

Does Racial Triangulation Unravel Intersectionality?

By Samantha Keng

ABSTRACT. This essay explores how Claire Kim’s idea of racial triangulation complicates intersectionality in its classic sense. Specifically, I argue that the racial triangulation of Asian Americans introduces new dilemmas for intersectional frameworks by destabilizing analyses of subject formation and understandings of privilege and oppression. How, for example, can Asian American complicity in anti-Blackness be incorporated into understandings of identity and its mobilization? By expanding discussions of race beyond binary thinking, racial triangulation both poses new questions and creates new possibilities in the realm of intersectional theory. Especially given today’s racial landscape, this paper attempts to engage in the critical work of addressing obstacles to Black-Asian solidarity and imagining ways of theorizing that prove congruent to lived experience.

I. What lies beyond the Black-white binary?

In her book *Asian American Dreams*, Chinese American journalist and activist Helen Zia recounts an experience from her youth in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights era. During a conversation with two friends, one of them told her: “Helen, you’ve got to decide if you’re black or white!” The idea of this racial limbo is a consistently recurring theme in the work of Asian American scholars.¹ Ethnic Studies

¹ Recent work in the realm of Asian American Studies has called attention to the East Asian-centric tendencies of the discipline, a bias that homogenizes Asian Americans as a group and obscures the particular racialized oppressions that Southeast and South Asians face. Adequate discussion of this

professor Gary Okihiro (1994) posed it as a question: “Is yellow black or white?”(p. 32) Cultural critic Jeff Chang (2016) deemed Asian Americans “the in-betweens”(p. 137). These observations suggest that the dilemma of Asian American racialization directly undermines conventional binary thinking.

Academics and activists have increasingly pushed for scholarship and organizing that go “beyond the binary.” Their claim is that the Black-white binary marginalizes Asians and other communities of color who are not easily slotted into categories of “Black” and “white,” such as Indigenous and Latinx folks. Confining analyses to this binary thus reproduces exclusions and slights that anti-racist work is supposedly designed to dismantle.² The call for scholarship that transcends the binary has also left its mark on feminist theory, as non-Black women of color advocate for intersectional frameworks attentive to the collision of racialized and gendered oppression in their lives.

Political scientist Claire J. Kim (1999) introduced a groundbreaking, non-binary conceptualization of race in 1990 through her theory of “racial triangulation” (p. 105). Instead of a Black-white binary or a strict racial hierarchy, Kim (1999) proposes a “field” of identities generated in relation to one another (p.106). According to this formulation, Asian Americans are “triangulated” vis-à-vis Black and white folks in order to subordinate Blackness and

problem would require analyses of colorism, religion, and histories of colonialism that this paper does not contain space to explore, but the use of “Asian American” as an umbrella term is highly contested, and the conflation of “East Asian” and “Asian American” is a dangerous one. As this language continues to evolve, I hope that more specific, less universalizing terminologies will emerge.

² Notably, critics of the push to expand analyses beyond the Black-white binary highlight how the effort can actually distract from the centrality of anti-Black racism as a foundational organizing logic throughout U.S. history.

inhibit interracial solidarity. The “uplifting” of Asian Americans as success stories that allegedly vindicate meritocracy—via the model minority myth, for example—is a key function of white supremacy.

This paper explores how the racial triangulation of Asian Americans complicates Kimberlé Crenshaw’s foundational theory of intersectionality. Although Black feminists had long ago articulated the interplay of gender and race, Crenshaw is credited with popularizing intersectionality through her 1989 paper on the shortcomings of anti-discrimination law in accounting for Black women’s experiences. My analysis takes Kim’s model as the basis for challenging intersectionality in its classic sense. I argue that racial triangulation impairs the ability of intersectional frameworks to manage the complex ways in which racial hierarchy is organized. Specifically, I show that intersectionality and racial triangulation diverge in two ways – in their analyses of subject formation and their understandings of privilege and oppression. By expanding discussions of race beyond binary thinking, racial triangulation poses new questions and creates new possibilities in the realm of intersectional theory.

To be clear, my analysis is not an indictment of Crenshaw, nor is it a proposal to abandon intersectionality altogether. At the time that Crenshaw wrote her 1989 essay, the idea of racial triangulation was not even in circulation, given that Kim did not publish her work until the following year. The argument that Crenshaw’s intersectionality cannot accommodate racial triangulation theory also does not presume that intersectionality is rendered ineffectual. On the contrary, this paper suggests that incorporating the idea of triangulation into our analyses of race, gender, and their intersections in fact leads us to richer, more nuanced frameworks. If anything, the messiness of this theorizing is an indication of how multifaceted and contorted systems of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy truly are. The logic of them—preserving domination—may be straightforward,

but their inner workings are tangled and often hard to discern.

This paper begins with a brief overview of two central theories—Crenshaw’s intersectionality and Kim’s racial triangulation. I will then examine the particular ways in which racial triangulation challenges intersectionality’s understanding of identity. Because Kim’s model lacks a specifically gendered dimension, I introduce Karen Pyke and Denise Johnson’s racialized femininities as an alternative framework. Finally, I discuss the implications of this research that compel us to widen the margins of intersectional thinking.

II. From intersections to networks: How do identities emerge?

Crenshaw’s (1989) work on intersectionality is predicated on the rejection of a “single-axis framework” that erases Black women and invisibilizes those who are “multiply-burdened” (p. 140). Oppression is re-entrenched, she argues, when privileged experiences become codified as normative—when white women’s experiences become synonymous with “womanhood” or when Black men’s experiences become synonymous with “Blackness.” In her critique of anti-discrimination law, Crenshaw highlights how formal legal structures fail to account for the specificity of Black women’s experiences at the crossroads of race and gender. In her most famous analogy, she compares incidents of discrimination to a traffic accident that occurs at an intersection. When a Black woman is harmed in a “collision,” it is difficult to place blame on either sex discrimination or race discrimination alone. Crenshaw presents an analogy of vulnerability, based on the idea that overarching structures make certain identities more susceptible to injury while simultaneously obscuring the fact that injury stems from racialized *and* gendered oppression.

Kim’s theory employs a different spatial metaphor, one that contains two axes of analysis. The first axis, “civic

ostracism,” situates individuals along a foreigner/insider scale; the second, “relative valorization,” operates along an inferior/superior scale (Kim, 1999, p. 108). Through racial triangulation, Asian Americans are coded as “hardworking” and “well-behaved” yet “perpetually foreign.” In contrast, Black folks are labeled “lazy” and “disorderly,” yet their American-ness is not typically called into question. Because the axes of Asian exclusion and Black subjugation operate concurrently, whiteness is re-centered as the normative standard – undeniably “American” and the embodiment of proper, upstanding citizenship.

In Crenshaw’s model, identities are fixed, represented by the streets that form an intersection. If one street is “gender” and the other “race,” then Black women are positioned where the two streets meet, which is also the site of injury. The underlying assumption is that there are identities that pre-exist the collision, readily recognizable notions of “womanhood” and “Blackness” that are tied to degrees of vulnerability but that presumably exist on their own. For Crenshaw, the metaphor at work is based on an organized grid—a map of linear streets and discrete identities. Where non-Black women of color are located within this grid is a question Crenshaw leaves unaddressed. Do their experiences unfold at a different intersection? Is there a discrepancy in how frequently they suffer collisions compared to Black women or men of color?

According to racial triangulation theory, racial identities are not autonomous, nor can they be disentangled from the structure and context in which they were produced. As Daryl Maeda (2009) explains: “Racial triangulation asserts that the formation of the category ‘Asian American’ always occurs in dialogue and dispute with both blackness and whiteness” (p. 11). In other words, racial subjectivities are generated *against* each other. A triangulation framework sheds light on three aspects of racial identity that diverge from Crenshaw. First, identities are *constructed* by systems of power; they do not pre-exist systems of power. Second, identities are *relational*, firmly embedded in a social

structure alongside other identities, giving each other meaning. Lastly, identities are *mobilized* and used in active pursuit of preserving racial hierarchy.

The framing of identity in racial triangulation theory disrupts intersectionality's notion of identity as fixed and autonomous. In racial triangulation, Blackness cannot be understood apart from whiteness or Asian American-ness; there are no unitary, stable racial categories that exist outside of power relations. If racial triangulation is adopted as the framework for analyzing oppression, then Crenshaw's grid is revealed as too simplistic of a metaphor. One alternative conceptualization of identity can be adapted from assemblage theory, in which "specific *connections with other concepts*" is precisely what imbues identities with meaning (Puar, 2012, p. 57). As Jasbir Puar (2012) writes: "Concepts do not prescribe relations, nor do they exist prior to them; rather, relations of force, connection, resonance, and patterning give rise to concepts" (p. 57). An assemblage model problematizes intersectionality's "fixing" of identity; instead of a grid, it proposes a network resembling Kim's field of racial positions—a cluster of entities that can only be understood in relation to each other.

III. Internally divided subjects: How do privilege and oppression converge?

Racial triangulation also pushes against intersectionality's assumption of privilege and oppression as separate spheres that do not bleed into each other. In her critique of Crenshaw's framework, Jennifer Nash (2008) identifies one shortcoming of intersectionality as a failure to explore "the way in which privilege and oppression can be co-constituted on the subjective level" (p. 11). By glossing over the "intimate connections between privilege and oppression," Nash argues that intersectionality ignores how subjects can be "both victimized by patriarchy and privileged by race" (Nash, 2008, p. 12). According to Nash, individuals can inhabit worlds of

privilege and oppression all at once, an acknowledgment left out of Crenshaw's intersectional model.

The concept of privilege and oppression not as discrete and distant but as often overlapping is particularly relevant in racial triangulation theory. A critical element of racial triangulation is the notion of *complicity*—specifically, Asian American complicity in the preservation of white supremacy. Kim (1999) observes: “If the Black struggle for advancement has historically rested upon appeals to racial equality, the Asian American struggle has at times rested upon appeals to be considered White” (p. 112). While the “civic ostracism” axis (i.e. the “perpetual foreigner” myth) has prevented Asian Americans from accessing the full privileges of whiteness, Kim emphasizes that the racial triangulation model is sustained through Asian American participation. This participation consists of a range of strategies—defending “colorblind meritocracy,” attacking affirmative action initiatives, choosing to assume apolitical stances, actively engaging anti-Blackness. In this way, Asian Americans come to represent the intimate coexistence of privilege and oppression within a single subject position.

Race theorists like Charles Mills (1997) have characterized Asian Americans as “probationary whites,” (p. 81) highlighting how they are denied genuine inclusion yet afforded racial privilege according to their willingness to be complicit in maintaining structural violence. Although they may face persistent discrimination that challenges their belonging, they are not subject to racialized violence (e.g. mass incarceration, state surveillance) to the same *extent* that Black folks are.³ To return to the metaphor of spatialization, a network of subjectivities in assemblage theory contains sites of varying intensity. In spite of patterns

³ This holds true assuming that “race” is the only factor of analysis, excluding other factors such as skin color/physicality, socioeconomic status, citizenship status, ability, etc. that change the equation.

of relationality, oppression is more concentrated at certain points in a network, not evenly distributed throughout.

IV. Racialized Femininities: An alternative framework

If we acknowledge that racial triangulation disrupts intersectionality, our work then turns to locating alternatives that give voice to these complexities. I propose that Karen Pyke and Denise Johnson's theory of racialized femininities in particular has made valuable contributions to this effort. Recognizing that the category of "woman" itself is, in Nash's (2008) words, "contested and fractured terrain" (p. 3), Pyke and Johnson (2003) propose a more multifaceted "plurality of femininities" (p. 35). Drawing upon sociologist R.W. Connell's theory of "hegemonic" and "subordinated" masculinities, Pyke and Johnson (2003) suggest that the interplay of race and gender creates parallel hegemonic and subordinated femininities (p. 35). To illustrate this point, they juxtapose the trope of the "angry Black woman" with the "Lotus Blossom stereotype" that characterizes Asian women as exotic and submissive: "By casting Black women as not feminine enough and Asian women as too feminine, white forms of gender are racialized as normal and superior" (Pyke & Johnson, 2003, p. 35). In stigmatizing Black and Asian femininity as aberrant and problematic, white femininity is stabilized as hegemonic—dominant, ascendant, and "normal."

Pyke and Johnson's work can be interpreted as a mirroring of racial triangulation in conversation with theories of gender. Asian femininity is distortedly "valorized" by patriarchy through hypersexualization, yet is still coded as undeniably Other. By situating Black and Asian femininities at opposite poles, white femininity is established as the idealized norm. The process of racializing femininities again produces a re-centering of whiteness, a reification of white, gendered hegemony. Like in triangulation theory, the idea of racialized femininities rejects the notion of hierarchy as natural or organic, instead

emphasizing the “integration of gender and race within a social constructionist framework” (Pyke & Johnson, 2003, p. 34).

V. Implications

In closing, I hope to demonstrate the high stakes of these conversations for both intersectional and anti-racist scholarship. Particularly in our current political moment, forces of white supremacy are determined to pit Asian and Black communities against each other, leveraging Asian Americans as a “wedge” against those seeking redress for systemic oppression. Take, for instance, Chinese Americans protesting en masse against the indictment of Brooklyn police officer Peter Liang, who fatally shot an unarmed Black man, Akai Gurley, in 2014. Or the recent anti-affirmative action movement alleging that race-conscious admissions policies deny educational opportunity to Asians—a conservative tactic described by Sumi Cho as “racial mascotting” (as cited in Chang, 2008). This splintering of Black-Asian solidarity reinforces white supremacy at large while also exposing the complicity of Asian Americans in perpetuating anti-Blackness. How can we better enable critical theories—like intersectionality—to attend to these urgent realities?

The debate over which framework best attends to axes of oppression and multitudes of experience is not merely a question of semantics but a question of how solidarity and resistance should be pursued. The primacy of intersectionality in feminist writings since the late 1980s is not a harmful trend by any means. In fact, the popular discourse of intersectionality has allowed women of color to produce scholarship that is increasingly reflective of their lived experiences. Intersectionality as a broad idea – the insistence on multi-axis analyses that consider not only gender and race but an abundance of other identities – is a powerful tool in countering mainstream feminisms that center white, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender,

heterosexual women as normative. Recognizing intersectionality's critical interventions, this paper has intentionally remained specific in its critique. As Nash (2008) describes, intersectionality is "a tool particularly adept at capturing and theorizing the simultaneity of race and gender as social processes" (p. 2). I contend that intersectionality's limitations ultimately stem from the complexity *within* these social processes.

Racial triangulation introduces new dilemmas into intersectional theory, and taking these dilemmas seriously expands our ability to manage the "fractures and incommensurabilities" (Shih, 2008, p. 1349) that characterize worlds of race and gender. The shortcoming of Crenshaw's intersectional model is that it implies a "fixity of racial and sexual taxonomies" (Puar, 2007, p. 215) that is often irreconcilable with the disorder of lived experience. Embracing a more dispersed model—resembling assemblage's network or triangulation's field—allows us to conceptualize violence in ways that are not uniformly vertical or top-down. Like particles in motion, violence can also occur horizontally and diagonally, or with more concentrated intensity at certain sites; there is a certain chaos to these interactions that cannot be captured through theories of structure and grids. Oppression is not located in a singular, unmoving source but is distributed throughout uneven terrain, scattered and subject to other forces and shifts.⁴ The takeaway, then, is that we lose a certain degree of nuance when we confine our analyses to more rigid configurations. Our theories and conceptual frameworks should seek to mirror the intricacy and entanglement of lived experience, which rarely unfolds at a single juncture.

⁴ In this sense, using terms such as "injury," "disadvantage," and "violence" may be more accurate than "oppression" and "subjugation," which assume a vertical structure of power.

Samantha Keng is currently completing her undergraduate degree in History and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Emory University in Atlanta. She is broadly interested in Asian American racial politics and formation, with a particular focus on examining the roots of anti-Blackness within Chinese American communities. Through her work at Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Atlanta and with a campus activist group, she hopes to participate in growing a contingent of young Asian Americans committed to racial, immigrant, and economic justice. She enjoys making dumplings and egg tarts with her grandma and napping in the sun.

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