politics. This paper provides an overview of the unique racial history of Asians in the United States and analyzes the implications of dynamic racialization and status for Asian Americans. In particular, we examine the dynamism of Asian Americans' racial positionality relative to historical shifts in economic-based conceptions of their desirability as workers in American capitalism. Taking history, power, and institutions of white supremacy into account, we analyze where Asian Americans fit in contemporary U.S. politics, presenting a better understanding of the persistent structures underlying racial inequality and developing a foundation from which Asian Americans can work to enhance equality.

Keywords: Asian Americans; racial hierarchy; settler colonialism; BLM

Introduction

As racial tensions flare amidst a global pandemic and national social justice upheaval, the centrality of structural racism has renewed old questions and raised new ones about where Asian Americans fit in U.S. politics. The death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer shook the nation because it exposed in vivid detail the reality that racism, specifically anti-Black racism (e.g. Fanon, 1952; Wilderson, 2010; Sharpe, 2016), is dangerously institutionalized at a systemic level and condoned through the silent complicity of many of those in power—"the structure of the entire world's semantic field, regardless of cultural and national discrepancies... is sutured by anti-Black solidarity" (Wilderson, 2010, 80). Prior to Floyd's murder, there were numerous cases similarly documenting the violence of police brutality against Black Americans that were ultimately overlooked and forgotten by a system that confronts its racism only when held accountable by a wide representation of the American public. This reality sheds light on the extent to which systems of white supremacy must rely on the silence

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and complicity of the majority to reinforce the structures and practices that maintain the status quo.

The recent heightened awareness of the systemic racial subjugation of Blacks reinvigorated the difficult yet necessary conversation concerning the role non-Black minorities play in perpetuating an anti-Black racial social order, and the extent to which Asian Americans in particular might problematically benefit from a system that preserves Black inferiority and subordination. Given the relative recency of migration and higher level of socioeconomic resources for some Asian Americans, this minority group has been stereotyped, among other things, as the “model minority” and used as a baseline of minority success (e.g. Junn, 2007). At the same time, the companion racial trope of “forever foreigner” places Asian Americans in a position of tension within white supremacy; the disconnect yielding circumstances in which some privileges are afforded to Asian Americans that can come at the expense of Black lives.

By being “uniquely positioned at the conjuncture of white supremacy and anti-Blackness” (Kim, 2018, 226), Asian Americans are in contemporary politics racially positioned in relation to both whites and Blacks (Kim, 1999), and particularly so since the Civil Rights era when barriers against Asian immigration to the United States were formally removed (Tichenor, 2002; Daniels, 2004). Despite the bimodal distribution of higher educational attainment, occupational status, and wealth among Asian Americans that separates a relatively high-status group from a resource-deprived segment of the population (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Wong *et al.*, 2011), in recent years the racial position of Asian Americans overall has begun to shift upward, with some characterizing the societal status of this group of Americans as “virtually white” (e.g. Hacker, 1992; Ignatiev, 1997). In their recent work modeling racial positionality on two axes of subordination—perceived *inferiority* and perceived *cultural foreignness*—Zou and Cheryan (2017) find that Asian Americans are perceived as superior relative to African Americans and Latinx, but are still fundamentally perceived as foreign and deviating from the American cultural prototype. The arrival of COVID-19 in the United States exposed the hard truth that despite the comfortable illusion of Asian Americans having greater access to the opportunities of “white-adjacency,” being so does not mean being equal. Demonstrative of their continued subordination as foreigners, numerous documented instances of blatant racism surfaced nationwide of verbal and physical abuse as well as glaring acts of discrimination against Asians, revealing that many still view Asian Americans not quite as Americans, but instead as perpetually foreign Asians (e.g., <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/10/30/amara-walker-racist-encounters-asian-americans-new-orleans-airport-vpx.cnn>).

“Sometimes Asians are not unwilling conscripts. Sometimes they weaponize themselves”

(Kim, 2018, 238).

In a political environment marked by the pandemic and racial upheaval, this current moment spotlights the unique racialization of Asians in America, where they remain viewed as “other” in comparison to whites, while simultaneously not subjected to the same level or kind of racial discrimination Blacks and other non-white racial minority groups face. Claire Kim (2018) articulates the complex

racial positioning of Asian Americans and the problematic ramifications that may arise when all non-white racial minorities are assumed to share the same racialized experience. In particular, Asian Americans can become implicit and effective perpetrators of an anti-Black racial order while at the same time acting as advocates for social justice. A hierarchy that grants Asians some semblance of racial privilege often mistaken for full equality affords them comfort relative to Blacks and other lower-positioned racial minorities, which creates incentives for Asian Americans to preserve the status quo. The video of Floyd's murder not only provides a horrifying glimpse into the very real consequences of systemic anti-Blackness, it also critically exposes the existence of Asian complicity in enforcing it. As ex-police officer Tou Thao demonstrated when he stood by silently in the background as a witness to Floyd's murder, Asians are oftentimes positioned with the capacity to challenge anti-Black racism but may problematically instead stay silent.

This incident exemplifies the distinct role and share of responsibility Asian Americans have in reinforcing institutionalized anti-Blackness, and importantly identifies the imperative to stand against it. In addressing the ways in which Asians perpetuate racism through their actions or lack thereof, we must acknowledge the racial history of white supremacy that continues to normalize and naturalize the U.S. racial hierarchy and intergroup race relations today. Former Minneapolis police officer Thao serves as a vivid reminder of how Asian Americans can become willing and active conscripts of Black subjugation when they assimilate the structures and practices of "white civilization" either intentionally, or without discernment. To contextualize where Asian Americans fit into today's racial social order relies on recognizing their unique racialized history in the United States. Equally as important, identifying where Asian Americans fit in U.S. politics requires an understanding of the ways in which anti-Blackness structures the institutions and practices of white supremacy, and in so doing, frames the context in which Asian Americans are both targets of discrimination while simultaneously participants in racism in a post-George Floyd America.

We begin by discussing the unique racial history of Asians in the United States and analyzing the implications of dynamic racialization and status for Asian Americans. Next, we build on Kim's (2018) identification of the importance of sociometric studies of race that specify racialized experiences in accordance with differential positions of power in an anti-Black society. We also analyze the dynamism of Asian Americans' racial positionality relative to historical shifts in economic-based conceptions of their desirability as workers in American capitalism. Taking history, power, and institutions of white supremacy into account, we analyze where Asian Americans fit in contemporary U.S. politics, presenting a better understanding of the persistent structures underlying racial inequality and developing a foundation from which Asian Americans can work to enhance equality.

Asian Americans in an anti-Black society

In addition to igniting protests across the country calling for justice, Floyd's murder also notably mainstreamed long-overdue discussions about what racial privilege is, where it comes from, and who has it. The irrefutable evidence of excessive police brutality contained in the video confirmed the grim reality that anti-Black prejudice is

institutionalized in the very bureaucratic structures of law enforcement designated to protect citizens. It also reveals that racial privilege—while shaped by the regime and practice of white supremacy—is inherently rooted in the continued subordination of Blacks, and therefore granted at their expense (Hanchard, 2018). In a world structured by anti-Blackness (e.g. Wilderson, 2010), Black Americans face a unique and extreme racialized experience, underscoring the importance of specifying Black subjugation as distinct from racism experienced by other non-Black persons of color. By accepting that the racial social order is anchored by anti-Blackness, the critical race divide can be reconceptualized as one between Blacks and non-Blacks rather than between whites and non-whites (Sexton, 2010). Through this first step of acknowledging the specification of anti-Black subjugation, we are better able to understand the contextual dynamics associated with the “privilege” of being not Black that differentially shape the racialized experiences of other minority groups

Historical roots of Asian American racial formation

While it is well established that the U.S. racial hierarchy is organized with whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom, it is less clear where Asians and other growing communities of color, like Latinx, may fit within the order (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Masuoka and Junn, 2013). Similar to Asian Americans, Latinx show considerable in-group heterogeneity with regard to ethnicity and nationality (e.g. Uhlaner, 1991; Fraga *et al.*, 2010), and though important intragroup differences within racial and ethnic groups exist, racial subordination often masks such distinctions (Omi and Winant, 1994), imposing further challenges to the study of ethnic subgroups and multiracial groups. A common pitfall when studying Asian Americans is to characterize it as a homogenous entity (Lien, 2018), which neglects the ingroup diversity of how Asians may develop political attitudes and behavior such as partisan identification and political participation (Carlos, 2018), and form voting preferences (Masuoka *et al.*, 2018; Masuoka *et al.*, 2019). Latinx as the other main contemporary immigrant community similarly possess important intragroup differences, including how they develop their sense of identity and feelings of ethnic linked fate (e.g. Vargas *et al.*, 2017; Maltby *et al.*, 2020), and form specific political attitudes like abortion (Holman *et al.*, 2020). It is important to acknowledge this heterogeneity within the historical construction of Asian American racial identity in contemporary politics in order to account for anti-Blackness among all Asian American (even ostensibly “conscious” Asian Americans).

Asian Americans and Latinx, who tend to be associated with the linguistic and cultural practices of their countries of origin (e.g. Cheryan and Monin, 2005; Rivera *et al.*, 2010), are often viewed as uninterested in American ways (Kim, 1999)—yet there are clear discrepancies between the racialization and status of both groups today. Regarding the positionality of the four largest racial and ethnic groups in the United States (i.e., white, Asian, Latinx, and Black Americans), Masuoka and Junn (2013) conceptualize the hierarchy not as diamond shaped in which Asian and Latinx Americans share equal status between whites and Blacks, but rather as a racial prism where Asians are positioned higher and closer to whites than Latinx. Within a labor system that works to differentiate and set racial categories

hierarchically (Glenn, 2002), the placement of these racial categories is indicative of how desirable each group is for entry and citizenship as informed by shifting U.S. immigration and naturalization policies (Masuoka and Junn, 2013). In other words, racialized desirability is assigned in relative terms, which means that a particular group cannot be considered “desirable” for inclusion into American capitalist society without conversely solidifying the subordinated status of other immigrant groups whose labor is deemed comparatively less valuable.

Asian Americans, who were once derisively characterized as “coolies” during the Asian exclusion in the 20th century, were recategorized into the higher racial position of “model minority” as contemporary immigration policy began targeting new entrants (i.e. Latinx) as more undesirable and unfit for entrance (Junn, 2007). This discursive shift differentiating Asians from Latinx immigrants provides the context for how contemporary perceptions of Asian Americans are historically and relatively constructed, which determines their unique racial position and the specific patterns of prejudice they face as a result (Zou and Cheryan, 2017). In Zou and Cheryan’s (2017) “racial position model” where each of the four groups are located in their own discrete quadrant according to their perceived *inferiority–superiority* and *cultural foreignness–Americanness*, both Latinx and Asian Americans are conceptualized as *foreign* relative to whites and Blacks—they differ, however, on the *inferiority* axis in which Asian Americans are viewed and treated as relatively *superior* to Latinx and Blacks despite being still inferior to whites (Zou and Cheryan, 2017). By incorporating historical insights to contextualize the formation and positioning of racial groups, we have a better understanding of how structures pertaining to capitalism and immigration powerfully shape perceptions of group foreignness and inferiority when ordered within a racial hierarchy that is bounded by anti-Blackness. This reiterates the notion that the racialization trajectories of all groups are not only interrelated—a key feature of sociometric analysis—but they are also significantly influenced by historical precedents and the contextual pressures derived from them.

The Asian American experience—while distinct from the experiences of white, Black, and other minority groups—is irrefutably conditioned by them, highlighting the importance of contextualizing the racialization of Asian Americans relative to the systemic construction of other groups’ racial identity that have changed in meaning over time. How we understand race today and the meaning we assign to racial categories is intrinsically rooted in the laws and practices that first articulated them. To better understand the dynamics underlying the unique racialization and positionality of Asian Americans, we assess the various forms of systemic oppression historically enacted against Asian ethnic groups that institutionalized anti-Asian sentiment and distinctly structured the racial identity of Asian Americans. The unique racialized history of Asian Americans resulting from U.S. immigration policies, settler colonial projects in North America, and exclusionary definitions of American citizenship, profoundly impacts both Asian Americans’ own internalized racism as well as the anti-Asian prejudice they experience today. In sum, Asian Americans’ position in the U.S. racial hierarchy is not static, but instead dynamic and relative to the position of other groups, as well as historically dependent. This has lasting implications for how Asian Americans both experience racism as well as how they express racial discrimination against others.

The lasting effects of Asian exclusion in the 20th century

In assessing where Asian Americans fit, it bears noting that they are today both the fastest-growing as well as the most heavily immigrant non-Black minority group in the United States (Wong *et al.*, 2011). The history of exclusion and consequent migration of Asian Americans during the 20th century demonstrates the in-group heterogeneity of the population, and the complexity of Asian Americans' place in contemporary politics. The rapid growth in the size of the Asian American population over the last two decades is due to immigration through family reunification as well as new entrants who come to the United States *via* skill-based occupational preferences. Federal immigration policy of 2020 is entirely distinct from that a century ago for Asians, when the United States was in a heightened period of restriction based on race and national origin. In the previous century, and by 1917, people from Asia-Pacific countries were fully excluded from entry through the Asiatic Barred Zone Act,¹ and this zonal exclusion followed anti-Asian barriers erected decades earlier at the federal level (Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) and through state statutes as well (e.g. California's Anti-Coolie Act of 1862). These restrictionist laws were followed by the federal 1924 National Origins Act, which further banned new entrants from what were at the time considered undesirable nations. That Asian nations were first, and barred explicitly on the basis of race, is crucial to understanding both the current standing and dynamism of Asian Americans in the U.S. racial hierarchy today. The reasons for anti-Asian policy are manifold, but the most important consequence to consider for the contemporary racial tropes and hierarchical positionality of Asian Americans is their absence from view throughout most of the continental United States during the first half of the 20th century (Chan, 1991; Gyory, 1998; Daniels, 2004).

At that time, people of Asian origin were prohibited from becoming naturalized citizens—the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions in *Ozawa* (1922) and *Thind* (1923) created a clear demarcation of who was white and who was most definitely not (Ngai, 2004; Gross, 2008). In these cases, Japanese Americans and South Asian Indian Americans were declared as not white, and therefore, unable to vote, marry, own property, and move freely (Haney-Lopez, 2009). The inferiority of Asian people on the basis of race was thus clearly articulated by both the high court and Congress. When Japanese Americans were detained and interned during World War II, they made up a tiny proportion of the U.S. population, and many of whom were U.S. citizens by birth on American soil (Takaki, 1998; Ancheta, 2006; Pfaelzer, 2007). There were fewer than one million people of Asian descent in the United States when the states of AK and HI were officially admitted to the union in 1959, and while Asians were again provided the means for lawful entry in 1952 with the McCarran Walter Act, only a small number were admitted to the nation (Takaki, 1998; Tichenor, 2002).

Instead, it would take the passage of the landmark 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, an act of Congress to systematically change the composition of the Asian American population, the group stereotypes attached to them, and their place in the U.S. racial hierarchy (Junn, 2007). What followed over the course of the half-century since the 1965 Act was the broad diversification of the Asian

American population to include entrants from a variety of Asian nations beyond East Asia, the introduction of refugees from Southeast Asia, and former colonial subjects from the Philippines who had gone from conquered in 1898, to citizens for a brief period of time, and back again to aliens after being stripped of U.S. citizenship in 1934 with the federal Tydings McDuffie Act. Distinct migration streams from a variety of sending countries throughout Asia, combined with the occupational preferences of the 1965 Act for high-skilled and professional workers, contributed to the distinctiveness of the post-Civil Rights Era population of Asian Americans. The earlier tropes of Asians as degraded opium addicts, yellow rats, launderers, railroad pile-drivers, and potential saboteurs persisted in the transformed status as “forever foreigner” (Tuan, 1998). But these stereotypes were complicated by the introduction of scientists, nurses, doctors, engineers, and other highly skilled professionals who entered the United States—often in what today seem unlikely locations in the American South and Midwest—to practice their professions as well as to attend graduate and professional school.

While abbreviated, this history of the 20th century migration of Asian Americans into the U.S. racial hierarchy demonstrates the heterogeneity of both the population itself as well as the complexity of the place where Asian Americans fit in politics. Other than small pockets of students and professionals who came in the first wave of Asian migration across the nation, family reunification drove the lion’s share of the growth among Asian American in subsequent decades, who settled in immigrant-rich metropolitan cities on the coasts of the United States, where these new Americans set up shops and businesses, bought houses, and sent their children to school. These very same areas were already populated by relatively large numbers of Black Americans and an increasing share of Americans with Latin American heritage. The increasingly multi-racial and multi-ethnic period—where whites remained dominant and the ideology of white supremacy was persistent—is the context in which Asian Americans’ racial triangulation between African Americans and whites began. As contemporary discourse on immigration policy shifted towards the alleged imperative of limiting entrants from Latin America and Mexico, Asian Americans were no longer the most “undesirable,” providing the foil to the racialized narrative portraying Latinx as low-skilled and unlawful migrants (e.g. Ngai, 2004; Glenn, 2002).

From the trope of “coolie” to “model minority,” Asian Americans still remain “racialized, distinctive, and threatening” (Junn, 2007, 370). Asian Americans who adopt and internalize the “model minority” identity ultimately reinforce their racialized distinction and dehumanization relative to the normative standard established by white supremacist ideology. In simultaneously being perceived as both white-adjacent in relative superiority yet perpetually foreign on the axes of subordination (Zou and Cheryan, 2017), Asian Americans’ own internalized sense of inferiority derived from being treated as foreign to the ostensibly white American prototype can manifest in harmful ways that further reinforces the ideology of anti-Black racism in the United States. Although Asian Americans have experienced discriminatory exclusions as well as racialized subjugation, they have also been protected by institutionalized anti-Blackness, where “white supremacy has pushed them down, and anti-Blackness has provided the floor beneath which they cannot fall” (Kim, 1999, 106).

As the United States becomes more racially and ethnically diverse, the positionality of Asian Americans becomes more complex but crucially remains buoyed by the anti-Blackness that anchors American society. This further clarifies racism as not a unitary concept experienced indistinguishably amongst non-white groups, but one in which historical context matters in understanding the heterogeneity of racialized experiences today. By not recognizing the privileges associated with being non-Black and treating all non-white groups as equal in minority status, Asian Americans can use their partially immunized position to advocate for their seat at the proverbial table by keeping lower-positioned minority groups outside the door. While the problem of interracial conflict between Asians and other communities of color is both varied and complex, the underlying structure of settler colonialism undergirded by white supremacy plays an important role in creating fractures between the oppressed.

Yellow skin, white minds: internalized racism of Asian Americans

To further elucidate the dynamics shaping the current racial positioning of Asian Americans, it is important to address the consequences of Western settler colonialism and the contemporary forms in which internalized oppression reveals itself. The internalization of inferiority borne from colonial oppression conditions non-white groups to idealize whiteness and shame non-whiteness, which breeds conflict not only between groups but also within them. This is particularly true for minority groups like Asian Americans and Latinx that have greater internal diversity in ethnic and national origins. Illustrating this, in describing how Chicanas view other Chicanas and why they frequently attempt to “oppress each other,” Anzaldúa and Moraga (1981) chillingly writes: “We are afraid of what we’ll see there.” The sense of inferiority that oppressed groups internalize directly impacts both how they view themselves, as well as how they evaluate those who remind them of their own inferiority. This racial implicit bias, or unconscious prejudicial attitudes, in favor of whiteness, leads to the systematic devaluation of the lives and bodies of non-whites (see Cacho, 2012), including their own.

Fanon (1961, 1952) argues that the colonialist exercise of authority in a cruel or unjust manner can have lasting and negative psychological effects on the oppressed. As a result of structural exclusion and subordination, many persons of color experience “double consciousness” of having to view themselves as the racialized other through the lens of racist white society (DuBois, 1961 [1903]). By continuously being classified as inferior and “other” from white civilization during these periods of Westernized settler colonial and imperial expansion, oppressed non-white groups develop internalized racism in which they are conditioned to idealize whiteness and feel shame whenever they fall short in meeting this white standard. White experiences—which are shared and supported through both cultural and media depictions of social reality—are implicitly normalized as the American way of life (Hayward, 2013), and in so doing, maintaining white racial power and the disempowerment of non-white communities (Schmidt, 2020).

This nefarious dynamic unsurprisingly has enduring effects on the ways internalized oppression manifests in Asian American behavior today (e.g. David, 2013),

which not only promotes the idealization of whiteness, but also reinforces Asian subjugation in the racial social order itself. Some contemporary examples illustrating Asian Americans' common displays of internalized racism include: discriminating against other Asians and Asians Americans who are perceived to be less westernized and more "fob" (i.e. "fresh off the boat"); and viewing Asian physical traits as inferior to white physical traits by engaging in cosmetic changes such as lightening hair color, using skin whitening soaps, or getting eyelid surgery. In this way, the legacy of colonialism represents another mechanism that facilitates and maintains intergenerational racial subjugation *vis-a-vis* the collective psyche of oppressed non-white groups—"Colonialism only loosens its hold when the knife is at its throat" (Fanon, 1961, 23).

Given that an essential phase of colonialism entails the colonizer imposing its values, norms, and culture on the colonized, this necessitates the eventual disintegration of the people's "savage" and "uncivilized" culture (Fanon, 1961). The racial formation of the Asian American identity becomes one of tension and discomfort, historically constructed through the experience of collective struggle against oppressive pressures to adopt Western culture and leave their way of life behind. The Asian immigrants fleeing authoritarian governments, war-ravaged regimes, or political unrest sought the stability offered by the United States and its democratic institutions (Lien, 2001), with many likely already possessing pro-Western or anti-communist attitudes. Irrespective of holding these views, the preference to leave their home countries for Western security establishes a foundation for Asian immigrants' internalized inferiority as they are incentivized to leave their indigenous "savage" roots and shame behind in favor of culturally assimilating into their new home, a nation assumed to be superior to Asian nations.

While undergoing the process of assimilation within an anti-Black and white supremacist system, Asian Americans inevitably absorb its racialized practices and biases, and may later participate in normalizing them. In other words, this socialization process can reconstruct or enhance the internalized racism of Asian immigrants in adaptation to the anti-Black social order that they are now a part of. Without a more egalitarian foundation between racial groups, integration only amounts to assimilation, reinforcing anti-Black oppression (Ture and Hamilton, 1992 [1967]). Referring back to Fanon's colonial model, the process concludes with those in power establishing political, economic, and social institutions that are designed to maintain the superiority of the colonizer and subjugate the colonized. The establishment of America's founding institutions followed the same formula in which the reigning supremacy of whites is "circumscribed by anti-Blackness" (Kim, 1999). The essential yet often overlooked characteristic shared by these enduring institutions is their fundamental grounding in both explicit and implicit forms of specified anti-Black racism. As long as racial subjugation of Blacks exists in any shape or form, the status quo of racial inequality established by the legacy of colonialism will continue to be upheld.

Asian Americans can become weapons of the settler colonialist and white supremacist system itself when their internalized racism allows them to ignore the specification of systemic anti-Black racism and minimize the oppression that other subordinated minority groups experience. By doing so, Asian Americans are

complicit, and may even take on an active role in reinforcing anti-Blackness. A demonstrative example of this is when Asian Americans perceive race-conscious affirmative action initiatives as a form of anti-Asian discrimination. As a result of the victimization and racialized resentment that develops, some Asian Americans in a misguided attempt to secure their own “equality” in this particular issue may even join arms with whites to promote a “meritocratic” admission process, which inherently presumes that all racial groups share the same opportunities and privilege, and there is no systematic variation in how they are treated and viewed.

In this latter case, Asian Americans are active participants in obscuring the reality of systemic and institutionalized anti-Black racism that sets the terms and opportunities for success. The internalized racism of Asian Americans allows them to ignore their own distinct privilege and maintain their “otherness” as a racial minority, which can lead them to construct a reality in which they face similar disadvantages as all non-white groups, or one in which no racial oppression exists. While it is important to recognize the heterogeneity in support for racially progressive policies, particularly among younger Asian Americans, the context of systemic anti-Black affect remains a constant for all Asian Americans. In presuming the homogeneity of racism, Asians can become effective conscripts of perpetuating colonialist institutions of anti-Blackness and reinvigorating the friction amongst the oppressed that they create. The idealization of whiteness in the internalized racism of oppressed groups often results in the policing of one another for the sake of preserving white civilization (Alvarez, 2020), driving fractures both between and within racial groups. This is particularly evident when professionally successful English-speaking Asian Americans look down on other Asians who have yet to fully adapt to English. Considering that the adoption of another culture’s language is “above all to assume a culture” (Fanon, 1952, 2), the ability to speak English well becomes a measure in which non-white immigrants assign social value to others and themselves. This is a problematic mindset that is too frequently relied upon by Asian Americans as a way to fit in at the expense of someone else—whether it is applied to “fobs” within their own race or to other marginalized racial groups. As long as anti-Blackness and the racial power structure persists, Asian Americans will continue to be racialized and never realize full racial equality.

Hitting the bamboo ceiling: the racialized experience of Asians

The arrival of the novel coronavirus in the United States from the place where epidemiologists suggest it originated, in Wuhan, China, brought to new light the racialized experience of Asian Americans as anti-Asian abuse and discrimination pertaining to the virus spread across the country. Structural racial inequality means that racial hierarchy is perpetuated even without conscious intent (Schmidt, 2020)—on top of actions that are deliberately racially discriminatory, the varying subjugation of non-white groups also live in the subtle and often-overlooked everyday acts related to a variety of social and economic decisions in which there is no conscious consideration of racial advantages (Roithmayr, 2014). While overt displays of racism propel the anti-Black racial order forward, it is the unconscious and implicit acts that shield white supremacy from efforts promoting racial equality. Racial implicit biases and

discrimination against all communities of color, including Asian Americans, are preserved as the racial order continues to exist and normalize them. Despite the perception of Asian Americans as “honorary whites” (e.g. Haney-Lopez, 2006), they still experience discrimination in distinct ways that reflect their subordinate racial status to white Americans that is neither equivalent nor meaningfully adjacent.

The racialized trope of “model minority,” while clearly more positive than “coolie,” is not without its own negative consequences (Junn, 2007). Asian Americans with their high levels of acculturation and achievement are often overlooked as a racially marginalized group. Their high rates of professional integration and intermarriage, incumbent with their designation as “honorary whites” (Haney-Lopez, 2006), obscure the racialized experience of Asian Americans in contemporary society. By internalizing the “model minority” identity and conforming to whiteness, Asian Americans not only perpetuate anti-Blackness as discussed previously, but they also simultaneously provide the grounds for society to disregard their own racialized experience.

“When I hear the phrase “Asians are next in line to be white,” I replace the word “white” with “disappear.” Asians are next in line to disappear. We are reputed to be so accomplished, and so law-abiding, we will disappear into this country’s amnesiac fog. *We will not be the power but become absorbed by power, not share the power of whites but be stooges to a white ideology that exploited our ancestors*” (Hong, 2020, 35) (emphasis added).

The presumption of Asian American accomplishment in relation to their white-adjacency allows American society to insist that race has nothing to do with Asian Americans “being bullied, or passed over for promotion, or cut off every time [they] talk” (Hong, 2020, 35). In line with this observation, recent studies of the professional workforce find a notable disparity, with Asian Americans in the lower ranks and fewer at the executive level, highlighting the situation that while Asian Americans are very hireable, they are not necessarily in advanced positions of power places when compared to white professionals (Gee and Peck, 2018). For example, a 2017 study analyzing EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) data on Silicon Valley’s management pipeline shows that even though Asian Americans are the most likely to be hired into high-tech jobs, they are the least likely racial group to be promoted into management and executive positions. Beyond the tech industry, *Yale Law School* reports that Asian Americans despite being well-represented in law (i.e. making up more than 10% of the graduates of the top 30 law schools), they have the “lowest ratio of partners to associates among all [racial] groups” (Gee and Peck, 2018). These are two specific examples that showcase the limits of Asian professional success in contemporary America, but they demonstrate the reality that even the most highly educated and perceivably “superior” Asian Americans (Zou and Cheryan, 2017) will continue to encounter a “bamboo ceiling” in the realization of full racial equality as long as the racial order remains in place.

In addition to normalizing discriminatory attitudes regarding Asian inferiority in the professional setting, the “othering” of Asian Americans also manifests in very personal and dehumanizing ways. The historical fetishization of Asian women are distinct and pervasive forms of anti-Asian racism that are still relevant today. While

Asian men were seen as threats when they first immigrated to the United States (Ngai, 2004), Asian women were seen as the spoils of war, portraying Asian immigrants as a foreign enemy either to be feared or conquered, images replicated in cultural stereotypes (e.g. Yuen, 2016). These anti-Asian prejudices continue to saturate the racialized experience of Asian Americans today. Asian men are found to be least desirable in romantic dating markets and are twice as likely as Asian women to be unpartnered (Kao *et al.*, 2018). The desirability of Asian women, however, is inherently intertwined with society's enduring objectification and fetishization of them. Oftentimes disguised today as an acceptable dating "preference," the sexual fetishization of any racial group is a racialized and degrading practice that assumes each individual in that particular group to embody a certain stereotype, and imposes racist fantasies onto their identity. The exoticization of both Asian women and men in shaping social preferences further establishes their dehumanization in the racialized terms that are projected onto them.

These continuing anti-Asian attitudes solidify Asian Americans' status as the foreign other, consequently devaluing their cultural identity as distinct and inferior to that of white society. The institutionalized practice of assigning Asian Americans their racial identity in accordance to the values and norms dictated by white supremacy sets the stage for the appropriation of Asian culture, in which it is assumed that Asian culture is one to which social value can be assigned. The cultural appropriation of traditional Asian clothing and even facial features (i.e. the recently popularized "fox-eye" trend created by lifting up the outer-corners of the eye to create a slanted, almond shape) as fashion trends serve as further examples of the pervasiveness and normalization of Asian appropriation. In addition, recycled stereotypes of Asian Americans as "forever foreigner" and an ever-present threat to security are echoed in false charges made by the Trump administration accusing Chinese-American scientists of spying (Wong, 2018a, 2018b). Thus, and despite efforts to conform and assimilate to white civilized society, Asian Americans still remain below whites as less American. Assimilation and complicity in a system that perpetuates the racial hierarchy ensures that Asian Americans will never share the same space as whites and continue to have their own distinct racialized experience.

Moving forward

In this paper we addressed the question of where Asian Americans fit in today's society, and highlighted the importance of not only contextualizing their racialization relative to whites and other non-white minority groups, but also of recognizing the historical roots of Asian American racial formation and its consequences. The specificity of racialization for Asian Americans and the ensuing patterns of migration to the United States post-1965 following nearly a century of full exclusion to migration from Asian nations, is crucial knowledge for analyzing how to move forward amidst the pandemic and racial upheaval. The lasting effects of Asian American internalization of oppression allows for the coexistence of the desirability of "white minds inside of yellow skin" within the stereotype of "model minority." While Asian Americans are perceived by Americans in opinion polls on a number of indicators to have more desirable traits than other non-white minorities including Blacks and Latinx, they

are still categorized as foreigners to the American prototype, which clarifies the distinct forms of contemporary racial prejudice they experience (Zou and Cheryan, 2017). The racialized trope and subordination of Asians in America as “forever foreigner” erects a formidable barrier for Asian Americans to realize full racial equality, with everyday acts of abuse in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic along with persistent anti-Asian racial discrimination acting as powerful signifiers of the limits of white adjacency. Recognition of these dynamics helps to clarify where Asian Americans fit in, and yields three ways forward for scholars of race, ethnicity, and politics as well as for all those who imagine a more egalitarian and just politics.

The first takeaway is the methodological imperative to theorize, observe, and analyze race through a sociometric lens. Put simply, this means that any measurement and study of racial dynamics—whether implicating identity, discrimination, attitudes, or political behaviors at the individual level in addition to macro-level phenomena—must be done by considering the relationship between the full complement of racial groups into which people are categorized. This is not to say that scholarship focusing on a single racial or ethnic group is undesirable, but instead, that to best understand not only how and why that group experiences racial inferiority or superiority cannot be captured by examining only that group. Explicit comparison is precisely what sociometry requires and doing so prevents a number of unnecessary errors of omission and inference in the study of racial politics in the United States. In particular, it is clear that the experience of racism for Black Americans is historically distinct in both form and intensity from that of other racial groups. Therefore, this unique history for Blacks is specific to its context and is not equivalent to the subjugation of other groups including Latinx, Native American, and Asian American people. As Kim (2018) argues, the designation of persons of color or minority Americans as equivalent to the circumstances of Blacks elides group differentials in power, which can lead to the further mistake of seeing racial hierarchy as majority whites versus all minorities.

Lumping together non-whites is problematic because it overlooks the profound anti-Blackness that anchors the racial social order, as well as conflates the distinct racialized experience of Blacks with that of other minority groups, leading to overly simplified and misguided interpretations of what racial discrimination looks like in the United States. This discourse disables analysts from understanding the complex dynamics of being Black in an anti-Black society, and similarly impedes an understanding of how, for example, Asian Americans are positioned differently in a system of white supremacy. Indeed, racial discrimination and prejudice are not unitary concepts, and assuming homogeneity obscures the differentiated positioning of non-white groups. Applications of this dichotomy—of whites versus non-whites—can yield incisive analysis of the development of more polarized racial policy alliances as Smith and King suggest (this volume, 2020). Nevertheless, aggregating all non-white minority Americans into one side of the binary for which racial reparations around the “slogan of BLM” resonate, potentially misses the mark for non-Black minority Americans who also experience racial discrimination, but in a way substantively dissimilar to Blacks.

This caution to see more of the variation in minority populations extends to a second lesson from this analysis of where Asian Americans fit in. Our brief analysis of

the dynamism in the racial positionality of Asian Americans from the status of “coolie” to “model minority” underscores the deep and abiding relationship between racial discrimination and class. It would be a mistake to ignore the synergy between neoliberal capitalism and the subjugation of people categorized by race (Kim, 2018, 239). The Asian American case makes clear that their racialization is in fact constructed around their undesirability or desirability as workers. Unlike the circumstances of chattel slavery of Blacks who were owned as human capital, Asians labored as indentured servitude and contract labor, a distinction with meaning in the 19th century American capitalism. Once welcomed by free states such as CA when fruit needed picking and mountains needed moving, the completion of the trans-continental railroad made Asian labor both unnecessary and undesirable. Anti-Chinese and exclusion laws were passed quickly and easily, justified by arguments of racial inferiority.

A century later, when capitalist projects called for workers to support new industries in technology, medicine, and education, many Asian immigrants with high levels of skill and education answered, now filling the ranks of H1B visa holders under employment-based preference criteria in addition to the working class. Asian Americans in the last five decades in the United States are a particularly vivid example of the intersection of neoliberal capitalism and migration trajectories based in class. This newest group of Asian immigrants differ dramatically from their counterparts who came in the century prior as agricultural and railroad laborers. They now have more wealth and comfort, and less reason to change the existing economic system from which they benefit, and furthermore to challenge the ideology of meritocracy from which the stereotype of “model minority” originates. Mindful of losing their advantaged spot, some advantaged Asian Americans work to support the system that supports their success (Wong, 2018a, 2018b).

That Asian Americans, along with other minority Americans and white Americans alike, are captured by neoliberal capitalism, and therefore continue to see the benefits of supporting it while ignoring the close connection it has to racial discrimination is a barrier to the development of a more equal and just politics. The way forward for Asian Americans is a long-term project of consciousness raising, recognition of the United States as an anti-Black society, and consolidation with other Americans—both minority and white—to support racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter. The start to this long process may be supported by the simple realization of the fact that the Civil Rights Movement, fought by Black Americans for all Americans, is one of the most important reasons why Asian Americans are where they are today.

Beyond this, Asian Americans can take a more active stance in standing against institutionalized anti-Blackness and racial inequality by working to increase turnout of underrepresented non-white and immigrant voters who have been historically excluded or neglected by formal institutions designed to boost citizen participation (Garcia-Castañon *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, Garcia-Castañon *et al.* (2019) find that contact from a non-partisan/civic or community group is substantively more important for mobilizing Latinx and Asian American voters, in contrast to conventional partisan/political institutions (e.g. political parties or campaigns), which have an overall positive effect on political participation for all voters. In the latter case,

encouraging voter mobilization contact solely through political parties or campaigns might only serve to perpetuate the status quo and do little to alleviate institutionalized racialized inequities in voter representation. This highlights the importance of promoting targeted mobilization efforts that attend to differences across racial and ethnic boundaries, as well as the necessity of supporting race-conscious policies that not only account for institutional racialized variation, but are specifically designed to address these differences. By emphasizing the oftentimes invisible work of institutions and systemic practices in keeping the structure of racial inequality in place, we hope that Asian Americans can critically inspect their own role within the U.S. racial order and consciously confront the ways they may be contributing to anti-Blackness through their actions as well as their silence.

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NOTE

1 To clarify, neither Japan nor the Philippines were included in the banned zone.

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