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Racism and sexism in cyberspace: Engaging stereotypes of Asian American women and men to facilitate student learning and development

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Samuel D. Museus and Kimberly A. Truong report on the negative consequences of the ubiquitous racialized and sexualized stereotypes of Asian American college students that appear online.

By Samuel D. Museus and Kimberly A. Truong

Racism and Sexism in Cyberspace: Engaging Stereotypes of Asian American Women and Men to Facilitate Student Learning and Development

IN A POWERFUL 2003 BOOK CHAPTER about racialized sexual harassment (for the purposes of this article, *racialization* refers to the dehumanization or objectification of a group or race), Sumi Cho begins her discussion by sharing the contents of a letter that was written from a white male professor to one of her Japanese female college students. The letter was filled with erotic messages, expressed desires for intimate sexual encounters, and demeaning and sadistic demands. Cho also describes how multiple female students complained about this professor, asserting that he “sought out Japanese women ... believes they are submissive and will obey any parameters he sets for the relationship ... [and] wants sex slaves” (p. 532). Cho invokes this story as a concrete example of how the convergence of racialized and sexualized stereotypes can mutually shape the experiences of Asian American women in college and put them at particular risk for being sexually harassed and assaulted.

Racial and gender stereotypes interact to shape Asian American male college students’ experiences in different ways, but they are similarly problematic. For example, one does not need to look very far to see almost omnipresent media representations that reinforce stereotypical images of Asian American men as nerds who are sexually undesirable and socially awkward because they spend a majority of their time playing video games and studying. Even if they seem benign on the surface, these stereotypes can have a profound impact on the experiences of Asian American men in college. In fact, David Eng refers to the ways that converging racial and gender stereotypes function to emasculate Asian American men as a form of *racial castration*.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, using data from a study of racism and sexism in cyberspace, we discuss the racial and gender stereotypes of Asian American women and men that some college students

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harbor. Second, we delineate some of the negative consequences of these stereotypes and, in doing so, reinforce why educators should assume responsibility for understanding and dispelling these myths. Finally, we offer concrete recommendations regarding how educators can and should acknowledge these stereotypes and engage them in constructing productive learning opportunities for their students.

RACISM AND SEXISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

WITHIN AMERICAN SOCIETY, RACISM and sexism are systemic problems that permeate both social institutions and individual thoughts and behaviors. Indeed, scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Kimberly Crenshaw have described how such racism and sexism can function to degrade people of color and women and deny them educational and professional opportunities in society. For example, people of color may encounter racial barriers to accessing higher education and professional advancement as a result of racism. Moreover, women may experience sexism in higher education and the workplace as they attempt to move forward in their careers.

Asian Americans experience racism and sexism in everyday life, and there is some evidence that this racism and sexism is increasingly manifesting in cyberspace. One example of how Asian American women

experience both racism and sexism in the digital world is demonstrated on the Creepy White Guys Tumblr account (creepywhiteguys.tumblr.com). An anonymous Asian American woman created this account to document her racialized and gendered encounters in online dating. She asserts, “Every Asian girl who has ever tried online dating ... has experienced it: messages from creepy White guys with Asian fetishes.” The examples she shares include white men exoticizing and objectifying her based on stereotypes of Asian women as being sexually adventurous and submissive. Another manifestation of racism and sexism toward Asian Americans in cyberspace is the Day Above Ground’s recently released music video called “Asian Girlz.” The video contains sexually explicit language and is full of racialized and sexualized stereotypes that exoticize and objectify Asian women.

Because higher education institutions are a microcosm of society, racism and sexism also permeate college campuses and shape the experiences of Asian American college students. Sam Museus, for example, has discussed the ways that racism and sexism shape the experiences of Asian American students in depth. Examples of the ways that racism and sexism influence the Asian American student experience include, but are not limited to, experiencing racial stereotyping, racial isolation, and racially motivated hate crimes and sexual assaults.

Moreover, Asian American college students encounter racism and sexism in the digital aspects of their campus environments. There are numerous examples of how racism and sexism toward Asian Americans within higher education manifests in the digital world. In 2012, for example, a blog was created to expose racism at Ohio State University after several students had tweeted racist comments about Asian Americans on their campus. And, in 2011, Alexandra Wallace, a white University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) undergraduate, released a video rant called “Asians in the Library.” In the video, she complained about “these hordes of Asian people that UCLA accepts into [her] school,” complained about Asian people using their cell phones in the university library, and imitated their speech with “Ching chong ling long ting tong” noises. Shortly thereafter, UCLA’s *Daily*

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Bruin published a newspaper article by Kate Parkinson-Morgan that reported that the video sparked outrage in and backlash from the Asian American community at UCLA and across the nation, which eventually led to Wallace dropping out of the university. Given the reality that Asian American students can encounter racism and sexism in cyberspace, it is important for educators to understand the nature and implications of such encounters, as well as how to effectively respond to and address these experiences in educational programming and practice that is designed to serve Asian American students in college.

AN ANALYSIS OF RACISM AND SEXISM IN CYBERSPACE

THREE YEARS AGO, WE BEGAN CONDUCTING A STUDY on how racism and sexism manifest in online discussion boards. Specifically, we pulled a plethora of data from hundreds of discussion boards that were posted on two popular and frequently used websites among college students at the time: Facebook.com and JuicyCampus.com. The data that came from these discussion boards overwhelmingly illuminated stereotypes of Asian American women and men. Facebook discussions were linked to the public identity of posters and tended to convey more subtle stereotypes, while JuicyCampus postings were anonymous and included more explicit and overtly offensive stereotypes of Asian American women and men. Nevertheless, discussion posts from both websites illuminate the inappropriate, dehumanizing, and disturbing stereotypes about Asian Americans that many college students possess.

In the following sections, we share data from these discussion boards. It should be noted, however, that some of the data were too graphic to share and have been edited. In addition, because JuicyCampus allowed users to post messages without self-identifying, we are

unable to share demographic information about these posters, except where it was volunteered.

The Objectification of Asian American Women

The vast majority of times in which Asian American women were mentioned in the discussion boards, the online conversations evolved into a litany of hypersexualized stereotypes and graphic and demeaning comments. One Facebook member from the City College of Chicago, for example, posted the following remarks in a discussion board that was titled, “Why is it that I’m crazy about Asian girls?” and perpetuated stereotypes of hypersexuality:

White Male Facebook Poster #1: The best Asian and Pacific Islander girls are the Americanized ones. Their cute face structure, black hair, [and] noses are my weaknesses. ... Add to the fact that I want my future wife to be sweet and sensitive in public, then ... Yea!!! Maybe I have this stereotype built in my head, but that is my love.

Posters consistently exoticized and sexually objectified Asian American women in these subtle ways on Facebook, but discussions on the JuicyCampus site frequently became much more explicit. The following comments were posted in a JuicyCampus discussion among students at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), which was titled “White Guys and Asian Girls.” They illuminate stereotypes of Asian American women as both hypersexual and submissive:

Anonymous Poster #1: Word up! Asian girls totally blow White *#@# out of the water.

Anonymous Poster #2: Ya, they’re the submissive type of girls.

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The comments that we found about Asian American men in cyberspace were very different from those focused on Asian American women but were similarly problematic and disconcerting.

Anonymous Poster #3: Asian girls are *%\$!. They love White dudes and treat us like Gods. That's why I date them.

Anonymous Poster #4: Oh man, I live in S.F. Too many Asian &*# up here. They love to ^@#%*!@%# and please their man.

Sometimes, these discussions about Asian American women did not end with the aforementioned degrading remarks but evolved into exchanges about how to sexually assault them. For example, students from the University of California, Berkeley engaged in another JuicyCampus discussion that was titled "How do I get an Asian sorority chick to *&!# me...?" In this discussion, multiple users responded with comments that reinforced stereotypes of Asian American women as hypersexual, and promoted drugging and sexually assaulting them.

Such comments illuminate the problematic nature of pervasive stereotypes of Asian American women, as they can be associated with views that it is acceptable to sexually harass or assault them. If educators detect that students harbor such prejudicial views, then they are obligated to confront these stereotypes and ensure that Asian American female students are aware of the potential dangers that can result from them. As we show in the next section, the comments that we found about Asian American men in cyberspace were very different from those focused on Asian American women but were similarly problematic and disconcerting.

The Emasculation of Asian American Men

When Asian American men were evoked as the topic of discussion, the comments typically reinforced racialized and gendered stereotypes that work to degrade and emasculate them. For example, students from UCLA and UCSD posted the following remarks on JuicyCampus:

Anonymous Poster #1: Asian guys tend to be more feminine and needy than White guys. They're used to a matriarchal society, so they look towards their girlfriends for direction and support, but not

all girls want to have that control in a relationship. It's refreshing to have someone take charge for once, so the Asian girls turn towards someone who will, in this case, [be] White guys.

Anonymous Poster #2: Asian guys ... on average ... are pathetically awkward and have little-to-no social skills. ... On average ... You [Asian guys] always have confused looks on your faces. ...

Anonymous Poster #3: It's obvious why White girls don't like Asian guys. ... Just stick to what you are good at ... Warcraft, studying, and I guess becoming doctors. ...

Posters went on to reinforce racist stereotypes of Asian men having small penises and their undesirability to white women. Such discussions work to emasculate Asian American men because they racialize the entire Asian American male population as socially awkward, incompetent, effeminate, asexual, nerdy, and physically inferior.

Indeed, the emasculation of Asian American men also became the focus of several JuicyCampus discussion boards, including a conversation among students at the University of Illinois that began with the posted question, "White girls would you %*#& an Asian guy?" In response to this question, one student posted the following remark:

Anonymous Poster #1: No! They have little penises, hips and ass like women. Too feminine. Gross. No thanks.

Anonymous Poster #2: If Asian women don't want to %*#& them (note the large population of Asian women with White men on this campus), why in the world would a White woman bother with them? When whiteness is your vision of beauty (notice that Japanimation characters look white), you're killing your chances with anybody. ...

Anonymous Poster #3: Most girls don't go for Asian guys because Asians tend to be self-conscious and have no confidence.

The preceding comments illuminate some college students' racist views toward Asian American men, but also demonstrate the ways that racialized and gendered stereotypes in society function to socially degrade male Asian American students in college.

Internalized Racism and Sexism in Cyberspace

Sometimes, Asian American women who had internalized racialized and gendered stereotypes joined the discussion and contributed to the degradation of Asian American men. For example, in one Facebook group called "Asian Girls and White Guys," Asian American women from several campuses across the country engaged in the following conversation about Asian American men:

Asian American Female Poster #1: Asians are small people. ... Poor Asian guys. Hahaha.

White Male Poster #1: The Asian guys are also smaller than us in other ways ...

Asian American Female Poster #2: The Asian guys in my school fit nicely into two categories (unless someone at my school proves me wrong): (1) The "gangstas," and the (2) quiet Asian kid whose name you never remember. The former just irritates me beyond belief and the latter I would hold less prejudice against if they actually talked and knew who they were. I can only think of one Asian guy that I am friends with at my school of 4000 of which 2000 are Asian.

Asian American Female Poster #3: White guys tend to be taller, more athletic, and have nicer facial bone structure (I'm a photographer so I think about these things). I'm not trying to be shallow, but they are. On top of that, it also depends on personality. I'm not really into [recently immigrated Asians] since I'm American born 4th generation.

These comments are disturbing, but they are in the environment that college students encounter

online and they do illuminate the real prejudices that exist throughout society and are espoused by students on college and university campuses. They illuminate how Asian American women internalized racism that led to their idealizing white men and degrading their Asian American counterparts. College educators can either ignore these prejudices or they can engage them in educational programs and practices around racism, sexism, and Asian American issues to facilitate student learning and development.

IMPACT OF RACISM AND SEXISM IN CYBERSPACE ON LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

OF COURSE, THE EXISTENCE OF SUCH negative stereotypes in cyberspace has many implications for college student learning and development. First, non-Asian American undergraduates who are exposed to these stereotypes online can internalize them and develop prejudicial and harmful views of Asian American women and men. However, Brigitte Vittrup and George W. Holden have shown that people begin internalizing racial stereotypes from their environment and discriminating at a very early age, and it is possible that students' encounters with these forms of racism and sexism in cyberspace could work to reinforce their already existing prejudicial views toward Asian Americans.

These stereotypes can also contribute to or reinforce negative self-images among Asian American college students. Indeed, they can lead to negative emotional, psychological, and physical consequences for Asian American men and women. For example, Jean Kim's theory of Asian American identity asserts that Asian Americans go through a phase in which they internalize negative views of the Asian American population and reject their identification with the Asian American community. If Asian American students internalize such stereotypes and do not have opportunities to challenge them, it can facilitate this rejection of their own racial group, prevent them from developing a healthy Asian American identity, and diminish their appreciation for their own cultural communities.

Such stereotypes can also have a negative impact on the access that all students have to meaningful

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and positive cross-racial interactions in college. Jeffrey F. Milem, Mitchell J. Chang, and Anthony Lising Antonio have written extensively about the ways that engaging in interactions with members of different racial groups facilitates many forms of student learning and development. Of course, where environments are negative and permeated with harmful racial and sexualized stereotypes, college students might be less likely to seek out, encounter, and engage in meaningful and positive interactions across racial lines, which ultimately inhibits their learning and developmental outcomes.

In extreme cases, racial and gender stereotypes of Asian Americans can lead to diminished safety on college campuses. Case in point: Jaemin Kim (2001) has written that, in 2000, three white perpetrators kidnapped, raped, and videotaped two Japanese American female college students. The criminals threatened that if the girls reported the incident, video footage of the rape would be sent to the victims' families. Fortunately, the victims were able to help the police locate the perpetrators, and the criminals were charged with kidnapping, rape, and intimidation. The perpetrators eventually admitted to targeting Asian American female students because of their fantasies about Asian women and their stereotypes that submissive Asians would not report such incidents to authorities out of fear of shaming their families. The offenders sexually assaulted a total of five Japanese female college students over the course of a month. And this case is not an isolated one, but is just one example of how racialized and gendered stereotypes can turn into physical harm for Asian American women.

Racial and gender stereotypes that emasculate Asian American men can have similarly destructive effects. For example, Kirk Semple from *The New York Times* wrote one of many articles shedding light on the hazing of a private in the United States Army Corps named Danny Chen, who was taunted with racist slurs aligned with the racial castration apparent in the discussions presented earlier, such as "dragon lady," and repeatedly physically abused by fellow soldiers until

he committed suicide in 2011. While the high-profile Chen case occurred in a military context, the issue of Asian American men being at risk for bullying is real in higher education settings as well. In 2009, for example, Ben Gittleston reported in *The Tufts Daily* on an incident in which a white student enrolled at Tufts University was intoxicated and interrupted a Korean Student Association (KSA) dance practice to spit in the face of one KSA member, shove another Korean American male student, insult the KSA students with racial slurs, and threaten to kill them. In sum, racialized and gendered stereotypes of Asian American men and women not only have the ability to detract from student learning, but also have the potential to lead to sexual violence and racially motivated bullying against Asian Americans on college campuses. Therefore, college educators have a responsibility to address these issues.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGE EDUCATORS: ENGAGING RACISM AND SEXISM IN CYBERSPACE TO PROMOTE LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

THE DISCUSSION ABOVE SHOWS HOW cyberspace can house harmful environments and pose new challenges for college educators. However, the digital world also offers promising spaces and tools for educators to facilitate student learning. Toxic information that students encounter in the digital world is archived, long-lasting, and sometimes permanent, but this also means that curricular and co-curricular activities that engage, produce, and disseminate information in the digital environment can also have an enduring and far-reaching positive impact. We offer several suggestions regarding how college educators can begin engaging racism and sexism in cyberspace to construct programs and practices that can have a positive impact on student experiences, learning, and development.

First and foremost, it is important for college educators to understand the digital environments that

students are likely to discover online. College students have access to an almost unlimited amount of digital information and are likely to encounter racist and sexist material in these spaces, which can affect their college experiences, learning, and development in myriad ways. Moreover, this electronic information can be linked explicitly to students' college campuses, as is the case in the preceding discussion, and ultimately lead these undergraduates to perceive this racism and sexism as a digital aspect of their respective campus environments.

In our analysis, we found that hundreds of students across the nation posted stereotypes about Asian Americans as truth in cyberspace, demonstrating that they do not fully understand or do not care that the prejudice that they harbor can be damaging. Most student learning theories are founded on the notion that, for these students to learn and develop, they must encounter information that challenges the racial, gender, and other prejudices they espouse. Thus, educators must acknowledge the importance of developing programs and practices focused on stereotype reduction that provide counter-narratives to challenge those images reinforced by racist and sexist stereotypes and facilitate the development of more complex ways of thinking about race and gender. Providing such counter-narratives means engaging more Asian American voices in co-curricular programming. One way for educators to engage more Asian American voices in co-curricular programming is by inviting speakers to campus to speak about racial, gender, and Asian American issues. Educators can also make concerted efforts to engage Asian American student leaders in the planning and implementation of co-curricular programs. However, it is important that these voices are not engaged for the sake of having Asian American voices represented, but are engaged in a way that allows them to facilitate the examination of Asian American issues such as the racialized objectification and emasculation discussed previously.

In addition, educators can engage technology and use their knowledge about racism and sexism to involve students in productive discussions about

stereotypes and activities to counter those race- and gender-based overgeneralizations. For example, faculty and student affairs educators could collaborate with Asian American students to create online digital storytelling exhibits, websites, and blogs that can be used to teach others about Asian American issues. Educators are already developing powerful examples of such efforts and documenting how they give Asian American students voice and are tools to educate others about the complexities of Asian American identity and experiences. Through engaging in these activities, educators can facilitate the learning and identity development of Asian American students, give them opportunities to define themselves in digital environments, empower them to discuss issues that they care about, address challenges that they face, and advocate for racial justice. Such efforts can also facilitate the learning and development of non-Asian American students by generating online tools to teach them that Asian Americans are not a monolithic group, that racialized and gendered stereotypes of Asian Americans are erroneous, and that all lives are more complex than a handful of gross race- and gender-based overgeneralizations.

College educators should also view cyberspace as a potentially rich source of useful curricular material and consider structuring critical racial and gender dialogues around information in the digital world. Because the Internet, in some cases, such as in the discussions here, provides people with a safe space to share their beliefs about different racial and gender groups without fear of retribution, data that exist in cyberspace provide a way to illuminate stereotypes that many people hold and might not openly share in an educational setting. For example, the discussions that we analyzed in this study—or this article itself—could provide a foundation for open and honest discussions about racial and gender prejudice, the negative implications of stereotypes, and ways that educators and students can combat them. Indeed, it is difficult to read the discussions above and deny that racial and gender stereotypes are real and function to degrade Asian American women and men. Therefore, discussions such as those presented here can provide a tool to facilitate the mutual

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acceptance of this reality and provide a foundation for more productive discourse about how to address this social problem.

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