Theories of Racism, Asian American Identities, and a Materialist Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that the persistence of "race" as the central unit of analysis in most U.S. scholarship on racialized populations and education has limited our systematic understanding of racism and class struggle. I discuss British sociologist Robert Miles's notion of racialization—as a way to theorize and articulate multiple forms of racism, the specificities of oppression and lived experiences that impact historically marginalized populations in the U.S. I critique "race relations" sociology because it essentially create and reproduce a black/white dichotomy. To provide specificity to the discussion, I examine "Asian American" identities and the ways in which they have been racialized. I discuss two key components to the social and historical construction for Asian America: a critique of the "model minority" myth and the deconstruction of pan-Asian ethnicity. This article looks at the implications for a materialist critical pedagogy.

***Keywords**: critical theory of racism, racialization, identity formation, model minority myth, Asian American pan-ethnicity, critical pedagogy*

Introduction

Historically, the development of U.S. capitalism and the American *citizen* have been defined "against" the Asian *immigrant* (though not limited to Asians), legally, economically, and culturally (Lowe, 1996, p. 4). Hence, the racialization of Asians in the U.S. must be framed historically and contextually. "Asia," "Asians," and "Asian Americans" have always been on contested and tenuous terrain in their relationship with the U.S. nation-state. According to Lowe, Asia has emerged as a particularly complicated "double front of threat and encroachment" for the United States (p. 5). On the one hand, some Asian countries have become rivals to U.S. imperial domination within the global economy; and on the other hand, Asian American subjects are still a necessary racialized labor force (intellectual, manual, and otherwise) within the domestic

political economy. By all means, immigration exclusion acts, naturalization laws, and education policies and practices continue to be used to regulate Asian bodies, but how these bodies are racialized has varied historically and contextually.

Asian Americans as the U.S. nation-state's "model minority" can also be traced back to the 1850s when the Chinese were "obedient" and "satisfactory" workers in the gold mines and the railroads of California, and the "model" Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Korean workers labored in the sugar-cane plantations in Hawai'i (Chan, 1991; Takaki, 1989). But the model minority thesis that we have come to know in the popular imagination first arose in the late 1950s, by sociologists attempting to explain the low levels of juvenile delinquency among Chinese and Japanese Americans (Omatsu, 1994, p. 63). The myth remained a social science construct until the 1960s—when it was used again by conservative political commentators to pit Asian Americans' "respect for the law" against African Americans' involvement with the black power and civil rights movements. In this sense, Asian Americans were racialized as the "good race" and African Americans the "bad race." Asian Americans were "good" subjects who represented hope, possibility, and academic excellence for other historically marginalized groups in capitalist America. This rhetoric helped to generate much resentment towards Asians in the U.S at a time of social and political fervor. The intent was to take focus away from the issues at hand—state-sanctioned racism and class inequalities.

In this paper, I examine the problematic of "race" as a central unit of analysis. I engage theories of race and racism—with the expressed focus on the influential work of U.S. scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant and British sociologist Robert Miles. I engage Miles's notion of racialization—which re-emphasizes the multiple forms of racism and specificities of oppression that impact historically oppressed populations in the U.S. I critique "race relations "sociology because it essentially reproduces a black/white dichotomy. In my attempt to ground the conversation, I examine "Asian American" identities and the ways in which they have been racialized in the U.S. I discuss the implications for a materialist critical pedagogy.

Literature Review

Omi and Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986/1994) has been critical to the discussion of race and racism in the U.S. Undoubtedly, they have left a mark on progressive scholars and theorists alike, including those on the educational left. They examine the legal genealogy of Asian Americans (and other racialized populations) in what they call "racial formation." They define "racial formation" as the "socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (1994, p. 55). They argue for a theory of racial formation by proposing a process of historically situated projects in which "humans and social structures are represented and organized" (p. 56). As Omi and Winant indicate, "race" is both a matter of social structure and cultural representation for U.S. national groups like African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. They state that too often, attempts to understand "race" and "racial inequality" simply as a social structural phenomenon, for example, are unable to account for the origins, patterning, and transformation of racial difference (1994, p. 56).

Omi and Winant's critique of mainstream approaches to racial theory and politics is useful in understanding racialized formation since the 1960s in the U.S. I agree with their distinction that racialized, rather than "racial" categories are socially constructed, transformed, and then destroyed. In addition, they continue to problematize the temptation to think of "race" as something fixed, concrete, and objective or to see the concept just as an ideological construction. However, there are limitations to their theoretical and political approach. As they critique the notion of "race" as neither "concrete" nor merely a "construction," they continue to reify the concept of "race" by stating that it "signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (p. 55). In other words, while Omi and Winant (1994) point out that selection of particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process, they reify social relations by concluding that all human beings belong to a "race" (e.g., Asian American race, Latino race, et cetera).

Limitations of "Race"

The fact of the matter is that "race" has its limits because it is simultaneously geographical and historical. Furthermore, the focus on "racial" identity as the basis for political mobilization has led to serious analytical problems. Scholars often continue to use the concept without critically engaging the construct itself. "Obviousness," as Miles (1993) indicates, is "a condition which depends upon the location of the observer and the set of concepts employed to conceive and interpret the object" (p. 3).

According to Miles (1989), "race" is a social construction of reality "imagined" rather than based on biological reality (p. 71). Its commonsense usage speaks volumes for its practicality but not its specific utility. The fact that we are selectively choosing physical characteristics indicates that this is by no means a natural category. Miles (1987) notes that the processes and representations of "race" have a history: signification and representation have been used in Europe the last centuries to categorize human beings. When somatic and phenotypical characteristics were not convenient, religion and nationality were used as a way to demarcate populations. The creation of the "Other" was based on the signification of human biological characteristics and socially constructed mental capacities. Furthermore, to simply focus on "race" is problematic due to the "abstraction" of cultural differentiations and the failure to identify class divisions within distinct groups.

Miles's Notion of Racialization: Conceptually Detaching "Race" from Racism

Miles (1982, 1989, 1993, 2003) notes that the notion of "race" first appeared in the English language in the 17th century. However, it did not become prominent until the scientific movements in the late 18th century Europe and North America (p. 69). Miles (1989) posits that the contemporary theoretical framework of racism was first used to identify Nazi Germany's notion of Aryan superiority and Jewish inferiority. As a result, racism came to refer strictly and exclusively to "race." What Miles vehemently attempts to do is break the conceptual link between the notion of "race" with that of racism as a way to distinguish the analytical use of racism. The word "race" is used to label groups on the sole basis of phenotypical features. There is no scientific justification to simply distinguish "races" based on select phenotypical characteristics that vary widely from

height, to weight, length of arms and legs, hair, skin color, and so on. The idea of "race" is employed as the result of a "process of signification" that are attributed with meaning and thereby used to organize and sort out populations.

The notion of racialization has been widely used and understood in different ways. Fanon (1963) was one of the first to use the concept in discussing the difficulties facing decolonized intellectuals in Africa when constructing a cultural future (Miles & Brown, 2003, p. 99). Banton (1977) uses racialization to refer more formally to the use of "race" to "structure" people's perceptions of the world's population. Miles and Brown (2003) note that Banton's usage of the concept was limited due to its scientific theories of topology for categorizing populations (p. 100). Some scholars during the 1980s distinguished between "practical" and "ideological" racialization. The former refers to the formation of "racial" groups and the latter refer to the idea of "race" in discourse. U.S. scholars like Omi and Winant (1994) use the concept to "signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practices or group…racialization is an ideological process, a historically specific one" (Miles & Brown, 2003, p. 100). For Miles, the concept is synonymous with racialized categorization.

In an attempt to contextualize Miles's deconstruction of "race" and the move to racialization, Ngin and Torres (2001) suggest that the language of "race" and "race relations" should be carefully analyzed without reifying it. This is done so by some scholars who consciously place the term "race" in quotation marks to distinguish its use from any biological implications. These scholars mention that until recently, discourse on African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans were largely based on phenotypical characteristics. These physical makers were used as a mechanism to exclude and exploit racialized groups. For Miles (1993), concepts of racialization, racism, and exclusionary practice identify specific means of disrupting the capitalist mode of production. This allows us to "stress consistently and rigorously the role of human agency even within particular historical and material circumstances and to recognize the specificity of particular forms of oppression" (p. 52). In other words, Miles's notion of racialization, in not reifying "races" of human being, does not homogenize the experiences of different "races."

Towards a Marxist Project of Theorizing Racism

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that "radical" theories of racism, while critical of the existing "racial" order, cannot appreciate the uniqueness of "race" in the U.S. (p. 3). They claim that these radical theories simply fail to address specific U.S. conditions due to the fact that movements and intellectual traditions outside of the U.S have influenced them. The left, as Omi and Winant (1994) would have us believe, have "succumbed" to romantic illusions. Even more significant, they state that there are little theoretical and analytical efforts to "counter" the right (p. viii). It might be true, but it is also clear that there is much analysis done by Miles and other scholars working from a particular strand of Marxist analysis. This "racism" paradigm, which surfaced in the 1970s and was re-articulated most nobly by Miles (1982), is critiqued by scholars in the U.S. and abroad. This approach, according to "race" scholars, reduces "race" to ethnicity. It neglects to see the "continuing organization" of social inequality and oppression along "racial" lines (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 70). The political and intellectual discussion of reducing "race" to ethnicity has many people up in arms because for them, it advocates a "colorblind" discourse.

It is assumed that the elimination of "race" as an analytical category would lead to a "colorblind" discourse. This is not what Miles and other scholars (including myself) are arguing. For this reason, there is much resistance to the deconstruction of "race" due to the fear of de-legitimating the historical movements that are grounded in "race." Instead, the intent is to argue that skin color is not an inherent characteristic, but in fact, a product of signification. For example, human beings "identify" skin color to mark or symbolize other phenomena in a historical context in which other signification occurs: "Collective identities are produced and social inequalities are structured when people include and exclude people through the signification of skin color" (Darder & Torres, 2004, p. 41). Thus, it is important to understand the signification of skin color and to understand how it is produced and reproduced, given different historical contexts. In order for us to address structural inequalities, there has to be a shift from "race" to a plural conceptualization of racism. In so doing, we can interrogate the different meanings attributed to racialized groups.

The strongest case for retention of "race" as an analytical concept has much to do with how victims of racism have taken on this term as a way to resist their political and economic subordinations. This retention of "race" has many consequences because of its lack of analytical rigor. The idea of "race" was closely associated with the idea of "black" in the U.S. and Britain (Miles, 1993; Hall, 1996). In fact, one can argue that the notion of "race" struggle is synonymous with the "black" struggle. However, the use of "black" as a means of political mobilization "embodies" a specific rather than a universal tradition of resistance—a resistance that focuses solely on the colonial domination of African subjects (Miles, 1993, p. 3). The attempt to generalize the "black" struggle to all colonized subjects, whose lives are influence by racism, "disavows" the specific cultural and historical origin of non-African people. The analysis of racism in the U.S. (and Britain) with a "race" perspective, radical or otherwise is misleading because the idea of "race" is highly ideological. The political economy of migration perspective, proposed forcefully by Miles (1982, 1989, 1993, and 2003), Darder and Torres (1999, 2004), and others is a major theoretical break from Marxist theory of "race relations," prevalent in much of the Marxist writings in the U.S. academy.

Gilroy (1989, 2000) (who has since shifted his position along the lines of Miles's critique) and other "race" scholars argue that a Marxist analysis of capitalism based on historical stances of 19th century Europe is inadequate. While both Gilroy and Sivanandan (1983) distance themselves from the Eurocentric Marxist tradition (largely because of its presumed inability to deal with "race"), Sivanandan has reclaimed Marxism in order to contextualize "race" relative to class, while Gilroy rejects Marxism in order to establish the absolute autonomy of "race" apart from class (Miles, 1993, p. 43). This important distinction reminds us that neither Marxism nor the black radical tradition is monolithic, but in fact, has very diverse conflicting and contradictory positions.

Hence, the task for scholars working from a political economy of migration perspective is not to create a Marxist theory of "race" that is more "valid" than conservative or liberal theories. The task at hand is to deconstruct the notion of "race" and detach it from the concept of racism. Skeptics reiterate that Marx's theoretical and historical analysis on the mode of production has limited analytical value because examples are specific to the

nature of capitalist development in Britain and Europe in general. This type of analysis presumes that it would be best to articulate the notion of "race" in a place like the U.S. where there is a long history of slavery. On the contrary, Miles (1982) has convincingly argued that the totalizing nature of capitalism does not recognize the color or national line. In the following section, I discuss the ways in which "Asian American" identities have been negotiated, maneuvered, and used. I examine the racialization of Asian Americans historically and the impact (and consequences) it has on our theorizing of "race," "race relations," and identity politics in the U.S.

The Racialization of Asian Americans

Omatsu (1994) notes the Asian American radical/liberationist movement coincided not with civil rights, but the black power movement and that Malcolm X, rather than Martin Luther King Jr., was the leading influence. The struggle for many Asian American scholars and activists was not based so much on "racial" pride but to reclaim larger political and economic struggles of past generations. Due to the prominence of the black/white paradigm, Asian Americans and other racialized groups were left out of the theoretical and political discussion because they were neither black nor white. The black/white paradigm deemed the histories and issues of Asian Americans as insignificant or secondary in the existing U.S. hierarchy of racialized oppression. Suffice it to say, Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's *war of position* contends that Asian Americans had to situate themselves as a "racial" group for social, cultural, political, economic, and educational purposes (Hoare & Smith, 1971; Lam, 2009). Due to discriminatory practices against U.S. Asians, the desire to create a pan-Asian coalition was a necessary political tool for the sustenance and survival of the group.

The inclusion of Asian Americans in the "people as color" paradigm is a precarious and tenuous one at best. Given that Asian Americans are categorically labeled as the "model minority" and have "honorary white" status, it is sometimes difficult for other racialized groups (who might not be aware of the histories and struggles of Asians in the U.S.) to conceive them as "legitimate" people of color. "Whites" also perceive them as not as "legitimate" because historically they have not "suffered as much," in relation to say, African Americans. I have no intention of "showing" or arguing that Asian Americans

have "suffered enough" to qualify them as "people of color" or an "oppressed" group. My intent here is to show the limitations of a "people of color" analysis because it still falls into a black/white paradigm. It does not take into account the different political and ideological perspectives or class locations of individuals from different groups. In engaging the discourse, I am not taking away from its historical and political significance in the continued attempt to create solidarity across ethnic and class lines. Asian Americans and their *war of maneuver* speak to how complicated identity politics can get, as they negotiate the murky waters of "race relations." The analysis on racism must go beyond what "white" people say and do to "black" people. However, this is not to suggest that white-on-black racism is not significant.

A Critique of the Model Minority Myth

According to Omatsu (1994), the widespread acceptance of the model minority thesis was not just a result of the growing number of Asians in the U.S. or the increasing attention from mainstream institutions, but in fact, coincided with the rise of the New Right and the corporate offensive on the poor (p. 63). Omatsu correctly notes that the model minority myth has been critiqued politically, but not ideologically. It is critical that we do not leave out this important dimension. I would also like to stress a materialist dimension in my critique of the myth for Asian American subjects.

It is fundamental to understand the myth in the context of material conditions in U.S. society at different historical junctures. The racialization of Asian Americans has much to do with the economic and political imperatives of the U.S. with the Asian country of origin. Asian Americans as "obedient," "docile," and "apolitical" bodies are also used to perpetuate and reproduce certain colonial relationships in the domestic sphere. In particular, the neo-conservative movements of the early 1980s played an important role in redefining the language of civil rights and creating a "moral vision" of capitalism. It clearly constituted a campaign to "restore" trust in capitalism and those values associated with the rhetoric of "free enterprise." It was a return to a "celebration of values, an emphasis on hard work and self-reliance, a respect for authority, and an attack on prevailing civil rights thinking associated with the African American community" (Omatsu, 1994, p. 63). Asian Americans, in this instance, were used to symbolize the

resurrection of capitalist values. The images of hard-working Asian American petit bourgeois class and immigrant merchants laboring in our inner-cities and over-achieving students excelling in the classrooms reinforce the long-held meritocratic belief that if you work hard and do not complain, the system will reward you regardless of ethnicity or class location.

Describing Asian Americans as "model minority" continues to obfuscate the diverse and complex experiences of Asians in the U.S. Instead of recognizing difference, Asian Americans are lumped into a "race." By "painting" Asian Americans as a homogeneous group, the model minority myth "erases ethnic, cultural, social-class, gender, language, sexual, generational, achievement, and other differences (Lee, 1996, p. 6). The imposition of categorical labeling on a "race" suggests that all Asians are "successful" in the face of racism, in the classrooms, at the office, restaurant, cleaner, liquor store, or doughnut shop. In any case, the myth denies the rates of poverty, illiteracy, and high dropout rates in Asian American communities, especially from Southeast Asian American students (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992). Situating Asian American experiences in relation to political economy, migration, diaspora, and critical pedagogical approaches (Freire, 1970/2001; McLaren, 2007; Darder, 2012) help us begin to comprehend the complex nature of this racialized population.

There are ideological and material implications to which we must tend. The "model minority" myth as a hegemonic device tells us that we need to engage in more substantive analyses of the racialization of Asian Americans (and other populations) and challenge the presupposition of "race" as a commonsense notion. Gramsci's notion of *hegemony* is a concept referring to a particular form of dominance in which the ruling class legitimates its position and secures the acceptance, if not outright support, of those below them (Hoare & Smith, 1971). In this instance, Asian Americans have "consented" to their label as the "model minority." This is not to suggest that there is no resistance or agency. In fact, Asian American scholars and activists have critiqued this stereotype from its inception. Regardless, the myth has great adhesive value, for it still plays a prominent role in our thinking and analysis of and about Asians in the U.S.

The minority model stereotype as a hegemonic device maintains the dominance of elites in a racialized hierarchy by diverting attention away from racialized inequality and by "setting standards for how minorities should behave" (Lee, 1996, p. 6). Asian Americans as the "model minority" captured the U.S. imagination when the *U.S. News and World Report* published an article in 1966 "lauding" Chinese Americans as a "success" in the midst political upheavals. As the article states, "At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation's 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own-with no help from anyone ("Success Story," p. 73). The article also presented Chinese Americans as "good citizens" and Chinatowns across the U.S. as "safe" places. Asian American writer and activist Frank Chin (1990) articulates in his writings the notion of a "racist love" for Asian Americans, and paradoxically, a "racist hate" for African Americans and other marginalized groups in their relationship to the nation-state. Chin's naming gives context to the positionality of racialized populations in U.S. society and how they have always been strategically used against each other.

Asian American Pan-ethnicity

Nguyen (2002) states that the Asian American body politic has been mostly concerned with *demographic* heterogeneity and not necessarily *ideological* heterogeneity (p. 6). Ideological heterogeneity should not to be mistaken for class heterogeneity, which most Asian American scholars and activists are willing to acknowledge. Nguyen points out that the Asian American intellectual class "betrays" their own ideological rigidity when they are not willing to read for ideological heterogeneity (p. 7). The Asian American movement, the subsequent development of Asian American Studies programs has attempted, though with limited success, to unify diverse Asian ethnicities into one political, cultural, and historic bloc. Along with intellectuals, Asian American capitalists and unabashed pan-ethnic "entrepreneurs" have transformed perceptions of Asian America (Nguyen, 2000).

The racialization of Asian Americans, especially before the 1960s, forced Asians in the U.S. to frequently practice "ethnic dis-identification." This is the act of distancing one's group from another group so as to not be mistaken for and suffer the blame for the

presumed misdeeds of a particular group (Espiritu, 1992, p. 20). Given the imperial wars between their mother countries and Japan, ethnic dis-identification was most evident during the Second World War when Chinese, Koreans, and Filipinos distanced themselves from Japanese Americans. Chinese, Filipinos, and Koreans wore "ethnic" clothing and identification buttons to differentiate themselves from Japan and Japanese Americans, seen as "the enemy race" at the time. These identification buttons would explicitly state the hatred and animosity Chinese, Koreans, and Filipinos had for Japan, and thus, Japanese Americans. During the Cold War era, the Chinese were racialized as the "enemy race," and Japanese Americans were seen in a "positive" light. One can certainly argue that Muslim and Arab Americans are similarly racialized as such today. This also attests to the pervasive problem of "racial" lumping historically and contemporarily.

The black power and civil rights movements in the U.S. and the anti-colonial national liberation movements in Asia had a profound impact on the political consciousness of Asian American educators, scholars, and activists. Influenced by these broader political, economic, and educational struggles, Americans of Asian ancestry worked in solidarity to "denounce racist institutional structures, demand new or unattended rights, and assert their cultural and racial distinctiveness" (Espiritu, 1992, p. 25). However, this does not explain why a pan-Asian identity or consciousness did not develop until the 1960s. Given the nature of Asian exclusion acts and naturalization policies, a pan-Asian identity prior to the 1960s was not feasible because the U.S. Asian population was predominantly foreign-born and they did not share a common language. In addition, demographic and residential segregation, with its history grounded in the segregated Chinatown and Manila-town ghettos or the farming enclaves in many parts of the West Coast, made it difficult for the creation an "Asian American" consciousness.

There is also a class dimension to the development of pan-Asian identity, coined first by college activists. The term was later extended by professional and community spokespersons to lobby for the "welfare" of *all* Asians (Espiritu, 1992, p. 35). The term was (and still is) embraced by university students, professionals, artists, and political activists—most of who came from the middle-class. Pan-Asian consciousness "thrived" on college campuses and in urban settings; however, it made very little impact on Asian

ethnic enclaves. Here lies the concern of scholars and activists *theorizing* as Asian Americans but also recognizing the limitations (and even dangers) of a pan-Asian identity. The pan-Asian structure has continued to be a source of friction and mistrust, with less "dominant" groups feeling "shortchanged and excluded" (Espiritu, 1992, p. 51). The influx of Asian immigrants after 1965 and "tightening" of public funding sources further deepened ethnic and class inequalities amongst Asians.

Due to the material implications of the "Asian American" designation, certain groups have made (successful and unsuccessful) attempts to break away from the category. This is largely because their needs are neither met nor addressed under auspicious labeling. Leonardo (2000) looks at the identity of Filipino Americans and their continued struggles with the "Asian American" category. Filipino Americans have adopted new labels like "Pacific Islanders" to signify their desire to shift in association with the category. Unlike most other Asian groups, Filipinos have had a profound Spanish influence due to the colonization of the Philippines by Spain. Some would argue that Filipino identity in the U.S. may perhaps be more linked to "Hispanic" than "Asian." This is the result of some previous cultural commonalities like language, but more so their own responses to the Asian American political climate.

The insistence on pan-ethnicity has and continues to do much harm in obfuscating problems of educational achievement, unemployment and underemployment, unequal reward (i.e., "glass ceiling"), occupational segregation, under-presentation, and most important, class polarization in Asian American communities. The U.S. Census (2002) substantiates this argument. The average yearly income during a three-year period (2000-2002) for "Asians" was $54,999, about $10,000 more than "whites," "$25,000 more than "blacks," and $21,000 more than "Hispanics." As Kitano and Daniels (1998) point out, this homogenizing mechanism does not reflect the high rate of poverty among Asian Americans refugees: 26 percent for Vietnamese, 35 percent for Laotians, 43 percent for Cambodians, and 64 percent for Hmong (San Juan, 2002, p. 101). This data does not speak to the historical particularities of different Asian groups and their relationship to U.S. hegemony. Moreover, Ngin and Torres (2001) argue that theorizing Asian American (and Latino) identities and ethnicities can best be understood within the changing U.S. political economy and international division of labor.

The aforementioned statistics clearly show that the Asian American population is not a monolithic socioeconomic group. In fact, it is increasingly differentiated along class lines. The postwar removal of "racial" barriers in the economic sector did in fact increase the number of educated and professional Asians in the U.S. Espiritu and Ong (1994) posit that the preference for highly educated labor in immigration legislation further widened the economic/achievement gap, thereby reinforcing class inequalities in Asian American communities (p. 298). This is most apparent with migration policies: Asian professional class entered the country through occupational categories whereas mostly working-class Asians were allowed entry through family reunification categories.

Espiritu and Ong's (1994) concern is not with "class variations within any given Asian population, but rather with systematic variations in the class distribution among Asian populations" (309). In understanding differences in historical development, migration patterns and contemporary conditions of different groups, we begin to see why Asian American groups have had very different class profiles. As a result, there are inter-ethnic conflicts and tensions that existed within Asian American communities. This speaks to the reproduction of power and control of resources by certain ethnic groups. Lopez and Espiritu (1990) have argued that the relative success of Asian American pan-ethnicity has largely been due to the influence of a sizeable middle and professional class (Espiritu & Ong, p. 314). However, I agree with Espiritu and Ong (1994) in saying that there is a heavy price to pay for the "relative success" of coalition building among Asian American groups, a price that is sometimes too big for some**.**

Implications for a Materialist Critical Pedagogy

As we move well into the 21th century, perhaps the price is too heavy to pay for a political bloc based on "race" and traditional notions of "race relations." Given dramatic demographic and economic changes (especially in the U.S. metropoles) for Asian Americans and other historically marginalized populations and the desire to fundamentally understand difference, I am calling for a return to class struggle—grounded in political economy of racism and migration. This call is more urgent and timely than ever—especially for critical scholars and educators interested in a materialist critical pedagogy.

Due to the utility of "race" as the central unit of analysis, it is not surprising that the theories, practices, and policies that have informed social science and education-based analyses of marginalized populations during the last few decades are deeply rooted in identity politics (Darder & Torres, 2004). A political economy-inspired class analysis and a critique of capitalism are noticeably missing from much of the historical and contemporary analysis of racialized groups. In addition, most scholars doing work on African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and other subordinated groups are unwilling to engage class divisions and their contradictions within and between these diverse racialized populations. This neglect of class analysis is often carried out with an effort to sustain a political base that was first developed during the civil rights movements in the 1960s.

When class is mentioned, it is done so through the all-too-familiar references to the "race, class, and gender" intersection of oppressions. As a result, it reinforces the idea that class should be treated as one of many equally valued components of analysis. The fact of the matter is that class and "race" are concepts of different sociological order. Darder and Torres (2004) make this important distinction by positing that class and "race" do not occupy the same analytical space and "thereby cannot constitute explanatory alternatives to one another...class is a material space, even within the mainstream definition that links the concept to occupation, income status, and educational attainment—all of which reflect the materiality of class, though without analytical specificity" (p. 128). In effect, it places "race" in the middle of the discussion and moves the analysis of class to the background.

Despite the fact that "race" and gender invariably intersect and interact with class, they are not co-primary (McLaren & Jaramillo, 2006, p. 79). In agreement with McLaren and Jaramillo (2006), I also conceptualize class struggle as one in a series of social antagonisms, but argue that class most often "sustains" the conditions that produce and reproduce the other antagonisms (p. 79). This is not to say that we can reduce racism and sexism to class. These antagonisms are indeed dialectical in its nature. However, class struggle as the primary antagonism helps shape and forms the particularities of other social antagonisms like racism, ethnocentrism, gender, et cetera. Class exploitation as a topic of discussion, not surprisingly, is hardly explored in schools of education and

teacher education programs (McLaren & Jaramillo, p. 79) when speaking of income and educational stratification. It is often linked (in very limited way) to distribution of resources and opportunities.

Malott (2014) makes the distinction between a Weberian-informed conception of class that is prominent in critical pedagogy and multicultural education (the aforementioned schools of education and teacher education programs are sites of such work) versus a Marxian analysis (134). He states, taking critical insights from Kelsh and Hill (2006), that for both Weber and Marx, class determination does indeed involves property; however, Marx's conception of how property determines class position is based on the

> Realization that those who do not own property or the means of production are forced out of necessity to sell their labor for a wage while those who own property live off the profit or surplus value extracted or exploited from labor (p. 134).

Marx's conception of class is inextricably linked to capital while Weber's notion is connected to consumption patterns and culture (Kelsh & Hill, 2006; Malott, 2014). To further substantiate this distinction, Kelsh and Hill (2006) make clear that "Weberian-based formulations of class served the interests of the capitalist class…insofar as they erase both the proletariat and the capitalist classes as antagonistic entities unified in the contradictory and exploitative social relation of capitalist production" (Kelsh & Hill in Malott, 2014, p. 135). As Malott speaks to these insights to understand white privilege and consumption patterns in his formation as a Marxist scholar, I use it to discuss the utility (or rather limitations) of "race" and questions of identity politics that continue to be *the* theoretical driving force in our understanding of racialized populations and education in the U.S.

In their conceptual interrogation of critical race theory (CRT), Darder and Torres (2004) are concerned that CRT, in using "race" as the central unit of analysis, does not carefully undertake a systematic discussion of class and, more important, a substantive critique of capitalism (99). In contending with questions of "race" and institutional power, references are made to "class" and/or "capitalism." However, the lack of serious engagement by critical race theorists with these issues is a shortcoming. Their efforts in analyzing socioeconomic interests grounded in law and education are "generally vague and under-theorized" (99). Due to under-theorizing, critical race theory fails to provide

an in-depth analysis of capitalist social relations in our efforts to understand social, educational, and economic inequalities. Ambiguous concepts like "white supremacy" and "institutional racism" used by critical race theorists are, according to Miles, problematic due to the tendency toward conceptual inflation (99). Their intent is not to dismiss the important body of work in CRT. However, there is a clear analytical distinction in the political and intellectual project of CRT scholars and those of racism—grounded in political economy.

In their incisive article, "Class Dismissed? Historical materialism and the politics of 'difference,'" Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren (2006) note their political and intellectual trajectory for a materialist critical pedagogy:

> There is no doubt that post-Marxism has advanced our knowledge of the hidden trajectories of power within the processes of representation and that it remains useful in adumbrating the formation of subjectivity and its expressive dimensions as well as complementing our understandings of the relationships between 'difference,' language, and cultural configurations. However, post-Marxists have been woefully remiss in addressing the constitution of class formations and the machinations of capitalist social organizations. (p. 142)

Undoubtedly, the desire to take up 'post-al' frameworks and culture-based analyses, in lieu of political economy, has been a major concern for critical scholars and educators working within the materialist tradition. The emphasis on difference and representational politics is done so in ways that minimized, and in some instances, devoid of the *political* and *economic* aspects of difference (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren, 2006, p. 142).

As I have made clear throughout this paper, my interrogation of "race," "race relations" paradigm, and the politics of identity are done so in my (our collective) desire to theoretically and politically advance the conversation—a conversation that is very necessary at this moment in time. It is at this moment in time, where capitalism as a totalizing force, has a stranglehold on the majority of the world's population. Here in the U.S., the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor continue to grow. In engaging this discourse, it is not my intent to take away from the social, cultural, and historical significance of said social movements—grounded in the blood, sweat, and tears (and sometimes lives) of our comrades of the last few decades. In fact, I am indebted to these

liberation struggles in the U.S. (and around the world). What I am hoping to do (as a site of analysis and point of departure) is to offer something critical, something personal, and hopefully something useful—as an organic Asian American intellectual, U.S. ethnic studies scholar, critical pedagogue, but foremost—a political refugee and working-class subject (products of both U.S. imperialism and capitalism). To be sure, capitalism as *the* totalizing force the world has ever known does not see the color line, national line, or the identity line.

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