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Asian Women: Rape And Hate Crimes

"Older, White Critics ... Missed the Boat" by making an issue of the interracial relationship in the movie *Rachel Getting Married*, posted Defamer.com last October. In rare form, the popular blog site -- known for mercilessly ridiculing celebrities and media players -- took a principled stance.

The posting chided well-known film critics for focusing on race when reviewing the film. The critics were preoccupied with the fact that white Rachel was marrying a black man. In the film, however, the couple's ethnicities go unmentioned. And this is the way a "cultural melting pot" should be, Defamer rhapsodized.

"[W]hite people can marry black people in 2008 without someone giving a speech about it," Defamer moralized.

But one month later, Gawker, their New York-based sister site, turned its back on racial sensitivity. "Following Hallowed Nerd Tradition, Michael Phelps Dates Asian Chick," blasted the Nov. 29, 2008 headline. In stark contrast to Defamer's impassioned call for the acceptance and respect of white/black couples, Gawker offered a lecture debasing Caucasian/Asian couples and dehumanizing Asian women.

"Michael Phelps is kind of a dweeb," Gawker wrote. "So it's funny that he's gone and done what so many newly-rich, videogame-anime-lady-obsessed nerds have done before him: he's found himself an Asian girlfriend."

In a link, Gawker then "outed" a list of other famous and very powerful Caucasian men romantically involved with women of Asian descent. The men - although widely perceived as Masters of the Universe -- are mocked as "nerds." But the truly troubling aspect of the Gawker story, and many of the discussion posts it spawned, is how they demean and commoditize all Asian women.

Indicative of where society stands today, the postings are racially inflammatory. The participants of one thread theorized Asian women have different gynecological anatomy than other human beings. Others repeat racist beliefs that this entire ethnic category of women are "submissive" and mindless, sexual playthings to be bought and sold.

Normal attraction, love and respect cannot exist in such pairings, implied the Gawker writer who started the discussion. "[L]ook at all these rich nerds with fetching Asian ladies on their arms. We don't want to sound 'offensive' but it's just a thing, you know?" he wrote. "... a cliché ..."

The inapposite nature of Gawker and Defamer's two pieces about interracial dating is telling. Asian-American women suffer a stunning exception to hard-fought notions about racial equality applied to other minority groups. It is a societal norm to reduce an Asian woman to a sexualized stereotype, a one-faceted "thing" that is exclusively an object of desire. It is with breathtaking ease that even Gawker -- read and written by an educated, urbane class -- thinks nothing of endorsing this dangerous bigotry.

I repeat: these stereotypes are dangerous. Reducing Asian women into a sexual object is not funny, it is not flattering. It is perilous. We can see this when Asian women are subject to race-targeted sexual violence. The racist nature of the crimes go unrecognized and unpunished, as if there is nothing wrong with choosing a rape victim because she is Asian.

In Spokane, Washington, two white men and a woman specifically hunted random Japanese women in an elaborately planned scheme to kidnap, rape, sodomize, torture and videotape them. Their motivation? According to police reports, the rapists had a sexual "fantasy" and "fixation" about young Japanese women, who they believed were "submissive." (The very same beliefs so blatantly bandied about by Gawker and some of its readers.)

During a one month period in Autumn 2000, the predators abducted five Japanese exchange students, ranging from age 18 to 20. Motivated by their sexual biases about Asian women, all three used both their bodies and objects to repeatedly rape - vaginally, anally and orally -- two of the young women over a seven hour ordeal.

In Spokane, one of the attackers immediately confessed to searching only for Japanese women to torture and rape -- and eventually all pled guilty and were convicted. It clearly was a racially-motivated criminal case. The victims also believed they were attacked because of their race, the prosecutor told me.

What is astonishing, however, is that the district attorney failed to bring an additional charge that would have tagged the crimes as motivated by racial bias. The police also neglected to report the crime as a "hate crime," as demanded by the Justice Department to keep accurate statistics of all bias-driven crimes. Although the attackers all received long sentences, an important opportunity to raise the nation's consciousness was lost. We, as a society, were told that it's not a hate crime to rape an Asian woman because of her race.

In most states, as well as the federal justice system, crimes committed against a person because of the victim's race, ethnicity or national origin (as well as other protected classes) are considered "hate crimes" or "bias crimes." Such a label doesn't always add much to a sentence, but this enhancement to the charges is considered an important public policy matter and receives greater press coverage than standard crimes. A bias-driven crime is particularly egregious, say the laws, and must be defined as such.

But in rapes and sexual assaults targeting Asian women, I can find no instance of prosecutors or police bringing "hate crime" charges. It seems our society frowns on the rape itself, but accepts the racial motivation behind it. Mainstream society simply is blind to this type of racism. Indeed, the Spokane police detective handling the case wrote in an email to me: "It was felt that there was no hate involved instead he [the lead rapist] was very infatuated with the

Japanese race." (sic).

Another stunning case of authorities failing to properly apply a "bias crime" label to race-based rapes took place in Los Angeles. In 2005, the LAPD arrested a serial rapist who explicitly only sought Asian-looking women, particularly Koreans, to rape, assault and rob. The man, who was not Asian, was charged with attacking seven women. But the violence extended to more: 13 known women were attacked, all Asian, and 11 of whom were of Korean descent. Police suspected more women were raped, but didn't come forward.

Nobody in the police department or District Attorneys office would speak to me about their inability to recognize the attacks as "hate crimes." A secretary in the press office, however, flat-out dismissed my queries by telling me the rapes were "not a hate crime."

I am Korean-American. If I was chosen to be raped because of that fact, I would expect the world to recognize it as a hate crime -- regardless of whether the attacker said he selected me because of a racial "infatuation." When such a belief is used to rape, kill or beat, it is a hate crime. The law is on my side; the law needs to be utilized.

In California, a "hate crime" includes a criminal act, such as rape, committed in whole, or in part, because of the victim's actual or perceived race or ethnicity. The bias need not be the only motivation. Hateful words, or epithets, are not required. Then why is this clear case of a rapist targeting Korean women not prosecuted as a bias crime? Why weren't the Spokane rapes recognized for their racist motivation?

The Associated Press reported on Jan. 2, 2009 that a "hate crime" label indeed accompanied the arrest of four people for gang-raping a woman in the San Francisco Bay Area. In that case, the attackers taunted the woman for being a lesbian, and the woman was raped shortly after getting out of a car that bore a rainbow gay pride sticker. The authorities' branding of that rape as a "hate crime" stems from the attackers using epithets and slurs that showed their literal hatred against gays. This type of "proof" fits the widely-accepted model of "hate crime" evidence: a white gang spewing racist words as they run down a black person; or black attackers yelling anti-Jewish words as they beat a Hasidic person.

The attackers in the L.A. and Spokane rape cases did not use typical "hate speech." But the biggest obstacle to bias crime charges in those cases is that society at large thinks it benign to hold sexualized stereotypes about Asian women. The woeful abandonment of "hate crime" categorization when Asian women are sexually attacked comes from the mistaken belief that weight should be attached to the attacker's claim to an "attraction" or "fetish" for the victim's Asian race. There is a disconnect: while authorities do not see the "fetish" as an excuse for the rape, they see it as an excuse from hate crime labeling. Like society at large, they fail to see that this is a form of racial discrimination.

Until we see a change in how these types of sexual attacks are perceived, Asian women in particular remain vulnerable. Unlike any other racial group in America today, Asian women routinely are dehumanized in popular culture as sexualized, meek and voiceless objects. These very stereotypes have led to violent attacks. Let's call it what it is: a hate crime.