Reconsidering the Model Minority and Black Mormon Discourses

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“Statistics are like a bikini. What they reveal is suggestive, but what they conceal is vital.”

-Chang, 1998, p. 367

Black Mormonism is an example of model minority discourse. In this paper I will assert that model minority stereotypic discourse is used to instantiate the claim that with enough hard work, anyone can “make it” in the United States. Further, the rhetoric of the model minority myth indirectly demonizes Blacks by implying that Asians have achieved excellence due to their effort, while Blacks are understood to have been unsuccessful due to their own laziness and dependence on social support services, like welfare. Aggregated statistics are used to promote the notion that Asian Americans constitute a model minority. Historically, Blacks have been demonized, but oddly, one particular group of Blacks (the Senegalese) is now beginning to be described as representing a “new model minority” (e.g., see Kaba, 2008). But how can Blacks be demonized and also be considered model minorities? In this paper I argue that they cannot, and that Black Mormonism serves as an example of a racialized (Smith, 2003), albeit disguised, model minority discourse.

Purpose of Paper

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2 All racial terms in this paper, like Black and Asian, are capitalized due to their salience and social construction.
The main purpose of this paper is to explain how Black Mormonism is an example of model minority discourse (Hattori, 1999), and how this discourse—the model minority stereotype—is deleterious to the education of Black students. In order to understand the negative implications of the model minority stereotype for Black Mormons, it is first important to note that it was not until 1978 that Blacks were allowed to become members of the Mormon Church (Saulny, 2012; Smith, 2003, 2004; Time, 1963). This historical fact raises questions about inclusivity and issues of social justice for the Black Mormon communities. While scholars have argued that the “Lotus Blossom” image inheres in the “model minority” stereotype (see Shrake, 2006), no scholar has made the claim that Black Mormon exceptionalism is a racialized religious trope and an analog of the Asian model minority stereotypic trope. Similarly, the discourse around the Asian model minority stereotype is merely an extension of Black Mormon discourse.

Additionally, this paper presents a critical perspective of Black education (King, 2005) by citing model minority conundrums related to Blacks, and Black education: such as (1) Frank Wu, the first Asian American law professor at Howard University, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU); (2) Cornel West, a Black professor who has taught at Lily White Ivy League institutions of higher education; and (3) Howard Zinn, a White professor who taught at Spelman College, another HBCU. It is my hope to fill lacunae in the literature in Black education, (Black) Mormon and (Asian) model minority discourses, spirituality, and various forms of religious and social justices.

I begin with a comprehensive synthesis of the previous literature on the model minority stereotype: over 240 model minority stereotype literary documents were reviewed. Next, references are made, with regard to professors—Frank Wu, Cornel West,
and Howard Zinn—who work, or have worked, in transracial educational settings. I then discuss how the myth of the “American Dream” permeates (Black) Mormon and (Asian) model minority discourses. I end by explaining how Black Mormonism is an example of disguised Asian model minority discourse. Last, implications are shared for race relations and Black education.

Methodology

Literature reviewed for this paper was located through a series of steps, and both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed documents were rigorously reviewed for content. Peer-reviewed articles, books, book reviews, book chapters, encyclopedia entries, journalistic writings, newspapers, reports, and monographs were located and saved in a systematic way. First, batteries of Google Alerts were set up (with various combinations of the following terms: Asian American + Model Minority + Mormonism + Mormon + Black Mormonism + Stereotype + Myth + Model Minority Stereotype + Model Minority Myth). Second, a search for literature was conducted using three separate methods: (1) first by using the Library of Congress (http://www.loc.gov/index.html) website (using the same phrases above), (2) second by using the WorldCat (http://www.worldcat.org/) website (using the same phrases above), and (3) third by cross-referencing bibliographies and reference pages within literature already found. Book chapters and other printed materials were scanned and saved in PDF format on the author’s external hard-drive. Files were saved using the following convention for ease of later reading: Author’s Last Name (Date of Publication).

The next section details the literature that was found in more detail. Due to space restrictions, I do not provide as thorough a review as other scholars have undertaken, including myself elsewhere (e.g., see Hartlep, In-Press). Nevertheless, the review of
previous literature is comprehensive enough to situate and contextualize the present paper.

**Previous Literature on the Model Minority Stereotype**

In order for readers to understand the notion that Black Mormonism serves as an example of model minority discourse, a review of the literature on the *model minority* is necessary. To begin, some scholars have labeled the model minority to be a *myth* (e.g., see Chou & Feagin, 2010), while others have labeled it a *stereotype* (e.g., see Lee, 1996). In this paper I intentionally use the term “model minority” *stereotype* in order to center the negative aspects of this hyperbolic characterization of Asians.

**Origins of the Stereotype**

The genesis of the model minority stereotype can be traced to William Petersen’s (1966) *New York Times Magazine* article, “Success Story: Japanese American Style.” In this highly cited article, Petersen pointed out how the Japanese were doing extremely well, unlike Blacks, in America. Petersen’s article fed the public’s understanding that Asians (Japanese) in America were “model minorities” worthy of emulation. The quintessential qualities of a model minority are the following: apolitical orientation to life, working hard, not questioning the established order, and assimilating into middle-class culture. The Japanese were successful at doing all of this, while Blacks were not, leading to the latter’s stigmatization.

Therefore, many model minority scholars contend that the model minority discourse served as a rhetorical—social, political, and educational—device used to divide and conquer Blacks and Asians (as well as other non-White minorities) while maintaining the *status quo*. Particularly, the stereotype of model minority is perceived to be a 20th Century or Cold War creation (e.g., see Lee, 2010). Due to strong international pressure,
the United States needed to convince foreign countries, as well as itself, that it was not racist, but a democracy wherein anyone, regardless of race, could achieve the “American Dream.” The American Dream is the “master script” (Swartz, 1992) or the “majoritarian stock story” (Noblit & Jay, 2010) that the model minority discourse supports.

**Trends in the Literature**

Indeed, the model minority stereotype is something that many scholars have written about (see Table 1). Although it is now over five decades old, the model minority stereotype continues to gain considerable academic attention. Evidence of this increased attention can be seen in the frequency of writings on the topic. Table 1 below highlights the numbers of writings on the model minority stereotype by the decade, beginning during the 1960s. It is clear that the model minority stereotype is a sociological phenomenon that continues to increase in academic appeal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Number of Writings</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>240</strong></td>
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**Table 1. Frequency of Model Minority Stereotype Writings**

Major Themes Found Within the Literature

After reading the 240 model minority documents, I found that some clear themes emerged. The following are salient themes codified within Asian model minority discourse:
1. **Critiquing Colorblindness.** Much of the literature attempts to dispel the notion of colorblindness.

2. **Countering Meritocracy.** At times an analog to colorblindness, many writings attempt to problematize the so-called American meritocracy that often ignores the plight of Asians in America.

3. **Demystifying Asian Exceptionalism.** Much literature on the model minority stereotype understands that applauding Asian Americans for their exceptionalism leads to the suppression of other oppressed non-White minorities.

4. **Uncovering Divide and Conquer Stratagem.** Many writings conclude the model minority stereotype is a “wedge” used to maintain White supremacy. Maintenance comes in various forms, but by and large, the model minority stereotype is predictable since it focuses on the individual while glossing over structural issues.

5. **Problematizing Homogenization.** The vast majority of the literature discusses the fact that Asian Americans are a heterogeneous population that follows a bimodal distribution.

6. **Unmasking the Yellow Peril.** The Yellow Peril is a parallel phenomenon (stereotype) when compared to and contrasted with the model minority stereotype.

**Leading Scholars in the Field**

Although many scholars have dedicated their careers to demystifying the model minority stereotype, a thorough and judicious analysis of the literature—consisting of over 240 documents—reveals that Stacey Lee, a professor of Educational Foundations at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, should be considered the nation’s foremost model minority scholar. Lee has written many articles (e.g., see (Lee, 1994, 2001; Ngo & Lee,
2007), books (Lee, 1996, 2005, 2009), and book chapters (Lee, 2003, 2007; Lee, Wong, & Alvarez, 2009; Park & Lee, 2010) on this topic. Her research indicates—and most model minority scholars would agree—that the American Dream inures through the model minority stereotype. Another well-respected Asian American model minority research scholar is Frank Wu (e.g., see Wang & Wu, 1996; Wu, 2012), who is discussed in the subsequent section.

**Transracial Teaching: Teachers who Disrupt Racial Congruent Politics**

*Frank Wu*, a Chinese American man, is currently the William B. Lockhart Professor of Law and Chancellor and Dean at the University of California Hastings College of the Law. Worth mentioning, he is the first Asian American professor to teach at Howard Law School, as well as the first Asian American to serve as dean of Wayne State University Law School in Detroit, Michigan. Wu is best known for his book *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White.*

*Cornel West*, a Black man, is recently retired from Princeton University, where he was both a Professor and Director of the Center for African American Studies. Dr. West also previously taught at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. With degrees from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton University, he has not only received an Ivy League education, he has taught in what can only be labeled “Lily White” institutions of higher education.

When I chanced to meet Dr. West at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, an “Urban 13” public university where I completed my doctoral studies, I asked him the following question after his lecture: “Professor West, as an African American who teaches at an Ivy League University, how do you reconcile your race and White racism, especially given what Princeton historically and contemporarily represents for folks of
color?” Before responding he sighed, and said that my question was a great one to ask. After a momentary pause, he responded by indicating that he had to always tell the truth to his students, many who are privileged, and to consistently recommit himself to the struggle for Civil Rights. My question was as salient as it was provocative given Dr. West’s race and Ivy League institutions’ “possessive investment in Whiteness” (Lipsitz, 1998).

Howard Zinn passed away on January 27, 2010. Prior to his death, he was a professor of political science at Boston University. Zinn also was professor of history at Spelman College in Atlanta from 1956 to 1963. Spelman, an HBCU, is a four-year liberal arts women’s college located in Atlanta, Georgia. Alice Walker, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist of The Color Purple met Zinn when she was a student at Spelman. Walker (2010) had this to say about Zinn:

I was Howard’s student for only a semester, but in fact, I have learned from him all my life. His way with resistance: steady, persistent, impersonal, often with humor, is a teaching I cherish. Whenever I’ve been arrested, I’ve thought of him. I see policemen as victims of the very system they’re hired to defend, as I know he did. I see soldiers in the same way. In some ways, Howie was an extension of my father, whom he never met. My father was also an activist as a young man and was one of the first black men unconnected to white ancestry or power to vote in our backwoods county; he had to pass by three white men holding shotguns in order to do this.

The American Dream: Mormon and Model Minority Stereotypic Discourse

Mormon discourse, like model minority stereotypic discourse, highlights a non-mainstream group’s success, hard work, loyalty, humility, and frugality, thereby
indirectly demonizing a non-representative, or out-group. Both discourses—Black Mormonism and Asian model minority—can be summarized as embodiments of the American Dream, or the idea that with enough hard work anyone can become successful in the United States, the land of “opportunity.” Rodman’s (1977) “The Mormons From Poverty and Persecution to Prosperity and Power” and U.S. News & World Report’s (1966) “A Church in the News: Story of Mormon Success” both signify such symbolism in their titles, reifying, reinforcing, and replaying the Horatio Alger Myth into the general public’s consciousness.

However, both discourses—Mormonism and model minority—are not as positive as they may appear to be at first blush (Poon-McBrayer, 2011; Tayag, 2011). Hamilton’s (1952) “Those Amazing Mormons,” Chen and Yorgason’s (1999) “‘Those Amazing Mormons’: The Media’s Construction of Latter-day Saints as a Model Minority,” and Chen’s (2004) Mormon and Asian American Model Minority Discourses in News and Popular Magazines recognize how the model minority discourse and the Mormon discourse are similar in their intent and purpose: to divide and conquer non-mainstream minority groups. The model minority discourse is one of “pariah-turned-paragon” seen in their transformation from a yellow menace to a model minority (Kawai, 2005; Shim, 1998), while the discourse of Mormonism is one that could be described as “satyr-turned-saint” seen in their successful rise from religious persecution to religious prominence and prosperity (Shipps, 1973).

The American Dream operates as a mythic message in which both discourses persist. The Mormon and model minority stereotypic discourses are pernicious since they overemphasize ascendance and attainment, ignoring their racist underpinnings. Both
discourses hinder race relations and Black education since they reinforce the message that “with enough hard work, anyone can make it, despite his/her race or religion.”

“With-enough-hard-work-anyone-can-make-it” is a truism that many Americans buy into. However, research indicates that for Black students, the American Dream is more fable than factual (Kunjufu, 1983, 2002, 2005, 2006). Indeed, data supports the fact that Black students are at greatly increased risk of becoming imprisoned (Alexander, 2010) compared to White students, exactly what the “White architects of Black education” want (Watkins, 2001).

**Black Mormonism as an Example of Model Minority Discourse**

Black educators are concerned with meeting the needs of Black students (King, 2005; Siddle-Walker, 2005). Their desire is laudable. But Black educators should also be concerned with the model minority discourse. Blacks are demonized whenever comparisons are made to Asian (“honorary” White) American students. For instance, when educational affirmative action is discussed, Blacks are often considered under qualified receivers of handouts that they do not deserve (Lee, 2008). Neoliberals use the term *reverse discrimination* to mollify the facts of affirmative action and diversification programs since the truth hurts: White females are actually the largest beneficiaries of affirmative action (Katznelson, 2005).

Moreover, many conservatives would like Asians in America to believe that affirmative action programs harm them individually and collectively. These individuals claim that Asians would be best served using meritocratic—or colorblind—college admissions, and have constructed the term “negative action”—the notion that at some elite colleges and universities, Asian Americans applicants are less likely to be admitted than equally qualified White applicants (Kidder, 2006). The idea that Asian American
college applicants are held to higher standards than other applicants has been written about by many people (e.g., see Nakanishi, 1989; Robles, 2006; Takagi, 1992). The implications are serious for affirmative action (college admissions) as well as race relations and education (Hartlep, Ecker, Miller, & Whitmore, In-Press).

**Implications for Race Relations and Education**

This paper has highlighted several implications for race relation work and education. The first pertains to the idea of a *coalitional politics*. Asians and Blacks must work in tandem in order to refute the model minority characterization—both Black Mormonism and Asian model minority stereotype (Hayes & Hartlep, In-Press). The model minority stereotypic discourse is harmful to Black education given that it seeks to divide and conquer Blacks and Asians. One salient example of this divide and conquer strategy can be seen in how affirmative action is framed by neoliberal educationalists.

Second, given that model minority scholarship has mushroomed in the 2000s (there are more writings in the 2000s than in the four previous decades combined; see Table 1), race relation scholars must develop *avant-garde* ways to discuss how the model minority stereotype is interconnected with Black Mormonism. Minority status can be in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and/or spirituality; thus, Black Mormonism should be examined by race (relations) scholars as well as by educational and spiritual sociologists in future research.

The model minority stereotypic discourse implies Asian success, but the eligibility is based on an ethno-racial and socio-political agenda that is meritocratic and colorblind. Blacks have historically been ineligible to be model minorities given their race. They have also been unable to be formally recognized as priests within the Mormon Church. Given that some critical scholars (such as critical race theorists) might contend
that both the foundations of education and of the Mormon Church are racist, Blacks may begin to be skeptical about the Mormon Church’s ideological position that historically maintained that Blacks were inferior. Blacks may also take issue with the Asian model minority stereotype, which indirectly implies Black inferiority as well.

Furthermore, the fact that selected “darker-skinned” Southeast Asians (e.g., Polynesians) have been allowed to enter the priesthood within the Mormon Church when lighter-skinned Blacks have not been able to should be sufficient evidence that both the “pariah-turned-paragon” (Asian model minority discourse) and the “satyr-turned-saint” (Black Mormon discourse) are internally illogical as well as inconsistent. Black Mormon economic and religious exceptionalism should now be readily seen and dismissed as an example of the model minority discourse. The model minority stereotype stifles race relation scholars and educationalists from doing the meaningful work that is necessary to demystify not only the “American Dream” myth but also the notion that education is the “great equalizer” (Mann, 1848). Both discourses—Black Mormonism and the Asian model minority—have nothing to do with achievement and ascendance, and everything to do with status quo and modus operandi maintenance. As a result, there are implications that Black education should consider:

1. **Building Coalitional Politics.** Both discourses are deceptive due to the fact that they deliberately avoid issues of race by emphasizing so-called merit, industry, and effort. The salience of the model minority stereotype and its discouragement of Black students should cause Blacks and Asians to form coalitions and politicize the conquer elements contained within both discourses. Blacks in America have a history of oppositional and confrontational politics, while Asians in America possess a critical mass (their growing population) and socioeconomic capital (Magazine Publishers of America,
2004). By joining forces, Blacks and Asians in America might be able to radically impact educational and social policy.

2. **Counter-Narrating Reality.** Both discourses also control the message or “metanarrative.” In other words, the majoritarian stock stories narrowly define and evaluate success. Counter-storytelling or counter-narration are seldom used as tools to question the validity—or the mendacity—of the model minority and/or Black Mormonism discourses (e.g., Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). One very powerful example of Black Mormon counter-narration is found in Smith’s (2011) “BYU’s Troubling Honor Code Pattern” story which was published in *The Chicago Tribune*.

By pushing back against colorblindness and supposed fairness, Smith (2011) effectively counter-narrated the notion that the rules and regulations for Brigham Young University (BYU) athletes were in fact colorblind and unbiased. If race did not matter, why did Black student athletes at BYU face harsher and longer punishments for their off-the-field infractions (honor code violations) compared to White athletes? Indeed, critical race theory’s tenet of counter-storytelling is powerful and effective when it comes to “race and sport” (e.g., see Hylton, 2009). Smith’s (2011) counter-story highlighted the racial profiling at BYU that is endemic in modern racism, which made it so effective.

Smith (2011) wrote the following in his scathing news story:

> Since 1993, at least 70 athletes have been suspended, dismissed, put on probation or forced to withdraw from their respective teams or the school for honor code violations. Fifty-four of these athletes, nearly 80 percent, are people of color. Forty-one, or almost 60 percent, are black men. A clear pattern of conduct has been established for athletes of color, who make up a mere 23 percent of all athletes, according to the university. (para 2)
I contend that by centering “just the facts”—in this case the statistics—counter-narration forces readers to question their own ideologies and preconceived ideas. As a result of counter-narration, people’s biases are left rattled and unsettled. Only when this dissonance occurs—when the familiar becomes unfamiliar and the normal abnormal—do I believe that dogma and ideology can become pliable enough to be altered for the better. Counter-narration is a strategy that can be used when examining the discourses of Black Mormonism (Smith, 2004) and the Asian model minority.

Conclusion

Indelibly, the confluence of race relations and religion is something American society has been forced to recognize and engage with. Barack Obama, the first Black U.S. President, and Mitt Romney, a well-known and highly visible Mormon (Riess, 2011), are now vying to be the next leader of the “Free World.” We have no choice but for race relations and religion to be placed on center stage. Both the racial (Obama) and the religious (Romney) representative embody the same type of “American Dream” discourse: Romney, a “rags-to-riches” Mormon, and Obama, a “pull-himself-up-by-the-boot-straps” Black man who became (1) the first Black President of the Harvard Law Review, and (2) the first U.S. President to be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize during his first year in office. This paper’s epigraph, the quotation from Chang—“Statistics are like a bikini. What they reveal is suggestive, but what they conceal is vital”—is helpful for understanding how Black Mormonism can be seen an example of model minority discourse: both discourses are suggestive of success, but what they conceal (White supremacy) is vital for the continuation and credibility of the “American Dream.”

References


**Model Minority Research By The Decade**

**1960s**


**1970s**


**1980s**


also available http://www.nytimes.com/1987/02/22/magazine/the-drive-to-excel.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm


1990s


Li, G. (2005). Other People’s Success: Impact of the “Model Minority” Myth on


Endnotes

1 It is not necessarily important to specify whether this refers to K-12 (primary or secondary) or post-secondary, considering Blacks experience negative outcomes at every level of education.