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“More Complicated than a Numbers Game”:  
A Critical Race Theory Examination of Asian Americans  
and Campus Racial Climate

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Education

by

Oi Yan Anita Poon

2010

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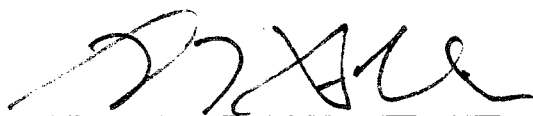
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This dissertation is dedicated to the students at George Mason University (2001-02) and UC Davis (2002-05), who inspired me with their honorable struggle for education access and equity.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“More Complicated than a Numbers Game”:

A Critical Race Theory Examination of Asian Americans  
and Campus Racial Climate

by

Oi Yan Anita Poon

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2010

Professor Don T. Nakanishi, Co-Chair

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In the Grutter and Gratz Supreme Court decision, proponents of affirmative action claimed that a critical mass of minority students could effectively counter racial marginalization often experienced by students of color due to their racial status. On some campuses, Asian Americans as a pan-ethnic population enjoy a critical mass in undergraduate enrollments, and therefore present an opportunity for scholars to explore

the relationship between critical mass, racial marginalization, and racial power within campus racial climate.

Using UCLA as a case study of a campus environment with a critical mass of Asian Americans and controversies over racial disparities in college access, I conducted in-depth interviews of 25 randomly selected Asian American UCLA undergraduates, who represent a diversity of ethnicities, genders, academic majors, and socio-economic class. My dissertation explores ways in which Asian American college students continue to be racially marginalized, based on their experiences of racial microaggressions despite critical mass due to a campus racial climate that maintains White dominance and privilege. I also analyzed the data to show how Asian American college students engage in behaviors that conform to, reinforce, and resist White racial dominance and power.

My project contributes to the literature on campus racial climate through a lens of Critical Race Theory. It also contributes toward the growing literature on Asian American experiences in education. Findings indicate that Asian American college students experience a range of racial microaggressions within the campus environment, indicating that critical mass is limited in its ability to mitigate racial marginalization. Students were also found to engage in various forms of responses to microaggressions that either reinforced or resisted dominant racist ideologies. Racial microaggressions are manifestations of structural racism, and are therefore important to study in order to assess campus racial climate. Based on this study, I present a Critical Race Theory Model to study Campus Racial Climate.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

On April 16, 2007, I awoke to my clock radio tuned to NPR like I do everyday, but that day was different. With a slight panic in his voice, a reporter announced that there had been a mass shooting at Virginia Tech. He explained that the identity of the shooter was not known and that there was no description of the shooter yet. In my gut I had a sinking feeling, an intuitive sense that the shooter was an Asian American male student. At one point that evening, a national news report announced that authorities were interrogating a “person of interest” who was a Chinese international student. The report identified on a map where this student’s hometown was, pointing out the large proportion of Muslims that lived in that region of China, drawing a connection between the incident and Islamic extremism.

The next day, authorities revealed the shooter’s identity, which confirmed my initial prediction. Seung-Hui Cho grew up in Northern Virginia, not far from where I had lived when I worked as Director of Asian Pacific American Student Affairs at George Mason University (GMU). His family had immigrated from Korea when he was very young, making Seung-Hui a 1.5 generation Asian American, like so many of the students I had worked with at GMU. And like Seung-Hui, several Asian American students I knew came from working-class, entrepreneurial families that owned small businesses like dry cleaners, restaurants, nail salons, and convenience stores.



However, unlike the students I knew, Seung-Hui took extremely violent measures in expressing his frustrations with social oppression. In a video he sent to the media, Cho asked,

Do you know what it feels to be spit on your face and to have trash shoved down your throat? Do you know what it feels like to be torched alive? Do you know what it feels like to be humiliated and be impaled upon a cross? And left to bleed to death for your amusement?

It is unclear to whom he directed his statement. Other materials he left pointed to “rich kids,” indicating that he may have been indicting people with class privilege. He went on to say, “It’s not for me. For my children, for my brothers and sisters that you fucked, I did it for them.” Who were his children, brothers and sisters? Was he talking about other Asian Americans, other people of color, working class immigrants? People who generally experience life in the margins of society? What is clear is that Cho was mentally ill, based on psychological assessments (Song, 2008). However, it is too easy to dismiss the Virginia Tech incident as a random fluke incident, and too easily written off as the inexplicable actions of a mad man (Song, 2008).

Sadly, Cho also shares another commonality with a handful of Asian American students at the two universities where I worked as a Student Affairs professional. Between 2001 and 2005 at GMU and UC Davis, I responded to the aftermath of three known Asian American student suicides. During that same period, through the email networks of Asian American Student Services practitioners, I remember hearing about eight other Asian American student suicides – two at UCLA, one at MIT, and five at NYU and Columbia.

Observing what seemed to be a frightening trend of violence among Asian American college students, committed both against themselves and others, I contemplated the possible connections between these unfortunate events and the racism experienced by Asian American students that continues to marginalize them in higher education. As a Student Affairs professional at both GMU and UC Davis, I listened to and counseled hundreds of students who faced various racial microaggressions<sup>1</sup>, such as local police targeting Asian American male students as gang members, professors speaking about Asian cultures and people as being “backwards” or “fascinatingly exotic” in classrooms, and White men in the library that would inappropriately touch Asian American female students, but were never told to leave because the librarians believed their behaviors were harmless. These students developed a range of strategies for handling these marginalizing experiences.

In my meetings with various students, I was often intrigued by the different ways in which students chose to respond to their experiences. These responses and generally how they made meaning of their experiences within social systems of inequality were often shaped by their personal circumstances and past engagement in what I call critical pedagogical spaces. In the tradition of Paolo Freire and bell hooks, the idea of critical pedagogical spaces recognizes that formal classrooms and relationships between teachers and students are only two types of spaces that provide opportunities for people to learn how to make meaning of the world. These spaces may include, but are not limited to,

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<sup>1</sup> Racial microaggressions are daily experiences of subtle discrimination and racist assaults experienced by people of color that contribute toward the maintenance of their racially subordinated position and white racial power in society (Solórzano, 1998).

dialogue with peers, participation in student-initiated outreach projects, engaging as an spectator or creator of artistic or new media productions. They challenge people to think critically about systems of inequality in society while they are enrolled students and may plant seeds for future reflection and praxis.

This dissertation uses a pan-ethnic lens for examining Asian American<sup>2</sup> student experiences, but recognizes differences in experiences among these students. Although Asian Americans are a very diverse group by ethnicity, class, and history of migration to the U.S., as a pan-ethnic group, they share significant commonalities in their experiences of racialization, which have allowed them to build important political coalitions and movements (Espiritu, 1992). This study sheds light on the experiences of Asian American undergraduates at UCLA with racism, identifying and describing the racial microaggressions they endure. It also illustrates and considers how Asian American students respond to dominant ideology of White privilege in society.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The racial ambiguity and the lack of a critical understanding of how Asian Americans experience racism present significant challenges to claiming legitimacy for Asian Americans in the discourse on racial equity in education. Historically under-represented, Asian Americans are now the fastest growing racial group of college

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<sup>2</sup> This study does not include Pacific Islanders due to the socio-historical differences between the racialization of Pacific Islanders, whose experiences are largely defined by indigeneity, and Asian Americans, whose experiences are defined by immigrant and refugee experiences. For a more detailed discussion about the problematic nature of the “Asian Pacific Islander,” “Asian Pacific American,” or “Asian American and Pacific Islander” term and category, please read Dr. J. Kehaulani Kauanui’s commentary (2008).

students in the U.S. (Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007). However, they continue to occupy a liminal space in the traditional Black-White racial framework of U.S. society. Moreover, the achievement gap framework often used in research on minority education cannot be easily applied to Asian Americans given the diverse education attainment levels among the pan-ethnic population, and excludes them from research. Asian Americans are found with large numbers in both the highest levels of educational attainment and in the lowest levels.

On some college campuses, there is a conspicuous critical mass of Asian Americans among undergraduate student ranks leading some to believe that Asian Americans no longer face racial inequalities in education. In fact, in the 2003 Supreme Court cases of *Grutter vs. Bollinger* and *Gratz vs. Bollinger* (539 U.S. 306), the defense argued that, "... the 'critical mass' admissions criteria supports the creation of a learning environment that combats the marginalization of under-represented populations" (Anderson, Daugherty, & Corrigan, 2005, p. 53). Critical mass, theoretically due to the visibility of a given group of students is said to counter racial isolation and tokenism. If this were true, then it should follow that those Asian American students enrolled in institutions like the University of California or other universities like Cornell would encounter minimal experiences of racial marginalization.

However, numerical representation is not the sole indicator of racial inequalities in education. While the under-representation of minority students is a critical problem requiring significant attention, it represents just one contributing factor that shapes students' racial contexts and campus racial climates (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen,

& Allen, 1998). Despite high Asian American undergraduate enrollments in the University of California (UC), well over 40 percent on some UC campuses, and Cornell University, over 15 percent, there is evidence that Asian American students continue to feel racially marginalized and isolated. Reports on these campuses show that Asian American students continue to feel racially marginalized and isolated, despite having reached critical mass in student enrollment. Cornell published a task force report on Asian Americans and campus climate that indicated that Asian American students indeed encounter significant racial isolation and marginalization (Asian and Asian American Campus Climate Task Force, 2004). Cornell administration formed the task force after a string of suicides by Asian American students on their campus. Not only were Asian Americans “over-represented” in the student enrollment, it was found that they made up an unusually large proportion of the campus’ student suicides. At UC Berkeley, the Campus Advisory Committee for Asian American Affairs (2001) reported that while Asian Americans are very visibly represented on campus, they continue to encounter experiences and feelings of marginalization. In fact, an analysis of data from the UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), conducted by Samura (2010), shows that Asian American students at all nine undergraduate UC campuses experience a lower sense of belonging than non-Asian American students.

Negative experiences with campus racial climate have been found to be significant in contributing toward depression among Asian Americans, who remain the least likely among students to seek mental health support (Cress & Ikeda, 2003). Moreover, Gee, Spencer, Chen, and Takeuchi (2007) found that Asian Americans who

self-reported everyday experiences of racism and discrimination were positively associated with stress and other chronic health conditions. However, the presumption is that the critical mass of Asian Americans on college campuses like UCLA naturally leads to the provision of an affirming campus climate and college experience (Egan, 2007). Indeed, the sizeable number of Asian Americans enrolled in post-secondary educational institutions can obscure other disparities and experiences of marginalization, which may lead to an institutional neglect of unique Asian American educational needs. This dissertation seeks to examine campus racial climate, as it is experienced by Asian American students at one university where they make up a critical mass of the undergraduate enrollment.

### **Personal narrative.**

To demonstrate the general nature of racial microaggressions, in this section, I provide my own narrative of an experience as an Asian American student at UCLA. With this narrative, I also illustrate the physiological effects I experienced and the choice I had in responding to the microaggression.

It was a sunny winter afternoon in Southern California. I was at a coffee shop in Westwood, adjacent to UCLA's campus, grading papers at the end of the quarter. Frustrated with the low quality of the papers, I was deep in thought over the decline of public education that may have led to the poor writing skills the students exhibited, and the complete lack of citations. Occasionally I would look up from my work to notice the demographics of patrons in the café. Throughout most of the day, almost everyone was

White in the space that had been decorated with portraits of great Black jazz musicians and singers. I contemplated the low numbers of African American, American Indian, Latino, and Pacific Islander students and faculty at UCLA and the racial inequalities in the education pipeline.

Deep in thought, I wasn't paying attention to what others in the café were saying or doing until I heard a female voice say, "I mean her eyes weren't that Chinky, but she thought they were pretty Chinky. I mean, she's not Chinese or anything. She's more like Middle Eastern. But, if she wants plastic surgery for that because it'll make her happy, I say go for it." Stunned, I looked up from the pile of papers in front of me to see two attractive women about four feet in front of me, both stylishly dressed. One was blond and White. The other was a light-skinned Latina woman. It was the Latina woman who had used the racial slur flippantly and without a second thought, as if she had been describing someone with a red sweater, and the White woman reacted as if they were talking about an ugly red sweater. Neither seemed to think what was said was wrong at all. They didn't notice me staring at them in disbelief.

As they went on casually with their conversations about friends, I sat facing them unsure of what to do, distracted from my work and deadlines. Did I really hear what I heard? Am I being over-sensitive? Am I over-reacting? Why does their friend want plastic surgery to get rid of her "Chinky eyes," eyes that might actually look like mine? Should I confront them? If I do, what will it accomplish? Will she be defensive if I confront her? How should I confront her? Should I be nice about it? I don't want to be apologetic about it. I didn't do anything wrong. Should I be angry in my confrontation

and storm out? Should I write it in a note? Why would I write it in a note? I have my voice. I am spending too much time on this and wasting my time, but I can't shake this feeling. This feeling of my hands sweating and nervousness, my heart racing, my head pounding, my feet can't stop shaking. If I say something, will the unknown consequences bother me even more? Will that be more time wasted? I'm spending all this time thinking about this, and they've gone on to talk about screen and modeling casting opportunities. Why haven't they noticed that I've been staring at them for the last 20 minutes? Am I invisible? Why don't they see me? Am I beneath them? Why am I having this conversation with myself? Now my jaw is aching from grinding my teeth and my back hurts from being so tense.

Thirty minutes have passed since I first heard the woman across from me in the café use the term "chinky eyes." She and her friend have gone on with their conversation about the weather, the beach, their lunch, upcoming casting events for modeling and acting gigs, and holiday parties they plan on attending. They still don't see me glaring at them, struggling restlessly in my seat to decide what I should do, or if I should do anything. I can just try to let this go, and just breathe through it, and get back to my work and deadlines. If I just let it go, they'll just live their lives like nothing happened, but something happened, and the weight of something so simple has been bearing down on me. It doesn't seem fair. If I try to let it go, will I be replaying what I could have and should have said or done in response? That will take up a lot of time and energy too. But if I do something in response what if that takes up a lot of energy and time? Whatever I do, I can feel all the physiological responses to racial microaggressions I've read about



and experienced many times in my life before – elevate heart rate, nervous energy, sweaty palms, holding back rage.

As her friend gets up to go to the restroom, I make a decision to approach the woman with a respectful and calm voice. I finally get her attention just as she is reaching into her bag for a book to read.

Me: Excuse me.

Woman: Yes?

Me: I wasn't trying to listen in on your conversation earlier, but I heard you say, "Chinky eyes." [Before I could finish saying "Chinky eyes" she knew exactly what I was talking about, and cut me off.]

Woman: Oh my god. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. I didn't mean to offend you. I didn't even see you there.

Me: It doesn't matter if I was here or not.

Woman: You're right. I'm sorry. I knew better than to use that word. I live in New York, and people say stuff like this all the time outside of California, and it doesn't matter.

Me: I'm originally from the east coast too, and it did matter to me when people said stuff like this. It was just as hurtful. But when I was younger on the east coast, I didn't ever say anything, so maybe that's why people didn't think it mattered, but it would just sit inside me.

Woman: You're right. You shouldn't have to hold it in. Thank you for calling me out on this. I should know better. I actually grew up in Orange County, and as a Mexican woman, I had to go through people saying stupid stuff to me about being Mexican. I'm so sorry. Please accept my apology.

Me: Thank you for your apology. I appreciate it.

Woman: I will never forget this moment. I will be thinking about it and learning from it.

It was more than surprising to me that the woman responded in the way that she did. I expected her to be defensive and resistant to listening to me. Interestingly, she

knew that what she said was wrong and offensive, yet she said it anyway. At first she used her current residency on the east coast as an excuse for why she didn't think twice about her word usage, indicating a belief of a California or west coast exceptionalism from a culture of racism, which I also found in the interviews of Asian American students for my dissertation. I have never had an experience like this before, but I've also never approached someone like this before to dialogue about a racial microaggression incident like this before either. To be honest, the woman's reaction to my response was not only surprising but it was also somewhat unsettling in a good way. The discussion was a pedagogical moment for both of us. For her, she was challenged to reflect on her behaviors and values. For me, it helped me see that not all responses to racial microaggressions need to be confrontational and combative, but they can be productive and positive. Finally, I was able to find some peace in the situation and returned to my work.

### **Goals of the Study**

This dissertation uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine how the process of racial formation shapes Asian American students' lives, both in how their experiences are affected by micro and macro-social interactions and in how they participate as agents within the racialized social structure of a college campus.<sup>3</sup> According to Allen and Solórzano (2000), "understanding and analyzing the campus racial climate is an important part of examining college access, persistence, graduation, and transfer to and

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<sup>3</sup> I will provide definitions of Critical Race Theory and racial formation in chapter 3.

through graduate and professional school” (p. 239). Set at a large public university on the west coast where Asian American students make up a critical mass – over 40 percent of the undergraduate population – this study illuminates the relationship between critical mass and racial marginalization in the context of campus racial climate. To identify ways in which Asian Americans are racialized and impacted by racism, this dissertation examines Asian American experiences of racial microaggressions, which are daily experiences of subtle discrimination and racial assaults experienced by people of color that accumulate over time and contribute toward the maintenance of their racially subordinated position and White racial power in society (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

By studying student experiences with racial microaggressions, scholars can, “...better understand how campus racial climate affects the educational experiences and outcomes of Students of Color” (Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002, p. 16). The experiences and perspectives of Asian American college students – especially stories about the hidden injuries of racism (Osajima, 1993) they endure – also provide critical insights into how systems of racial inequality in education shape race relations to privilege Whiteness<sup>4</sup>. Asian American lives are indeed impacted by their experiences with racial microaggressions, which are representative of a larger social system of White racial dominance and power.

Additionally, this dissertation sheds light on how Asian American college students respond to racial microaggressions through their agency. It identifies and

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of Whiteness is defined in chapter 3.

describes some of the many ways Asian American students navigate the campus and its racial climate after the point of admissions. The diversity of their responses and reactions to racial microaggressions is facilitated by their engagement in critical pedagogical spaces.

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. According to Asian American college students, what are the different types of racial microaggressions they experience?
2. In what ways do Asian American college students respond, if at all, to instances of racial microaggressions?

The following chapters answer these questions. Chapter 2 provides a brief review of relevant literature. Chapter 3 lays out the theoretical framework used in this project. Chapter 4 summarizes the methods employed in this study. Chapters five through seven summarize the analysis and findings. Finally, chapter eight concludes the dissertation with a discussion of the implications and limitations of the study, and also suggests potential future directions for research. In the end, this dissertation contributes toward the research on Asian American experiences in education, the development of Asian American Critical Race Theory in Education, and literature on campus racial climate. It also aims to educate student services professionals about the racialized experiences of Asian American students.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Overall, the production of research literature has not kept pace with the phenomenal growth of Asian American undergraduate students, especially at top tier universities (Nakanishi, 1995). The lack of research can be attributed to three primary reasons. First, the field of minorities and education research has been largely defined by studies addressing the “racial achievement gap” (Noguera & Wing, 2006). At least since the 1965 Moynihan Report and the 1966 Coleman Study, the minority achievement gap has been explained using a problematic lens of cultural and even genetic deficiencies that prevent them from excelling in school (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Kelley, 1997). Because of the higher than average aggregate high school graduation rates, college-going rates, and standardized college entrance examination scores of Asian Americans, this dominant framework of minority education has also framed Asian Americans as a “model minority” to maintain the deficit framework (Kumashiro, 2008). Moreover, as Lee and Kumashiro (2005) state,

The model minority stereotype also diverts attention away from the racial inequities faced by Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). It suggests that AAPIs have overcome racial barriers to achieve success.... The model minority stereotype has a profound impact on how educators and educational policy makers view AAPI students.... In particular, aggregate data on API students appear to confirm the model minority image, and educational policy makers who rely on such data often fail to create policies that attend to the needs of AAPI students or fail to intervene when problems arise.

A second reason for not including Asian Americans in education studies as a distinct group is that while their numbers are significant at some colleges and

universities, overall Asian Americans remain the smallest racial group of college goers in the country. In 2004, only 6.4 percent of all undergraduate students in the U.S. identified as Asian American, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Thus, oftentimes in national studies their numbers are rendered statistically insignificant.

Finally, Asian Americans are an extremely complex population consisting of a multitude of ethnic groups with many different socio-political histories, experiences, and languages; and as a result, there are great educational disparities among Asian Americans (Chang, et. al., 2007; Teranishi, 2002). Given such intra-Asian American complexities, diversities and disparities, some scholars simply exclude Asian Americans from their research and discussion of data collected, while others just aggregate them with Whites, dismissing their unique experiences attributed to their racialized status. The wide educational and other socioeconomic disparities found among the Asian American population may lead to divergent interests among group, challenging the idea of Asian American pan-ethnicity (Espiritu, 1992).

The absence of studies including or focusing on Asian Americans in higher education requires intentional efforts by scholars to address significant gaps in education research. This dissertation seeks to better understand how Asian American college students experience campus racial climate through the process of racial formation, including ways in which they participate as agents in racial projects on a college campus where there is a critical mass of Asian Americans. The limited literature on Asian Americans in higher education focuses primarily on contesting two frameworks of understanding the presence of Asian Americans in post-secondary institutions – the

model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner – two related frameworks of racialization (Lee, 2006).

There is not doubt that a discursive role is imposed on Asian Americans as a “model minority” within debates on race, education, and policies addressing access. In policy debates over both K-12 education (Kumashiro, 2008) and post-secondary education (Takagi, 1992) access, as the “model minority” Asian Americans are used as a discursive tool to uphold colorblind ideology and racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Although extant literature has primarily sought to counter these frameworks, there are two significant pitfalls in projects of negating frameworks. First, Lakoff (2004) argues that by negating, contesting, or complicating frames of discourse can unintentionally reinforce problematic frames. Secondly, in the emerging research field of Asian Americans and education, a continued focus on negating frameworks can be reactionary, limit research from examining and giving voice to the lived experiences and agency of Asian Americans, and restrict research from developing and advancing new innovations and frameworks through which to study Asian Americans in education.

In this chapter, I review and synthesize literature on Asian Americans in education and suggest gaps that research scholarship should fill toward advancing knowledge about Asian American college students. This chapter also reviews and problematizes the collective focus on the “model minority” frame in literature on Asian American college students. In the first part, literature discussing the model minority framing of Asian Americans in higher education is reviewed in order to identify gaps. This body of literature on Asian Americans in higher education, by and large, does not

present the perspectives and voices of Asian American college students regarding race and racism. In the second section, this chapter reviews literature in the emerging research on Asian Americans in K-12 schooling. Scholars in this field of education are producing significant research on the experiences of Asian Americans within structures of schooling, contributing to broader research problems in K-12 education through an examination of Asian Americans. Based on this review of literature, and taking a cue from research on Asian Americans and K-12 schooling, I argue that more critical research on Asian American experiences in higher education presenting analysis that privileges the voices of Asian American students should be conducted.

### **Centrality of the “Model Minority” in Asian American Higher Education Research**

In recent decades there has been a growing number of studies on Asian American college students. In much of this research literature, the “model minority” figure is very prevalent. The model minority narrative is the invention of William Petersen (1966) and other mainstream public intellectuals, offered in response to the urban uprisings in the 1960s, manipulating a narrow sample of Asian Americans as an antithesis to the African American claims of racial oppression. The narrative of the “model minority” stereotype is a tool to exploit Asian Americans for the benefit of the elite in the U.S. racial hierarchy (Osajima, 2000). In addition to placing blame on Pacific Islanders, some Southeast Asian Americans, African American, Latina/o, and American Indian students and families for their educational failures, the application of the model minority concept silences and marginalizes Asian American students and families.



**Asian Americans, admissions, and affirmative action.** A significant line of research related to the “model minority” is in the area of admissions particularly as it relates to affirmative action policies. In college admissions, a debate continues about whether Asian American college applicants are penalized by affirmative action practices (Golden, 2006; Kidder, 2006; Espenshade & Chung, 2005; Inkelas, 2003; Chin, Cho, Kang, & Wu, 1996; Kang, 1996; Brest & Oshige, 1995; Nakanishi, 1995; Takagi, 1992). Prior to the Supreme Court decision in *University of California v. Bakke* (438 U.S. 265), the Asian American Law Students’ Association (AALSA, 1978) at Berkeley’s School of Law drafted a report analyzing the *Bakke* case and the place of Asian Americans in the debate. The authors argued that Asian Americans should be included in affirmative action programs based on both corrective justice and distributive justice rationales.<sup>5</sup> Through a corrective lens, the group cites institutional racism and socio-economic disparities experienced by Asian American communities. Through a distributive justice lens, they argue for an admissions policy that would recruit and admit applicants that are committed to serving and practicing in “low-income and Third World communities” (AALSA, 1978, p. 24). Applying Brest and Oshige’s criteria for inclusion in affirmative action, AALSA argued that while Asian Americans as an aggregate did not meet the educational rationale, institutions may want to consider Asian American subgroups, such

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<sup>5</sup> According to Brest and Oshige (1995), Affirmative Action programs are justified by the education rationale, the corrective justice rationale, and the distributive justice rationale. In the education rationale, the goal of affirmative action is to diversify the racial demographics of a school’s enrollment to meet the educational mission of an institution to enhance the learning environment. In the corrective justice rationale, the goal of affirmative action is to compensate a group for historical injustices by providing benefits to individuals of that group. Through the distributive justice rationale affirmative action uplifts groups by providing opportunities to individuals who identify with those groups.

as Hmong or Cambodians that are less represented in higher education and Pacific Islanders for affirmative action programs. Implicitly, AALSA countered the model minority framing in order to assert the populations into the debate over affirmative action ultimately by showing how some Asian Americans are “at risk” populations.

During the 1980s, opponents of affirmative action successfully used a deceptive valorization of Asian Americans in contrast to other minority groups to roll back affirmative action policies. Takagi’s *Retreat from Race* (1992) provides an extensive history of the controversy over Asian American college admissions at elite colleges in the 1980’s. The book focuses on the articulation and re-articulation of the controversy over Asian Americans in college admissions. In the early 1980’s, Asian American community activists and academics began to question college admissions offices about possible discrimination against Asian American applicants in favor of White students, which has been called “negative action” (Chin et al., 1996; Kang, 1996). University officials viewed Asian Americans both as over-represented and as students who were not well rounded in their academic pursuits (Takagi, 1992).

By 1989, neo-conservatives like Dana Rohrabacher appropriated Asian American allegations of institutional discrimination for their own objectives of dismantling affirmative action policies (Nakanishi, 1995). They defined Asian Americans as the victims of affirmative action, and positioned them in opposition to undeserving African Americans (Kim, 1999; Takagi, 1992). Despite African American claims of racism, Asian Americans, they argued, had achieved great success even though they too were a racial minority. They argued that affirmative action provided opportunities to African

Americans while unfairly discriminating against Asian Americans (Takagi, 1992; Chin et al., 1996). In appropriating the allegations of discrimination in admissions, neo-conservative efforts were in direct contradiction with the values and aims of the Asian American community leaders, who did not want to end affirmative action (Takagi, 1992; Wang, 1995). In valorizing Asian Americans, neo-conservatives like Rohrabacher simultaneously silenced and ostracized Asian Americans when they co-opted the allegations for their own anti-affirmative action agenda (Kim, 1999).

To counter claims that Asian Americans are hurt by affirmative action (Hu, 1989), Kang (1996) has argued that it is actually policies of negative action, rather than affirmative action, that harms Asian American applicants by favoring Whites over Asian Americans. However, neglecting the research on negative action, Espenshade and Chung (2005) approximated that the end of affirmative action in admissions policies would lead to a large majority of Asian Americans at elite colleges and universities, implicitly invoking a model minority framing of Asian Americans. Kidder (2006) directly responds to and challenges Espenshade and Chung's assumptions and analysis with a critical examination of data to prove that Asian Americans would benefit from the end of negative action, but not by ending affirmative action.

Research like that of Espenshade and Chung (2005) can implicitly or explicitly reinforce the model minority perspective in relation to other students of color. In the higher education or college student development literature, a handful of scholars have attempted to counter the model minority stereotype by providing evidence of how some Asian American groups suffer challenges that are similar to other students of color, who

are “at risk” of not persisting in the educational pipeline (Suzuki, 2002; Yeh, 2002). By invoking a “victimization” frame, this literature overlooks the bigger picture of systemic racism and the role of Asian Americans in relation to other groups.

Rather than providing an innovative framework through which to analyze the diverse racialized experiences of Asian American students, this body of research maintains the minority education and at-risk frameworks, which can pathologize students of color as culturally deficient or inherently incapable of transformative success (Gutierrez, 2006). In trying to force Asian American student experiences into fitting in with other student of color experiences, they do not advance the understanding, based on an approach grounded in students’ experiences, of Asian American education. The argument advanced is that “Asian Americans have problems too just like those of Blacks and Latinos,” rather than generating a critical lens through which to understand the Asian American experiences, for which researchers have a hard time to account, of intra-ethnic inequalities. Research on Asian American educational experiences must create and advance a framework grounded in students’ experiences to understand this population in the social context of racial inequalities.

Asian Americans are a greatly understudied population in higher education, providing a wide-open field for scholars to advance studies of educational problems through the unique lens of experiences represented by Asian Americans. I suggest two particular areas for research to advance the understanding of Asian Americans in higher education. The first is Asian American college choice. The second is campus racial climate from the perspectives of Asian American experiences. Both of these topics of

research inherently allow researchers to highlight the voices and experiences of Asian Americans.

The college choice literature is one area of research that can be advanced to understand Asian Americans in higher education. In addition to research on Asian Americans and affirmative action in admissions policies, it is also important to study the factors that shape Asian American choice process, which affect differences in college access. In Hossler and Gallagher's model of college choice (1987), students go through three stages – predisposition, search, and choice –influenced by a student's background, attributes, as well as institutional characteristics. Unfortunately, barely any research has been published on Asian Americans and the college choice process. Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, and McDonough (2004) note the significant absence of research that includes analysis on Asian American college choice.

Contributing considerable progress toward research in this area, Teranishi et al. (2004) provide an analysis of the 1997 results of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's freshman survey. They conclude that Asian American enrollment in different types of postsecondary institutions as well as their college choice process varies by ethnicity and socioeconomic class. Applying a CRT framework to study how racial climates in high school shape Chinese American and Filipino American college opportunities and choice, Teranishi (2007) also found differences in how college access resources were provided within schools to different Asian American ethnic populations.

Goyette and Xie (1999) also further the study of Asian American college choice by examining factors that may contribute toward the educational aspirations, or college

predisposition, of Asian Americans. They conducted a statistical analysis using data from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Survey. Through linear and logistic regression analyses, Goyette and Xie (1999) found that parental influence was clearly a significant factor that shaped the aspirations and goals of Asian American youth in education.

Another area of literature that needs more research on Asian Americans is campus racial climate. Through a review of fifteen years of research on campus racial climate, Harper and Hurtado (2007) found that while Asian Americans were included in the majority of research on the perceptions of campus climate by race (7 of 11 studies and articles) and on the benefits associated with positive campus climates for cross-racial interactions (9 of 11), only four of the thirteen articles on racial/ethnic minority student experiences with racism and prejudice included Asian Americans. The authors acknowledged that, “too few researchers have explored how Asian American and Native American students experience campus racial climates” (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p.12).

In a campus racial climate related study, Inkelas (2003) conducted focus groups with 13 Asian American undergraduate student participants, and examined their perceptions of affirmative action and how Asian Americans are positioned in American race relations. Through the study, it was found that the Asian American students perceived other students of color to be inferior to Asian Americans. They felt threatened by White students and other students of color in the admissions process. Interestingly, they also had little knowledge about Asian American history. They also expressed a sense of being ostracized from race relations dialogues, which largely followed a Black-

White paradigm. This last finding is confirmed by Lewis, Chesler, and Forman (2000), who found that, “the dominant focus on Black-White relations in most discussions about campus racial/ethnic climate was sometimes found to create problems for the Latino/a, Asian American, and Native American students” (p. 83-84).

Furthering the research on racial attitudes of Asian American college students, Inkelas (2006) published a quantitative study to “demystify” Asian Americans in higher education as the “model minority.” Through survey data, the study found that Asian Americans’ views and perspectives on race are significantly different from those of other racial groups. However, Asian American racial attitudes overall were more akin to those of other minority students than to White students. Certain subsets of Asian American students (immigrants, women, and those with high SAT scores) were more likely than others to believe that racial discrimination was a problem. Asian American students who more closely identified with White dominant culture were also more likely to oppose affirmative action. Inkelas (2006) also found that Asian American students’ racial identities were often positively affirmed through their participation in diversity activities, especially those that focused on Asian American issues. Asian American students’ academic majors also had an effect on their racial attitudes (Inkelas, 2006). Social Sciences and Humanities majors were more likely to have more positive racial attitudes, and were more open to interacting with people of diverse racial backgrounds. In particular, Inkelas points to the need for the diversification of curriculum to include dialogue about race, especially for science and math majors.

If colleges and universities include diversity as a part of their missions, then they must intentionally implement educational programs that impact students' racial attitudes and abilities to interact with people in a multi-racial and global society. Unfortunately, college campuses oftentimes are negligent in facilitating cross-cultural learning opportunities and engagement (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Inkelas (2006) also found that campus climates that encourage informal and formal participation in dialogues about race have positive bearings on Asian American student perceptions and ability to discuss issues of racial diversity.

Counter to what some may believe (Egan, 2007) Asian American college students do in fact cite racial oppression as a significant problem (Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007; Inkelas, 2006). Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) found that like African American students, Asian American college students in their study were less satisfied with the university than White students. Their study also indicated that Asian Americans, like African Americans, reported more incidents of faculty bias and racism than Latino and White students (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). For Asian Americans that experience negative campus racial climate, significant mental health consequences are a possibility (Cress & Ikeda, 1998). Interestingly, while Chang, et al. (2007) found that a significant majority of Asian American college students believe that racism is a problem in U.S. society, they also found that they are *split* on whether affirmative action policies and efforts are the best way to deconstruct racism in society. This finding is congruent with Ong's findings in a study of Chinese American opinions on the use of race as a factor in education policy (Ong, 2003). Indeed, Asian Americans present an



interesting and understudied population for campus racial climate studies. The unique ways in which they are racialized in higher education and throughout U.S. society in general provide a unique lens through which to understand processes of racial formation in the campus racial climate.

**Explaining the academic achievement of the “model minority”.** In addition to literature addressing Asian Americans in the college admissions debate, another line of research explores explanations for aggregate Asian American academic successes. Rather than try to counter statistics that show that Asian American students on average are high achievers in schools, some researchers seek to identify causal factors leading to the phenomenon of Asian American academic success (Sue & Okazaki, 1995; Peng & Wright, 1994). Peng and Wright (1994) explore the home environments of Asian American students, and argued that Asian American families value education over other minority families. They claim that the behaviors of Asian American parents lead to higher levels of academic success among Asian American youth. However, Peng and Wright (1994) do not account for the real effects of racial stratification. It seems narrow sighted to attribute the academic achievements of some Asian Americans solely to parental behaviors and expectations. In fact, the Public Policy Institute of California (Baldassare, Bonner, Paluch, & Petek, 2009) found that Asian Americans (66%) were less likely than African Americans (77%) and Latinos (81%) in the state to believe that a college education is critical to success in life. Explanations that rely solely on cultural

factors run the risk of absolving broader structures of inequality that shape the context of achievement.

Sue and Okazaki (1995), on the other hand, assert that there is no single explanation for the success because multiple factors can affect achievement patterns. Instead, they apply the theory of relative functionalism to account for the minority status of Asian Americans and their behaviors in education. Essentially, for Asian Americans, “education is increasingly functional as a means for mobility when other avenues are blocked” (Sue & Okazaki, p. 139). Countering cultural or genetic explanations of Asian American educational achievement, Sue and Okazaki account for structural realities that provide a context for agency and navigation.

Overall, findings about Asian Americans in higher education, from various studies, seem to contradict each other, indicating the need for additional studies. Additionally, the literature on Asian American academic achievement and college admissions does not focus on the agency and the voices of Asian American students themselves. I define agency as the ability of people to be proactive or reactionary in their actions and responses to the social forces and contexts shaping the opportunities and obstacles they face. In *Immigrant Acts*, Lowe (1996) highlights the fact that Asian Americans have not only been the objects of racism, they have also been subjects and “agents of political change, cultural expression, and social transformation” (p. 9). The literature on college student experiences needs a more broadened critical analysis of Asian American educational experiences as they relate to race, from the standpoint of Asian American college students themselves. Within the racialized context of U.S.

education, Asian American students encounter, resist, and navigate through a campus racial climate employing various means and strategies.

### **Asian American Agency and K-12 Schooling**

While higher education scholars concerned with Asian Americans continue to be largely pre-occupied with negating or complicating the model minority framework, a significant body of recent scholarship on Asian Americans in K-12 schooling has centered the experiences of Asian Americans and has begun to move beyond focusing on a deconstruction or demystification of the “model minority.” By focusing on Asian American educational experiences as an important area of research, this body of literature is contributing towards a more complex picture of Asian Americans in education. In reviewing this body of literature, this section identifies ways in which scholars concerned with Asian Americans and K-12 education have begun to advance research, and how it has brought a critical lens to studying the agency of Asian American students and families.

Although in the book *Unraveling the Model Minority Myth*, Lee (1996) sets up the study as a project to complicate the model minority framing, it uses an extensive ethnographic methodology to explore the silencing effect of the stereotype. The book presents a study of how diverse groups of Asian American youth create their identities at one urban high school. Through ethnographic research methods, Lee (1996) highlights the subjectivity, voices and narratives of the youth in the study. The study shows how Asian American youth in this one high school were split into four general groups that

created different identities based on their varied experiences. Through this qualitative study, Lee successfully highlighted the voices of Asian American high school students, showing how class, gender, and immigrant status affected how these diverse students understood and countered racism in their everyday lives.

Like the Asian American youth in Lee's study (1996) the immigrant Chinese American parents in Louie's *Compelled to Excel* (2004) recognize the social realities of racism in the United States. Louie (2004) suggests that this recognition of racism motivates them to highly value education as a necessary tool for their children as they confront racial barriers in their lives. This finding is consistent with Sue and Okazaki's relative functionalist explanation of academic achievement (Sue & Okazaki, 1995). Louie's research and analysis also counters Ogbu's claim that voluntary or immigrant minorities are not as affected by discrimination or stereotypes and that Chinese cultural values lead to the educational success of Chinese American youth (Ogbu, 1983). It further complicates the idea that immigrant minorities bring a more hopeful and positive attitude about U.S. society and that they possess cultural values to overcome barriers that other minorities do not. Louie also asserts that Chinese American parental strategies for supporting their children's schooling are structured by socioeconomic class. Interestingly, most of the Chinese American youth in Louie's study supports the cultural argument for why their parents placed such a high value on educational pursuits, indicating communication challenges between the immigrant generation and their children.

Lew (2006) also provides a study on economic class differences among another Asian American immigrant group - Korean American youth and families. Lew illustrates

a distinct achievement gap between different economic classes of Korean Americans in New York City. The author argues that a continued focus on the “model minority” supports the “culture-of-poverty” or deficit theory arguments about students and communities of color. In *Asian Americans in Class*, Lew points to the critical impact that class, race, ethnic social networks and capital, and access to school resources bears on Korean American student achievement. Lew’s research study controls for “culture,” by limiting the participants to 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans in New York City. By doing so, the research findings show that Korean American culture produces limited effects on the achievement levels of these youth. These findings significantly counter research literature that argues that traditional Asian cultures, based on Confucian ideology, are responsible for Asian American academic success.

In *Consuming Citizenship*, Park (2005) provides a study of second generation and 1.5 generation Korean and Chinese American youth and an analysis of how these youth form their identities. Park asserts that these youth create their identities in response to the dominant U.S. framework of Asian Americans as perpetually foreign, un-American, and undeserving of the rights of U.S. citizenship. In response to this perpetual foreigner<sup>6</sup> stereotype, the youth in Park’s study viewed consumerism as a tool to carve a pathway for a sense of belonging in U.S. society. They too are directly responding to and navigating the realities of inequalities in society.

In *Up against Whiteness*, Lee (2005) studied a group of Hmong American youth at a high school in Wisconsin, and their experiences of identity development as a new

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<sup>6</sup> Suzuki (1995) provides an extensive examination of the racialized construction of Asian Americans as a group that is simultaneously depicted as the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner.”

American group within the racialized social context of the U.S. Her findings implicate a culture of Whiteness that prevents youth, who do not conform to White, middle-class cultural norms, from learning. The Asian American group in Lee's study exhibited a range of attitudes based on and in response to their experiences in school. Due to a culture of Whiteness and White supremacy at the high school, Hmong American youth in her study developed a culture of resistance, rejected their Hmong cultural heritage as deficient compared to White, middle-class culture, or were able to develop strategies attributed to cultural straddlers<sup>7</sup> in Carter's *Keepin' It Real* (Carter, 2005). However, Lee does not classify the Hmong youth's strategies of cultural straddling or the rejection of their ethnic cultural heritage as resistance. Rather, Lee (2005) uses Ogbu's definition of oppositional culture (1978) to identify students who developed a culture of resistance.

Despite high average educational attainment by the Asian American aggregate, these researchers show the diversity of identities and experiences with racism in schooling in the K-12 segment, primarily in secondary school. Unfortunately, there continues to be a lack of similar empirically based research that brings forth the voices of Asian American college students in the ways that Lee, Lew, Louie, and Park have done with high school students.

## **Chapter Summary**

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<sup>7</sup> Cultural straddlers are students who have developed strategies to negotiate contradictions between mainstream culture and their ethnic cultural communities. They are capable of being accepted and successful in both mainstream society and within their cultural communities.

In this chapter, I have reviewed two distinct bodies of research on Asian Americans in education. Within higher education, a focal point of research on Asian Americans is the “model minority myth.” Significant scholarship has been dedicated to countering, complicating, and explaining the image and ways in which it harms Asian Americans and maintains racial inequalities in both college admissions policies and academic achievement. Collectively, literature on Asian American college students largely describes what Asian Americans are not, through projects of negation, but rarely advances knowledge about who they are. I suggest two promising areas of future research on higher education and Asian Americans - the college choice process and campus racial climate. Embedded in studies on college choice and campus racial climate is an examination of student agency and experiences. In as much as policies affect student behaviors, students navigate structures of education access, informed by their communities, to apply, enroll, and progress through a variety of post-secondary institutions. Indeed, research centering the voices and experiential knowledge of Asian American can lead to important advances in the literature in higher education, as it seems to have done in the area of K-12 education research.

The emergent research on Asian Americans in K-12 schools has significantly advanced knowledge about Asian Americans in education. Scholars in this area have intentionally utilized frameworks of immigrant adaptation, economic class, and Whiteness to examine the relationship between Asian American immigrant communities and the social institution and system of education. Much of their work has also made more use of ethnographic methods, leading to a body of compelling research that

addresses the unique and interesting research problems presented by Asian Americans. Indeed, Chang (1999) argues that Asian American narratives are essential to address the problem of invisibility experienced by Asian Americans in the socio-political contexts of the U.S. Within the context of education, quantitative measures of students' experiences can overlook a significant proportion of student life, which is spent outside of the classroom. Through qualitative methods, scholars can advance significant and new directions in research on Asian Americans in education.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Building a Theoretical Framework**

The dialectical nature of critical theory enables the educational researcher to see the school not simply as an arena of indoctrination or socialization or a site of instruction, but also as a cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment and self-transformation (McLaren, 2003, p. 70).

Applying critical theoretical perspectives, this study examines the experiences of Asian American college students within the campus racial climate and how they navigate structures of White dominance as manifested through racial microaggressions on college campuses. In addition to socializing and indoctrinating students with dominant ideologies through the campus racial climate, which provides an institutional space for the process of racial formation, the college campus environment also provides opportunities for empowerment and transformation. Historically, student-led movements have both transformed post-secondary education as well as national policies (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). Asian American college students have also been at the forefront of campaigns for social justice within the Asian American community and post-secondary institutions (Wei, 1993; Umemoto, 1989).

The primary theories used to guide this study are: Critical Race Theory; racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 1994); campus racial climate (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998); the cycle of socialization (Harro, 2000a); critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2003); critical race pedagogy (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) and resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Informed by these theories, the theoretical model I propose at the end of this chapter emerged from the grounded theory analysis of interview data. The CRT model of

campus racial climate allows scholars to focus on students as agents, whose experiences have already been shaped by a process of racial formation, and not simply as blank slates entering campus environments to be shaped by the campus racial climate.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Despite the embedded nature of the relationship between campus racial climate and racial dynamics in the larger social setting, too few studies have addressed this connection (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000). Race relations and campus racial climate ultimately reflect the racial dynamics of the broader society, which has shifted largely to a dominant color-blind framework (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Given the dominance of color-blind ideology, Critical Race Theory is an important lens through which to critically examine systems of racial inequality within our campus communities to unveil systems of inequality, which can lead toward interventions.

CRT in education studies allows research to interrogate and identify ways by which racism operates within institutions of education to create inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Emerging from the post-Civil Rights era, it was led by legal scholars such as Derrick Bell and Mari Matsuda to account for the central role of racism in creating inequalities in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Yosso (2006) describes the five tenets of CRT in education as the (1) intercentricity of race and racism, (2) the challenge to dominant ideology, (3) the commitment to social justice, (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) the interdisciplinary perspective. Through the intercentricity of race and racism, CRT focuses on the intersections of racism with other

forms of oppression such as class exploitation, sexism, citizenship status, and English language proficiency. Given the diversity of Asian Americans, an analysis of their experiences requires an examination of how various forms of oppression intersect. CRT in education studies challenges the myth that schools are institutions of “color blind” equal opportunity and meritocracy. With a commitment to social justice CRT scholars view education as a political tool with the potential to strategically interrupt social reproduction of inequality. CRT also values diverse representations of the experiences of people of color, acknowledging that their experiences and interpretations of such experiences can be very diverse.

Finally, CRT uses interdisciplinary approaches to study the lived experiences of people of color that are oftentimes dismissed by traditional academic methods. Traditional social science discourages participation of research subjects; viewing human subjects as objects, and discourages any personal involvement of the principal researchers (Harding, 2004). However, Delgado Bernal (1998) promotes the idea that research subjects should become agents in research in her Chicana feminist epistemology framework, and the value of “cultural intuition.” The stories and lived experiences of those affected by racial inequalities in society are essential to effectively examine and deconstruct racism in the academy.

Although the field of Asian American education studies has begun to grow in recent years, most of the published studies do not directly employ Critical Race Theory. Because Asian Americans are racialized in unique ways in U.S. society that challenge the dominant Black-White paradigm of race relations, CRT is a necessary framework

through which to conduct research on Asian American college students and their experiences (Chang, 1999). CRT positions research participants as subjects rather than as objects within studies (Yosso, 2006). It centers the experiences and perspectives of people of color in education to challenge dominant ideology or the “master narrative.” Through this theoretical lens, this dissertation study privileges the perspectives of Asian American college students to identify ways in which they are racialized to both gain a better understanding of how racism operates and to contribute toward deconstructing systems of inequality.

A study of how Asian American students are affected by campus racial climate is effectively an analysis of a process of racial formation within the setting of a college campus, which is representative of and shaped by the broader society and a structure of racial inequality. It is important to critically examine the relationship between students and campus climate, where students are both affected by and act as agents within the campus climate and in the broader society.

Narratives, through a CRT lens, are instrumental in centering and bringing forth the experiences of racially marginalized populations – in this case, Asian American undergraduate experiences on college campuses. Narratives have also been used as instruments of empowerment to effectively document and study Asian American experiences (Li & Beckett, 2006). Chang (1999) argues that the Asian American experiences of racism are unique, promoting CRT in research as a means to better understand “nativist racism” experienced by Asian Americans. Asian American CRT can

connect narratives and experiences to a sociohistorical context of White dominance to advance social justice oriented change from Asian American perspectives (Chang, 1999).

### **Racial Formation**

The theory of racial formation suggests that society is suffused with racial projects, large and small, to which all are subjected. This racial “subjection” is quintessentially ideological. Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of her own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Thus are we inserted in a comprehensively racialized social structure. Race becomes “common sense” – a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world. A vast web of racial projects mediates between the discursive or representational means in which race is identified and signified on the one hand, and the institutional and organizational forms in which it is routinized and standardized on the other. These projects are at the heart of the racial formation process (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 60).

Asian American students, through their behaviors, either conform and reproduce dominant ideologies in society or engage in oppositional behaviors to challenge inequalities and injustices within a process of racial formation. Kim’s theory of racial power and order extends Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation (Kim, 2000). Racial power is what provides the movement and change in the racialization of different groups in U.S. society. Based on the concepts of racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994) and racial power (Kim, 2000), I define *race* as a social construction given meaning through historical and contemporary actions based on phenotype and traits that categorize humans. *Racism* is a social, economic, and political process that uses concepts of race to maintain and reproduce White dominance and racial inequalities in society. According to Kim (2000) racial power, “. . . works via cumulative and interactive processes in the

political, social, economic, and cultural realms to continuously reconstitute racial categories, meanings, and distributions in a way that maintains White dominance in American society” (p. 10). Racial power operates under the cover of a color-blind ideology of society, which advances the perspective that racial disparities and inequalities are a result of non-racial explanations (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). As the racial demographics of U.S. institutions diversify, proponents of the colorblind ideology have been able to reframe debates about racism to divert critical attention away from structural and cultural practices of White dominance (Lakoff, 2004).

Asian American students’ agency and choices in responding to racial microaggressions and other representations of systems of inequality also serve as forces of movement in processes of racialization, representation, and racial formation within college campuses and the broader societal context. Their actions, whether conscious or not, can redefine or reproduce the meanings of race and what it means to be Asian American in educational institutions and in society at large. Within the campus environment and through their time and experiences working toward a college degree, students navigate through a vast array of contexts of information that shape their choices. These spaces include, but are not limited to, formal classrooms, co-curricular activities, attendance at college-sponsored events, interpersonal interactions with peers, Internet-based spaces (e.g. youtube, facebook, myspace, etc.), relationships with family, interactions with faculty and student services staff, community-based learning opportunities (e.g. service-learning, volunteerism, etc.), and experiences with institutional bureaucracy. Student experiences in these spaces are shaped by the campus racial

climate. Student engagement in these spaces can also shape the campus racial climate and either challenge or reinforce racial projects in the process of racial formation.

College campuses are not immune to the pervasiveness of racial projects in society. They serve as an important part of the “comprehensively racialized social structure” detailed by Omi and Winant (1994, p. 60). Through racial projects manifested in post-secondary education and through the campus racial climate, Asian Americans are racialized and defined within an unequal racial structure that shapes college access and experiences. The college campus serves as an important space for lessons on racial meanings within the formal and informal curriculum. These lessons, both conscious and unconscious, socialize students to the broader social order.

### **Campus Racial Climate**

Campus racial climate is broadly defined as the environment of race relations on a college campus (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Theories on campus racial climate have been developed to understand racial conflict (Hurtado, 1992), campus reproductions of racial hierarchies and stress on students of color and integrating the study of racial microaggressions into the study of campus racial climate (Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002), effects of affirmative action debates on students of color (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), and student perceptions and experiences of campus racial climate (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) recognize external and internal forces that shape student experiences, and provide a framework for policymakers and educational practitioners to develop interventions for

race relations on campus. In defining external domains, they state that, “sociohistoric forces influencing the climate for diversity on campus are events or issues in the larger society, nearly always originating outside the campus, that influence how people view racial diversity in society,” listing state policies addressing financial aid, admissions, and state systems of higher education as examples (Hurtado, et al., 1998, p. 282). Focusing on the internal forces, Hurtado, et al. (1998) identify four domains of the campus racial climate that influence race relations: the institutional context of historical inclusion or exclusion; institutional structural diversity; the psychological dimension and impact of campus racial climate on students; and the behavioral climate dimension, which encompasses interpersonal interactions and relations on campus.

According to McDonough (1998), “organizational culture can legitimately be defined as an organization’s underlying values, beliefs, and meanings, while organizational climate refers to the resultant attitudes and behaviors of individuals within the organization” (p. 185). While climate reflects organizational culture, organizational culture also reflects the broader context of society. The framework presented by Hurtado, et al. (1998) acknowledges the importance of external factors, including sociohistorical context and social policies in shaping the campus racial climate. Additionally, Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1999) acknowledge the importance of examining ways in which colleges and universities serve as institutions for social reproduction that reinforce and perpetuate inequalities and structures of the broader society. Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) show how racial microaggressions



significantly contribute to the formation of the campus racial climate, particularly towards a negative environment.

However, these studies do not particularly focus on how students' responses can reshape the campus racial climate, which is examined to some extent by Solórzano, Allen, and Carroll (2002). In this study, the research team describes the different types (overt and covert) and contexts for racial incidents (in the classroom, outside of classroom, and outside of school setting), which are informed and shaped by a system of White privilege. They go on to discuss the different ways in which students respond to racial incidents, the effects of racial incidents on students, and the counter spaces available on campuses. Student responses, the effects of racial incidents, and available counter spaces all relate to each other and also inform and redefine the types and contexts of racial incidents. This model, however, does not allow for student agency to also affect the system of White privilege.

In addition to studying how the social context as an external force shapes the campus racial climate, it is also important to understand how the campus racial climate and student behaviors affect the broader social context. Historically, student movements like the 1968 Ethnic Studies Strikes and community-organizing campaigns led by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were formed within campus environments. They have effectively redefined campus climates as well as the broader social context.

Indeed, the campus racial climate is a product of the embedded relationship between the campus environment and social context of racial formation. Given the potential found within campus environments for powerful social change movements, it is

important to understand that campus climates do not just impact students. Rather, there is a fluid and symbiotic inter-relationship between the broad social context, campus racial climate, and student engagement. While the impacts of campus racial climate on student learning and other college experiences can be empirically measured, limited research has studied how student agency can simultaneously affect both campus racial climate and the social context. Examining the campus racial climate as a context for a cycle of socialization into dominant systems of oppression provides an opportunity for scholars to view the relationship between students and the campus environment as a multi-dimensional process, where the campus environment and students affect each other within a broader societal context.

### **The Cycle of Socialization**

According to Harro (2000a), people are socialized into structures of inequality through, “systematic training in ‘how to be’ each of our social identities throughout our lives” (p. 15). Social identities are complex and include gender, class, race, ability, sexuality, and other largely immutable characteristics that affect one’s opportunities. Harro (2000a) goes on to explain that the, “socialization process is *pervasive* (coming from all sides and sources), *consistent* (patterned and predictable), *circular* (self-supporting), *self-perpetuating* (intradependent) and often *invisible* (unconscious and unnamed)” (p.15).

Harro’s cycle of socialization explains that indoctrination into the existing social structure starts from the time people are born, when immediately we are bombarded by

information from our families and social settings. When we enter social institutions, such as schools, we receive more messages and the earlier messages we received are either reinforced or challenged by the new information. We learn about our social identities and positions of relative privilege or oppression within the social order through the formal and informal curriculum and texts – through classrooms, social interactions, and media. Hegemonic messages about the superiority and inferiority of certain groups are then socially enforced. Those who challenge the dominant order face negative consequences, which may range from social ostracism to economic harm or even physical violence. The social discipline can then lead to a range of outcomes including anger, guilt, stress, and violence, collusion with a system of inequality, self-hatred, and the internalization of patterns of power. We then have the option to maintain the status quo and do nothing, or we can choose to interrupt the cycle of socialization and oppression. Harro explains that fear, ignorance, and confusion block people from choosing to engage in acts of resistance to choose another path. The act of choosing a direction of change requires community and movement building. To increase the number of people choosing a new direction for change, Harro asserts,

We need education for critical consciousness for all groups. We need to take a stand, reframe our understandings, question the status quo, and begin a critical transformation that can break down this cycle of socialization and start a new cycle leading to liberation for all (2000a, p. 21).

It is through critical consciousness building work, or through what Freire (1993) called *conscientization*, that we may interrupt this dehumanizing cycle.

## **Critical Pedagogy, Critical Race Pedagogy, and Resistance**

The cycle of socialization encompasses multiple facets of social identities including one's racial identity. In order to disrupt the cycle of socialization and the continued reproduction and maintenance of dominant ideologies of oppression and social inequalities, Freire (1993) argues for a process of *conscientization* for liberation.

Through *conscientization* or a process of developing a critical consciousness, people learn to understand and critique social processes and relationships between institutions and people. They begin to question the status quo, learning to name injustice in society, recognizing their own position and relative privilege within social systems, which may lead to potential actions that challenge these injustices.

The development of a critical consciousness can be facilitated by engagement with critical pedagogy. According to McLaren (2003, p. 72),

Critical pedagogy asks how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not. Critical pedagogy asks how our everyday commonsense understandings – our social constructions or “subjectivities” – get produced and lived out. In other words, what are the social functions of knowledge?

Advocating for this Freirean tradition in education, Osajima (1998) called on teachers to engage in pedagogical practices that encourage and challenge Asian American students to develop a critical consciousness for understanding their racially diverse social context. When challenged to critically examine their own subjectivity within social structures of inequality, Asian American students may begin to reflect on their own experiences and observations of the world around them to make sense of the complicated nature of being Asian American.

Because critical race pedagogy serves as a key to allowing individuals to begin making sense of racial meanings and inequalities, it can also be an important tool for developing community leadership skills among Asian American college students to address social inequalities from positions of privilege. Chang, et al (2007) found a declining proportion of immigrant and first-generation college-going Asian Americans in four-year institutions between 1971 and 2005. They also found that a significant proportion of Asian American students hope to become leaders in their communities or serve their communities (Chang, et al., 2007). To do so, these students must be adequately prepared to live and work in a multi-racial and classed society. Asian American college students must be exposed to more socially relevant learning opportunities that allow them to critically understand and situate themselves within the context of “U.S. racism, capitalism, and imperialism” within their communities (Osajima, 1998, p. 269).

Moreover, Dong (2001) discusses the importance of “transforming student elites into community activists” and provides an extensive description of community activism by Asian American college students in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Freirean movements for critical consciousness and pedagogy are not new. However, relatively few institutions of education offer curriculum that includes Asian American Studies and provide spaces and opportunities for engagement in critical literacy development outside of classrooms. Structured learning interventions in the field of Asian American Studies can provide critical educational opportunities to advance the development of critical consciousness development (Osajima, 1998).

Solórzano and Yosso (2001) define critical race pedagogy as being,

Different from other frameworks because: (1) it challenges the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and discourse on race, gender, and class; (2) it helps us to bring to the forefront the focus on the racialized and gendered experiences of People of Color; (3) it offers a liberatory or transformative method to racial, gender, and class oppression; and (4) it utilizes the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, and the law to better understand the various forms of oppression (p. 599).

The practice of critical race pedagogy essentially promotes consciousness-raising that prepares individuals to participate in movements of social change and transformation.

In response to racist projects that reinforce and impose systems of racial inequality, Asian Americans have engaged in projects of resistance and social transformation (Lowe, 1996). It is important to acknowledge the complex agency in which individuals engage as social beings. Omi and Winant (1994) maintain that social movements, “challenge pre-existing racial ideology” and “are efforts to *rearticulate* the meaning of race” through both the “*disorganization* of the dominant ideology and of *construction* of an alternative, oppositional framework” (p. 89).

Traditionally, scholars have narrowly defined resistance as intrinsically self-destructive leaving out a critique of social conditions that may lead to oppositional behaviors (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). However, within a complex society, individual agency and behaviors should be understood as equally multifaceted and complicated. To reflect these complexities, Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) present four modes of resistance. The x-axis indicates individual motivation driven by social justice. The y-axis shows one's critique of social oppression. Each of the quadrants is used to describe behaviors in which individuals engage, in response to social

oppression. Transformative resistance can be exhibited in the behaviors of students who are community activists. These behaviors are both motivated by social justice values and critiques of social inequalities. Conformist resistance behaviors promote social justice values, but do not necessarily reflect a critique of social oppression. Self-defeating resistance is defined as behaviors that do not stem from a social justice motivation, but may be motivated by a critique of injustice. Finally, reactionary behavior is neither motivated by a social justice orientation nor a critique of social inequalities.

It is important to use this framework to understand behaviors, and not as a lens through which to categorize individuals. Throughout a lifetime or even a short period of time, individuals can engage in any number of the types of behavior outlined by Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001). It is also important to view the critique of social oppression dimension as a continual process, which is developed over time, through engagement in critical pedagogy, as well as through personal reflection. Moreover, because of the pervasiveness of dominant ideologies of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and other social forces of oppression, a person may exhibit transformative resistance behaviors in one area of social oppression while simultaneously engaging in reactionary behaviors in another area of social oppression. For example, while a person may have a strong and developed critique of racism, she or he might not have a conscious critique of sexism or other forms of oppression to inform behavior and actions.

Critical theorists and education sociologists have recognized that educational institutions serve as mechanisms for the social reproduction of inequalities and oppression (Morrow & Torres, 1995). The theories reviewed here privilege critical

pedagogy as a path to resisting dominant structures of inequality that depend on processes of reproduction and the socialization of people to be maintained. By engaging in *conscientization* or opportunities to participate in critical race pedagogy, Asian American students can gain a critical understanding of the campus racial climate, the society at large, and ways in which they are racialized in a system of racism and inequalities. However, engagement in spaces of critical race pedagogy does not guarantee that students will engage in acts of resistance beyond reflection, to begin a cycle of liberation (Harro, 2000b).

### **Toward a CRT Model of Campus Racial Climate**

Using a grounded theory methodology, which will be discussed in the next chapter, I developed a CRT model of campus racial climate based on the analysis of collected interview data. The model is also informed by the theories discussed in the previous sections of this chapter. Theories explaining the campus racial climate often focus on the impacts of the campus environment on students. However, through an examination of interview data collected, which is discussed in the remaining chapters, I found that Asian American students are not just objects in the campus environment that are affected by the campus racial climate, but rather their subjectivities make them agents of social transformation and reproduction within the campus environment and in reinforcing or redefining what it means to be Asian American in the campus racial climate.

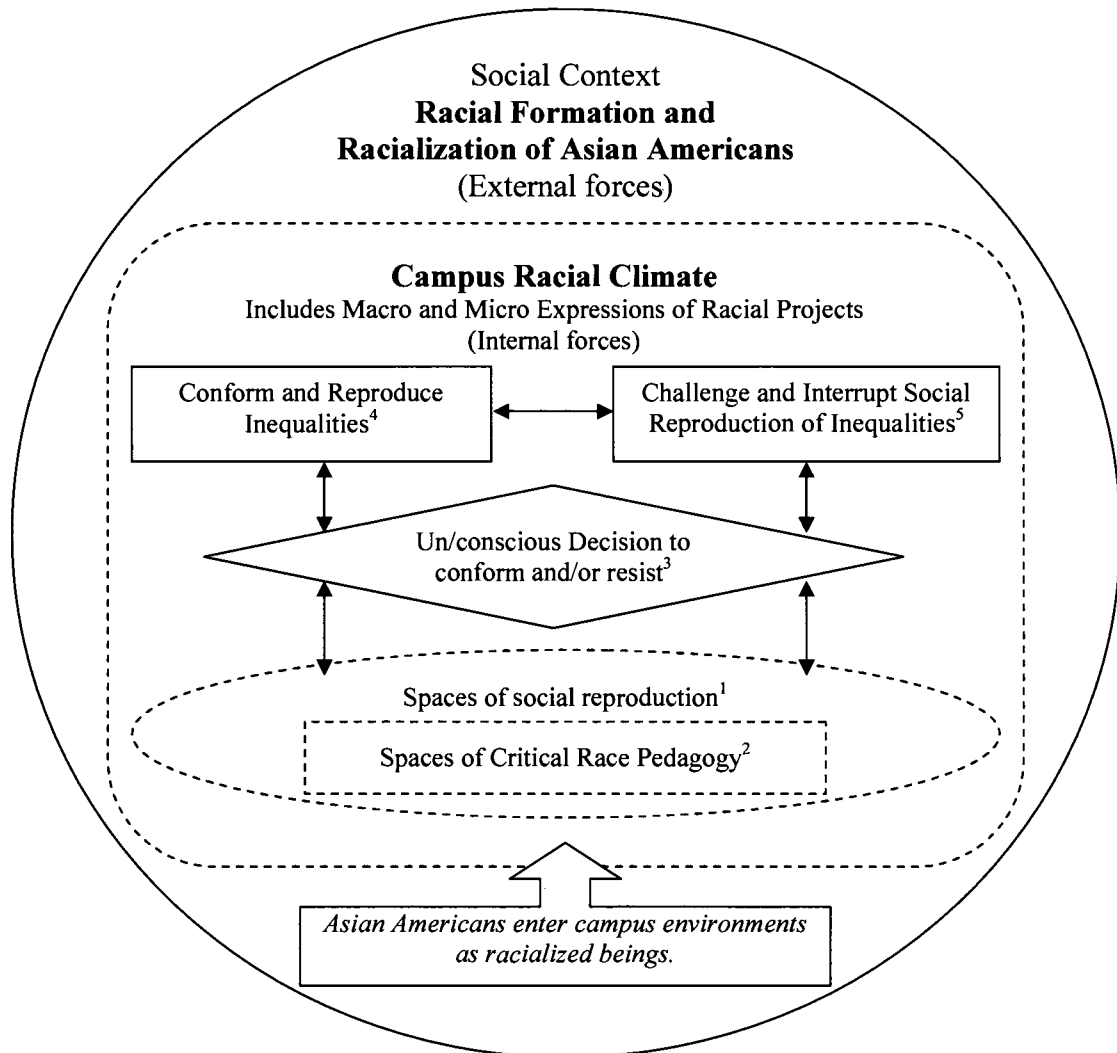


The Critical Race Theory Model of Campus Racial Climate (figure 3.1) represents the symbiotic relationship between the social context of racial formation (society at large) and the campus racial climate, which is formed by micro (e.g. experiences of racial microaggressions, interactions with faculty, relationship with mentors, family, and peers) and macro (e.g. institutional policies and resources, student movements) racial projects, where students act as agents of social reproduction or transformation. As an educational setting, the campus environment is largely a reproduction of the external forces of the social context. However, what happens on the campus also has the potential to reshape the social context, which is why the boundaries of the campus racial climate are not solid. Within the campus racial climate, Asian American student engagement in acts of reproduction and transformation are shaped by their exposure to spaces of critical race pedagogy, spaces of social reproduction, and other types of spaces that are not addressed in this model. The placement of the campus racial climate space inside of the social context of racial formation indicates that the spaces of universities and colleges are embedded within the broader social context.

This model begins with the acknowledgement that through the process of racial formation in the social context, Asian American college students enter post-secondary institutions as racialized beings. Even before college, through the process of racial formation that shapes the social context, Asian American students have already been racialized, and have been participants in the reinforcement of racist projects or in social movement projects that counter racist projects. The college campus environment like other educational institutions consists of spaces of social reproduction (dominant

ideology) and spaces of critical race pedagogy (hope and social transformation), where interactions with people and institutions occur. Experiences within these different types

FIGURE 3.1: CRT Model of Campus Racial Climate



1. In these spaces, students are compelled to submit to the dominant racial order. This concept is closely tied to dimensions of the institutional legacy, structural diversity, psychological climate, and behavioral climate (Hurtado, et al., 1998).

2. In these spaces, students are both supported and challenged to gain a critical understanding of their experiences with racism. This idea is connected to both institutional legacy and structural diversity (Hurtado, et al., 1998).

4. This box represents acts taken by students to conform to the dominant racial order, and is closely linked to the behavioral dimension in the Hurtado, et al. (1998) model.

5. This box represents student acts of resistance to the dominant racial order, and is also related to the behavioral dimension in the Hurtado, et al. (1998) model.

of spaces present students with the option to conform to racist systems that privilege Whiteness, or the option to engage in acts of social justice transformation and hope.

The broken borders of the campus racial climate indicate permeable boundaries between the social context and campus environment and the possibility of changing the campus racial climate through the enactment of variety of social forces. While larger social forces permeate throughout the campus environment to shape the college campus, events and occurrences on campus also influence the social context. The porous borders of the various spaces – campus racial climate, and spaces of social reproduction and resistance – indicate that these are all fluid spaces that are subject to change based on the relationships between student agency, campus racial climate, and the social context. They also overlap with each other, since in many cases, spaces can be simultaneously empowering as well as marginalizing. For example, within pan-Asian American community activist spaces, queer students might feel that their sexual and/or gender identity is marginalized, while their racial identity is supported.

Spaces play a significant role in whether and how people engage in *conscientization* or a critical consciousness raising process. Space, as defined by Yosso and Benavides-Lopez (forthcoming), can be social, physical, and epistemological. Different spaces shape the experiences of college students. Spaces of critical race pedagogy provide opportunities for students to critically reflect on their role in society and better understand social inequalities. Once students have been affected by spaces of critical race pedagogy and their consciousness of social inequalities has been raised, it is possible for these students themselves to embody a space of critical race pedagogy as

they experience the world around them and reflect on what they observe and experience, applying their active consciousness. Aguirre and Lio (2008) demonstrate how college campuses have provided critical spaces for Asian American mobilization and engagement in actions for political resistance – from the development of the pan-Asian American political identity to the development of Asian American Studies and community-based projects. These spaces include, but are not limited to, classrooms where teachers engage in critical pedagogical practices, campus protests that may introduce students to concepts such as educational equity and access, participation in student organizations with social justice missions, community-based projects, or even new media projects on the Internet that question social inequalities.

Spaces of social reproduction, on the other hand, are spaces in which students' experiences reinforce racial and other social inequalities. These spaces may include the media, familial and social networks, and generally interactions with others in their experiences pursuing their college degrees. They generally serve to impose limitations on Asian American student behaviors and communicating consequences for counter-hegemonic actions. Within spaces of social reproduction, student experiences serve to reinforce conformity to the dominant social structure of inequality. Racial microaggressions commonly occur in these spaces, conveying messages of racist ideologies.

Racial microaggressions are daily experiences of subtle discrimination and racist assaults experienced by people of color that contribute toward the maintenance of their racially subordinated position and White racial power in society (Solórzano, 1998).

Occurrences of racial microaggressions represent the racist social structure. In addition to interpersonal interactions, racial microaggressions can be experienced by people of color through academic curriculum that marginalizes the perspectives of non-Whites. They can also be perpetuated through public policy. Even laws that appear race-neutral can have a racially disparate effect or be administered in a prejudicial manner (*Yick Wo vs. Hopkins*, 1886).

Spaces of critical race pedagogy are embedded within the spaces of social reproduction to represent the disturbing relationship between the two. Without spaces that reproduce dominance and injustice, individuals would not enact their agency to create spaces of resistance or critical race pedagogy. Oftentimes within these idealized spaces of critical race pedagogy, other social identities can be unintentionally or intentionally marginalized. For example, a pan-Asian American and politically progressive organization with a social justice mission that addresses a range of issues might not sufficiently address challenges that affect queer identified students, which may lead to feelings of marginalization. The queer Asian American students might choose to create a new space they feel would both validate their identities of race and sexuality. However, within this new counter-hegemonic space, which might be especially validating for gay Asian American men, lesbian Asian American women or transgender Asian Americans might continue to feel marginalized.

The model also positions Asian American students as agents within the process of racial formation embedded in the campus environment and larger social context. Experiences in both types of spaces – social reproduction and critical race pedagogy –

lead students to making conscious and unconscious decisions to act to conform or challenge dominant ideology and systems of inequality. Asian American students, like other students, traverse a multitude of spaces (e.g. classrooms, residential halls, Internet-based spaces, interactions with family, peers, faculty and others, etc.) that present opportunities for reflection and learning during their college experiences. This reflection and critical consciousness of society may lead them to act in transformative ways. These acts of resistance can take many different forms (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), which can even include strategic silences (Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002). It is important to note that resistance to hegemonic systems and forces often might not take the form of public marches or rallies, or other images of traditionally recognized forms of social resistance.

While critical race pedagogical spaces can influence whether they choose to become agents for social transformation, Asian American students still have the option to either conform to dominant ideologies in their behavior or opt to disrupt reproductive cycles of racial inequality. Experiences that occur within spaces of social reproduction can be jarringly dehumanizing. Foucault's theory of the Panopticon is useful to understand how Asian American students may choose to conform to structures of inequalities rather than to resist them. Foucault (1977) argued that the social structure can be studied as panopticon, which was a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through the specter of surveillance and discipline, the omni-present hegemonic forces of the panopticon of the U.S. racist social structure coerce people to conform and maintain relationships of inequality, which have been defined and shaped by

the state, through their behaviors even when this behavior and system does not promote their interests. This concept conveys how state power is enacted even without physical violence to maintain racial order.

Within the campus racial climate, Asian American students reflect on what it means to be racialized as Asian American college students and in society in general. Among those who engage in spaces of critical race pedagogy, some become actively engaged in countering and disrupting dominant racist projects in efforts to redefine the process of racial formation and relationships of power and dominance. Others who have been exposed to projects of critical race pedagogy choose not to actively engage in social movement projects. An awareness of the negative consequences of challenging dominant ideology may prevent them from moving beyond recognition of social injustices. Students who have experiences in hegemonic spaces of social reproduction will either continue the reinforcement and reproduction of dominant racist projects in the racial formation process, or they will seek out spaces and projects of critical race pedagogy to make sense of their experiences. Also, in different contexts of students' lives, they may conform to hegemonic values in one space, while simultaneously countering them in other spaces. This reflects the complexities of their lives. Throughout this process, the institutional context of the campus racial climate is informed by and affects the larger social context of racial formation.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Methods**

It is important to study campus racial climate as exhibited through behaviors and attitudes exhibited on a campus, through the perspectives and voices of students (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000), to understand the symbiotic relationship between the campus environment and students. In their review of campus racial climate literature, Harper and Hurtado (2007) found that more than three-fourths of published studies on campus racial climate utilized quantitative methods. Only one out of eleven studies on students' perceptions of campus climate used qualitative methods. Slightly over half (7 of 13) of the published studies addressing student experiences of prejudice and racism used qualitative methods. Harper and Hurtado (2007) also found that Asian Americans and Native Americans are understudied populations in the campus racial climate literature.

This dissertation contributes toward the study of campus racial climate in three ways. First, it is a qualitative study of the relationship between the campus racial climate and student agency, which is embedded in a process of racial formation. Secondly, it draws attention to Asian American experiences with campus racial climate. Finally, this particular study of Asian Americans and the campus racial climate is also a study of critical mass and racialization in the campus environment. What happens when students of color enroll in large numbers at a predominantly White institution?

This chapter summarizes the methodology used in this study, which followed the CRT method outlined by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), to answer the following questions:



1. According to Asian American college students, what are the different types of racial microaggressions they experience?
2. In what ways do Asian American college students respond, if at all, to instances of racial microaggressions?

First, this chapter explains how CRT guided the research methods. Then it describes the study setting, the sampling and data collection steps taken in the study. Finally, the data analysis process, which utilized a grounded theory methodology, is discussed.

### **Critical Race Theory Methodology**

Social structures privileging Whiteness or White dominance are largely invisible, yet wholly ingrained into everyday life (Sue, et. al., 2007; Lee, 2005; hooks, 2003; Lipsitz, 1998; Tatum, 1998). These structures of White supremacy manifest themselves in people's daily lives through racial microaggressions (Sue, et. al., 2007; Solórzano, et. al., 2000). Through a CRT lens, this study illuminates Asian American experiences with racial microaggressions in the campus environment and how subjects respond and resist these daily racial affronts. Racial microaggressions are expressions of the dominant racial order that privileges Whiteness. Therefore, the study also critically examines the process of racial formation embedded in the campus environment through the campus racial climate. It also contributes toward the knowledge of how educational leaders and teachers can provide opportunities for Asian American and other students to gain critical literacy skills around race and racism.

This study utilized the CRT methodology developed by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), which provides guidelines for conducting research through a CRT framework. First, CRT methodology positions research as an epistemological project that generates knowledge about the experiences of populations that have been marginalized by past research. As seen in chapter 2, research on Asian Americans in education has been limited by the unique challenges the diverse population presents. Additionally, in much of the existing literature on Asian Americans in education, Asian American voices and experiences have been largely silent, with research positioning these students and their families as objects to be studied. This study uses CRT to overcome these difficulties and limitations. CRT methodology challenges scholars to conduct research in order to develop theories of social transformation and to intentionally address social inequalities, which I have attempted to do in chapter 3 in presenting a CRT model of Campus Racial Climate through a grounded theory analysis of collected interview data. CRT methodology also positions research to examine and understand the experiences of people of color with racism and other forms of oppression as well as their responses to these experiences. These experiences and responses can occur inside and outside of the walls of schools, and must be understood within the larger social context. Finally, research conducted using CRT methodology should be done through an interdisciplinary lens, and it must aim to counter dominant narratives.

**Setting.** The study was conducted at UCLA with over forty percent of the campus' undergraduates identifying as Asian American. Asian Americans, therefore,

make up a significant critical mass in their visibility on campus. Although they are not the majority of the undergraduate population, they represent a plurality of the undergraduate enrollment.

With the large numbers of Asian Americans in the undergraduate enrollment, Whites are no longer the majority at UCLA and some of the other UC campuses. This new configuration of student demographics in these premier post-secondary institutions has led to unique controversies over racial equity and access to the public university. These intense debates have shaped the campus racial climate at UCLA affecting Asian American students.

Over the last several decades there have been significant admissions controversies at UCLA and the UC as a whole over race (Nakanishi, 1995). In 2006 less than 100 African American first-year students enrolled at UCLA leading to significant public discussion about race, admissions, and equity in college access. That year was also the ten-year anniversary of Proposition 209, which banned public institutions from utilizing race, ethnicity, and gender in admissions processes. Shortly after the African American admissions and enrollment controversy began in Fall 2006, the campus newspaper printed an editorial piece that called on the UCLA community to “blame the Asians” for the low numbers of enrolled African American, Latino, Chicano, and American Indian students (Levine, 2006). The satirical editorial was accompanied by a cartoon depicting the iconic Royce Hall in an Orientalist, pagoda style with a panda bear as the school’s mascot instead of the Bruin bear. The scapegoating of Asian Americans and the Orientalist cartoon in the editorial piece places Asian Americans squarely as outsiders to

the UCLA community; whose presence is fundamentally changing the character and identity of the institution.

During the 2008-09 academic year, public debate over UC admissions continued, with Asian Americans embroiled in the controversies. In the summer and into the fall quarter of 2008, the admissions equity debate reignited again, just as I was conducting my interviews of Asian American students. In August 2008, Professor Tim Groseclose (2008) accused UCLA of secretly using racial preferences in the admissions process, which would be in violation of Proposition 209. Groseclose concluded that the decrease in Vietnamese Americans admitted directly correlated to the increase in African American students, pitting the two communities in opposition to each other, and ultimately distorting the analysis of educational equity. However, he did not acknowledge that the cause for increase in African American students could have been the result of intentional and sustained efforts by a University-community partnership, which began partly in response to the dismal numbers of entering African American student numbers in Fall 2006 (UCLA Newsroom, 2007). Later in the same academic year, in February 2009 when the UC Board of Regents voted to affirm a new admissions eligibility policy, some Asian Americans were wary of the potential effects of the changes and organized limited protest over the decision. However, much of the debate was caused by unclear presentations of data and perhaps a negative collective community memory of the UC's historical treatment of Asian Americans (Poon, 2009).

These controversies were carrying on as I completed my interviews. All of my interviews were conducted in the fall of 2008, shortly after the Groseclose resignation

from the UCLA Academic Senate admissions committee and his report was released, which garnered significant media attention. Given this ongoing and active debate over educational access and institutional policies, I recognize that students I interviewed may have been affected by these events.

**Sample and Data Collection.** During the Spring quarter of 2008, I recruited interview subjects by visiting an Asian American Studies introduction lecture class, handing out flyers on Bruin Walk, which is the main thoroughfare on campus, by sending emails to a diversity of student organizational leaders (from both Asian American oriented organizations and mainstream organizations like the student government), and by using a snowball method and asking interviewed students to help recruit their friends to participate in the study. In the emails and flyers I handed out to students (Appendix A), I asked students who fit the study criteria to respond to a brief online survey, which allowed me to verify that the students fit the criteria for study. In order to participate in the study, students had to identify as 1.5 or second-generation Asian American, be enrolled at UCLA with sophomore standing or higher, and at least 18 years old. I defined 1.5-generation as Asian Americans who immigrated to the U.S. no later than the age of 12. I narrowed the focus of subjects to 1.5 and second-generation Asian Americans because the research literature recognizes these two groups of youth generally as being similarly acculturated to and familiar with dominant U.S. culture and intimately familiar with the immigrant experience (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). They also make up the majority of Asian American youth population. Fifty-two students completed the online

survey, which was administered through surveymonkey.com. All but one survey respondent met the criteria to participate in the study. I invited all fifty-one students to participate in individual interviews, and was able to complete twenty-five interviews. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes.

The following table summarizes the characteristics of the interviewed students based on data collected through the survey. See Appendix B for a more detailed table summarizing each subject's characteristics and pseudonym. Due to the self-selection nature of the sampling, the interview subjects' characteristics do not exactly match the patterns found among Asian American undergraduates at UCLA. In comparison to statistics describing Asian American student ethnic backgrounds (comparing table 4.1 to table 4.2), there is a larger representation of Southeast Asian American<sup>8</sup> (28% vs. 17.8%) and Filipino American (16% vs. 9.3%) students in the study than there is among Asian Americans at UCLA, and an under-representation in the study of East Asian Americans (48% vs. 59.8%) and South Asian Americans (8% vs. 13.1%). The gender balance between the subjects and the overall population was very close. Among the interview subjects, 56 percent were women, while 55 percent of the Asian American undergraduates at UCLA are women. For family income, the low-income or working class marker was less than \$60,000. I chose this threshold based on the UC's Blue & Gold Plan's criteria proposed in 2008, which planned to provide free student fees to all students whose family incomes were less than \$60,000 per annum. Given this definition

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<sup>8</sup> The UC Office of the President had not yet changed its "Other Asian" category in Fall 2008. It is presumed that a large majority of students identifying as "Other Asian" are actually Southeast Asian American.

of economic class, 80 percent of the interview subjects were from low income or middle income families.

Table 4.1: Characteristics of 25 Interview Subjects

	East Asian	South Asian	Southeast Asian	Filipino	% of Total
% of sample	48%	8%	28%	16%	100%
Female	6	2	3	3	56%
Male	6	--	4	1	44%
STEM	2	--	3	2	28%
Lib Arts	9	2	--	2	52%
Business	1	--	1	--	8%
Family Income					
<\$60,000	5	--	4	1	40%
\$60-\$89,999	4	--	3	3	40%
>\$90,000	3	2	--	--	20%
2nd generation	9	2	6	4	84%
1.5 generation	3	--	1	--	16%
Transfer students	2	--	--	2	16%

Table 4.2 Fall 2008 UCLA Asian American Undergraduate Enrollment

	26,536	As % of undergrads	As % of Asians
Filipino	991	3.7%	9.3%
Chinese	4,298	16.2%	40.3%
Japanese	544	2.1%	5.1%
Korean	1,540	5.8%	14.4%
Other Asian	1,902	7.2%	17.8%
South Asian	1,396	5.3%	13.1%
Total Asian	10,671	40.2%	100.0%

Data source: University of California Office of the President

Looking at their academic majors, the subjects in this study are much less likely than the overall population of Asian American undergraduates at UCLA to be pursuing science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) majors. Table 4.3 shows that

Asian American and Pacific Islander students are very similar to International students in their academic pursuits. Still, Asian American and Pacific Islander students are the most

Table 4.3: Fall 2008 Academic Majors by Race		
	%Non-STEM	%STEM
Asian American/Pacific Islander	42	58
Non-Hispanic White	61	39
African American	62	38
Latino	62	38
American Indian	66	34
Unknown/Other	63	37
International	45	55
Total	53	47
Data source: UCLA Center for Analysis and Information Management		

likely (58%) to pursue STEM majors. Only 42 percent of Asian American students majored in the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at UCLA. The pattern for all other U.S. students at UCLA is almost exactly the opposite of Asian Americans. Non-Hispanic White (39%), African American (38%), Latino (38%), and American Indian (34%) students were all less likely to major in STEM fields.

All of the interviews were conducted and completed during September and October 2008 and January 2009. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews with 25 Asian American undergraduate students. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Each interview was conducted in a private office at UCLA. Supported by a research grant from the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, I gave interview subjects a gift card of \$10 each for Amazon.com or Jamba Juice as a token of appreciation for their time.



Prior to each of the scheduled interviews, I emailed the participants a one-page outline (Appendix C) of the themes of racial microaggressions experienced by Asian Americans developed by Sue, Bucci, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2007). Sue and his colleagues identified eight major themes of racial microaggressions that target Asian Americans. These include, (a) alien in own land, (b) ascription of intelligence, (c) exoticization of Asian women, (d) invalidation of interethnic differences, (e) denial of racial reality, (f) pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, (g) second class citizenship, and (h) invisibility. They also included a ninth theme of microaggressions that were undefined. I asked the participants to review the definition of racial microaggression and the descriptions of the eight themes prior to our meeting. During the interview, I provided a hard copy of the handout that I had emailed them earlier, to facilitate our discussion.

Using the guiding questions in the interview protocol (Appendix E), I asked them to discuss each theme and provide evaluation based on their personal experiences during their time as UCLA students. I encouraged the subjects to share memories and stories of their experiences that related to each theme if they felt certain events and incidents fit the themes. I also asked the subjects whether there were experiences of racial microaggressions they had experienced that were not detailed in the Sue, et al. (2007) categories. Some were able to generate additional themes, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Through their personal narratives, they were also able to critique the themes and discuss the themes in more detail, contributing toward a redefinition of the themes. As students reviewed each theme and as they finished discussing the themes, I

also asked them to discuss how they responded to their experiences of racial microaggressions.

### **Data Analysis**

After each interview, I wrote brief memos about my immediate impressions of the meetings with students. I used these notes to develop a coding scheme (Appendix E) for analysis of the interview data. As I transcribed each of the interviews, mostly verbatim, I also made notes about themes that emerged from each interview, which helped me revise my codes for emergent themes. I then read and re-read each transcript, coding passages that fit each category and code. The codes were organized in two general categories. The first category of codes was used to specifically identify students' experiences with racial microaggressions. I used the eight themes articulated by Sue, et al. (2007) as general codes in this category for a thematic analysis. The second category of codes was used to identify responses to racial microaggressions. The generation of codes in this category generally followed the categories of resistance explained by Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001). Interestingly, at the end of some of the interviews, when I asked for any additional thoughts from the subjects, several students also commented about how the articulation and publication of the themes validated their experiences, and helped them better understand how race plays a role in their lives.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Racial Microaggressions, Asian Americans & Campus Racial Climate**

According to Constantine and Sue (2007), “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities (whether intentional or unintentional) that somehow communicate negative or denigrating messages to people of color” (p. 143). As demonstrated in my personal narrative in the introduction, racial microaggressions can be unintentional. The two women did not think twice about using a racial slur to describe the shape of their friend’s eyes. While they went on enjoying their afternoon over coffee and pastries, I spent a significant amount of time in turmoil over their unintentional offense. It made me angry, sad, frustrated, anxious, nervous, and resentful. Unless I chose to act in response to the incident, the weight of the event would fall entirely on my psyche, affecting my health, and the two women would never think again about the event and how their attitudes would impact others.

Sue, et al. (2007) have identified several themes of racial microaggressions that Asian Americans may experience, including alien in own land, ascription of intelligence, exoticification of Asian women, invalidation of interethnic differences, denial of racial reality, pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, second class citizenship, and invisibility. As counseling psychologists, they conducted their study in order to fill a gap in the literature to define and clearly describe what racial microaggressions are. They also hoped to better understand Asian American psychological and emotional “coping” mechanisms for racial microaggressions. By using the word “cope” the authors do not necessarily view the research subjects as active agents in political and cultural resistance

as Lowe (1996) described. I interviewed Asian American students within a specific campus context, using a list of the eight themes, to contribute toward the identification and description of racial microaggressions experienced by Asian Americans.

By examining the racial microaggressions that target Asian Americans, this study also allows for a better understanding of both a campus racial climate where Asian Americans are a critical mass of undergraduate students as well as the surrounding social context characterized by the process of racial formation. Racial microaggressions, as past studies (Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) have shown, are outcomes of the social context and campus racial climate. Experiences with these racially marginalizing incidents are representative of the larger social context and its different layers.

Based on interviews with twenty-five Asian American students at UCLA, this chapter presents four categories of racial microaggressions – exclusion, alien in own land, gendered racial microaggressions, and ascription of intelligence – that characterize Asian American experiences with the campus racial climate at a university with a critical mass of Asian American undergraduate students. Table 5.1 below provides a cross tabulation of racial microaggression categories students experienced by student characteristics (gender, family income, ethnicity, and academic major). Each percentage column indicates the proportion of each student demographic that has experienced different types of racial microaggressions, discussing the experiences in depth during the interviews. For example, nine out of fourteen (64%) of the female subjects discussed racial microaggressions that communicate the idea that Asian Americans do not belong in the

U.S. On the other hand, only five of the 11 (45%) of the male students interviewed expressed similar experiences. Although the percentages are useful for comparing the frequency of student experiences with racial microaggressions by demographic, the number of participants in the study is not large enough to be able to draw conclusive generalizations about different Asian American students' experiences with racial microaggressions. In other words, it is not possible to determine causal relationships between student characteristics and the types of racial microaggressions they experience.

Table 5.1: Racial Microaggression Categories by Student Characteristics

Category	Exclusion	%	Alien	%	Ascription of Intelligence	%	Gender	%
Female	10	71	9	64	10	71	8	57
Male	9	82	5	45	7	64	8	73
<\$60,000	8	80	7	70	8	80	5	50
\$60-89,999	7	70	4	40	8	80	8	80
>\$90,000	4	80	4	80	2	40	3	60
East Asian	11	92	6	50	7	58	6	50
Filipino	2	50	1	25	3	75	4	100
South Asian	1	50	2	100	2	100	1	50
SE Asian	5	71	5	71	6	86	5	71
STEM	5	71	4	57	6	86	6	86
Business	1	50	1	50	1	50	2	100
Non-STEM	13	100	10	77	12	92	7	54
TOTAL	19	76	14	56	17	68	16	64

Source: Interview Data

However, all twenty-five of the interview subjects articulated and discussed racial microaggression experiences that fell under one of the four categories. These experiences will be discussed by category in the remainder of this chapter. Student reactions in response to racial microaggressions will be discussed in chapter 7.

### Racial Microaggression Category: Exclusion

Through analysis of interviews, I found that experiences of being treated as a second class citizen, denial of racial reality, invisibility, the invalidation of inter-ethnic differences, and cultures and values being pathologized could be broadly categorized as experiences under a theme of exclusion. The interview subjects' discussion of these five themes, which were originally described by Sue, et al. (2007), demonstrated that they were significantly interrelated. These five themes show how Asian Americans are racialized in a way that excludes and dismisses them from being recognized as a diverse population of individuals and U.S. citizens. As second-class citizens, Asian Americans are excluded from the respect afforded to full social citizens in the U.S. When their experiences are invalidated as legitimate experiences of racism, or their experiences are invisible within dialogues about race, Asian Americans are excluded from the public discourse that acknowledges racial inequalities in the U.S. The ethnic lumping or invalidation of inter-ethnic differences among Asian Americans also dismisses the dissimilarities within the pan-ethnic group, which also can lead to the further denial of experiences with socioeconomic inequalities that need to be addressed. Although experiences of cultures and values being pathologized were rare among the interview subjects, these types of racial microaggressions served to further mark Asian Americans as outside of the cultural norms of the U.S. due to the privileging of Whiteness.

**Second-class citizenship.** Experiences of racial microaggressions under the theme of second-class citizenship convey the message that Asian Americans are somehow less than others, especially Whites (Sue, et al., 2007). Five students provided

detailed narratives about experiences in connection to these types of microaggressions. They discussed experiences of being overlooked by faculty and other staff in favor of White peers, the demeaning nature of public commentary reducing Asian Americans to racial mascots, and observations of the institution reducing funding to academic curriculum in ways that seem to target Asian and Asian American related course offerings.

While most of the interview subjects did not feel that Asian Americans were treated as second class citizens at UCLA or in California, which will be discussed further in chapter 7, some did share stories about experiences at UCLA when a faculty or staff member may have overlooked them because of their race. Priscilla<sup>9</sup> shared how she often felt overlooked in classes by faculty, “I usually sit in the front of class, but sometimes [professors] look at me [when I have my hand raised] and just pass my hand... I feel like the professor was racist and didn’t call on me.” Like Priscilla, Joe<sup>10</sup> also conveyed past experiences with feeling treated like a second-class citizen due to his racial status. As a marching band member for several years, Joe observed that the students in band and its student leadership, who are all selected by the band director and his staff, were overwhelmingly White, and did not reflect the racial demographics of the rest of the university’s enrollment.

I know for UCLA, band is mostly White. The director, he’s an old guy. He’s a little bit old fashioned. A lot of times you feel like he does discriminate against certain races. For a really long time the only drum majors were White trumpet players. This year there was a kind of an

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<sup>9</sup> All names used are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of interview subjects. Priscilla is a 1.5-generation Chinese American woman majoring in Ethnic Studies.

<sup>10</sup> Joe is a second-generation Taiwanese American man majoring in business.

exception... A lot of people always said that he was racist or liked to discriminate. So I was always under the impression that he was going to no matter what. But sometimes, I guess perceptions change.

In sharing his thoughts, Joe noted that he and many of his peers had noticed that the band director, a White man, had rarely selected non-White men for the primary leadership role of drum major in the organization. Additionally, because membership in the band is by audition, the demographics of the band are an outcome of the selection process organized by the band director and his staff. Whether the band director's attitudes have truly changed to be more accepting and inclusive of racial diversity remain to be seen.

Students also expressed frustration over public discourse reducing Asian Americans to a discursive tool as racial mascots as a second way in which Asian Americans experience racial microaggressions characterized by the second-class citizen theme. Cho (1998) explains, "The adoption of a racial group, or even an individual of color by a white political figure or constituency – a practice I refer to as mascotting – is necessary to deflect charges of racism and preserve the redeemed status of whiteness" (p.169). Essentially, mascotting is a patronizing process, which two interview subjects particularly objected to in sharing their thoughts about racial microaggressions that reduced Asian Americans to second-class citizens, who become silenced within the public discourse. They both viewed the Groseclose incident, which was discussed in chapter 4, as a racial microaggression against both Asian Americans and African Americans. In discussing the resignation and public statement by Professor Tim



Groseclose, which claimed that the increase in African American students at UCLA in 2008 came about at the expense of Vietnamese Americans, Kyle<sup>11</sup> shared,

I don't think highly of Groseclose because he specifically targeted the Vietnamese Americans. He was the professor who wrote the article that basically pointed out the Vietnamese community. Like, 'Oh it's so weird that Black student admissions went up, but Vietnamese admissions went down.' So like it's obvious that is a blatant attempt to first of pit our two communities against each other. And also it just shows how he's basically saying that all Black students that got in didn't deserve it because there's something wrong with the admissions process.

Eun-Mi<sup>12</sup> also commented on the Groseclose events of summer and fall 2008 through the perspective of a social scientist, explaining,

You shouldn't pit Asian Americans against other minority groups. It's just very misleading because data needs to be analyzed further to really get a full story. I guess even the Groseclose thing... the way that some people frame it is they're trying to pit the Vietnamese students against the African American students, which is divide and conquer. It's kind of the same thing as in the beginning of Asian American history, just manipulating Asian Americans to whatever policy that benefits the privileged.

Both Eun-Mi and Kyle characterized the Groseclose resignation and commentary as manipulative and it was clearly weighing on their minds as racial microaggressions when I interviewed them. Interestingly, as Ethnic Studies students, they were both concerned with the effects of the public controversy not just on Asian Americans but also on African Americans, exhibiting a larger concern beyond those who share their racial identity. They also both recognized the larger implications of Groseclose's actions as a symptom of a larger historical pattern of pitting minority communities against each other and of a process of dividing and conquering in order to maintain White dominance.

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<sup>11</sup> Kyle is a 1.5-generation Taiwanese American man studying Ethnic Studies and Anthropology.

<sup>12</sup> Eun-Mi is a second-generation Korean American woman studying psychology and Ethnic Studies.

Finally, students described experiences of racial microaggressions characterized by the theme of second-class citizen committed by the university itself, especially through targeted budget cuts. During difficult budget times, all universities must make tough decisions for cost efficiencies. Two students expressed concern over cuts made to classes on Asian languages and cultures as well as to Asian American Studies. Seung<sup>13</sup> shared, “there was a budget cut, and the first thing they thought of getting rid of was Asian American Studies and Korean classes. There was a big fight during the summer... there were facebook groups.” He went on to explain that he and his peers suspected that the administration targeted Asian and Asian American related curriculum because of a perception that Asian American students would not rise up in protest. Eun-Mi also commented on the budget cuts to these courses and departments by asserting,

If administrating really values students’ input, they wouldn’t cut that. Things like language classes... [cutting them] ... that’s the idea that our cultures aren’t valuable enough to maintain the higher levels of language. I don’t know if they’ll be cutting the lower levels, but it still... it’s the whole idea of promoting diversity and then slash what students actually want on campus.

Seung and Eun-Mi both shared their concerns over contradictions in the institutions behaviors. On the one hand, like many other colleges and universities, UCLA stands firmly on a stated commitment to supporting diversity. Yet on the other hand, students observe the university cutting back on certain course offerings on topics like Asian languages and cultures, and see the insincerity in the institutional statements of diversity. And as Eun-Mi stated, these actions may be indicative of the university’s values in practice, which may have low levels of respect for non-dominant cultures.

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<sup>13</sup> Seung is a 1.5-generation Korean American male studying communications.

**Denial of racial reality.** One of the themes of racial microaggressions that emerged from the study by Sue, et al. (2007) was the denial of racial reality. Experiences with these types of microaggressions convey the idea that Asian Americans do not experience discrimination or racial inequalities, essentially dismissing Asian Americans who claim that they have experienced racial discrimination. Five students discussed this theme in depth, sharing their experiences of others dismissing Asian Americans as a population that is subjected to racial marginalization because Asian Americans are viewed as a model minority in both economic status and educational attainment. An additional three students discussed how this attitude translates into institutional practices of excluding Asian Americans from scholarship and internship opportunities targeting minority students.

For some, racial microaggressions that denied their realities of racial marginalization came from a general assumption that Asian Americans are all economically successful. Amber<sup>14</sup> explained why others view Asian Americans as a model minority, “I can see how with the whole model minority, how our experiences don’t matter as much, where some are doing so well, they’re almost seen as economically where White people are at.” Ken<sup>15</sup> learned about the model minority myth in a class he took on community health. Reflecting on the course content and his observations of the diversity of economic class in Asian American communities, he shared,

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<sup>14</sup> Amber is a second-generation Chinese American female transfer student majoring in Ethnic Studies.

<sup>15</sup> Ken is a second-generation Thai American man pursuing a STEM major.

I can see how the [model minority stereotype] is true, but I can see how it's false. Not every Asian is rich, but in Yorba Linda it's expensive. In that way they fit the stereotype, but in other ways like in Westminster, that's where a few of my friends are from, they have the more gangster types.

For Raakhi<sup>16</sup>, her higher than average economic class is used by peers to argue that she does not experience racial discrimination. She explained,

On the surface it looks like everything's perfect. And if you were like, "Well I do undergo discrimination," people would be like, "What? You have a comfortable home." I was actually talking to a guy who's Black about this freshman year. I was like "Discrimination isn't just Black and White. I can go through it when people call me dot or feather or exotic." And he was like, "Whatever. You're upper-middle class. You don't understand it." Kind of in a way, I got what he was saying. He's explaining that racism is even more apparent in poor communities, I assume.

Interestingly, all three of these students represent a range of family incomes from very low to very high. Yet, all three shared how the assumption of high economic status among Asian Americans affected them. . I had expected students from lower income backgrounds to have a more critical concern for future financial success.

Asian American students also had experiences with racial microaggressions that directly questioned the legitimacy of Asian Americans as a racially marginalized group. Raakhi shared that while she's felt outraged by being asked, "Which Indian are you? Dot or feather?" she has never shared these feelings with peers or others. She stated, "I guess if I spoke about this with other people, they'd be like 'Well it's not like they called you a derogatory word.' But if you're saying 'dot or feather' that's derogatory. You're not understanding either culture." In fact, at the end of her interview Raakhi expressed a

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<sup>16</sup> Raakhi is a second-generation Indian American woman studying economics.

gratitude for allowing her to express her anger over her experiences at UCLA with racial microaggressions, an experience she did not feel she had on campus prior to our meeting.

While Raakhi did not feel she had the opportunity to connect with others about her experiences with racial microaggressions, Lee<sup>17</sup> was very active in community organizing spaces on campus that allowed students to use institutional resources to address social inequalities. Yet, even in these politically conscious spaces, Lee felt that Asian American experiences still tended to be dismissed and excluded as being representative of true racial marginalization. As Lee shared,

[The student-initiated retention office] tends to be a predominantly Black and Chicano space. That's the people. It's kind of like the attitude of it. And it's as if their struggle is way worse than ours. It's kind of like this attitude like I'm more down than you or like my community's better than yours because I struggle more, which isn't even the case because oppression isn't even about comparability. So [Asian American organizations] were constantly left to legitimize our experiences and our struggle in that space. Because a lot of people are like "You're Asian. Why do you even need retention? Why do you even need these services? Look at your numbers!" 40 percent, right? Of course that 40 percent is an umbrella of like how many different ethnicities? And we're serving Southeast Asians specifically.

Even in these consciousness-raising and social justice dedicated spaces that Lee described, Asian American students continue to be marginalized in some ways.

Although Asian American students are still included in the student-initiated retention projects, some scholarships and internship opportunities no longer include Asian Americans in their eligibility criteria. The exclusion of Asian Americans from

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<sup>17</sup> Lee is a second-generation Vietnamese American woman studying art.

educational opportunity programs targeting minority students can unintentionally confuse Asian American students with their racial and political identities. As Jestine<sup>18</sup> explained,

I'm all for diversity and affirmative action, but sometimes it becomes reverse discrimination, I feel like. I applied to like 60 scholarships my senior year of high school and I wasn't sure if I was... I know I'm minority because 5 percent of the U.S. population is Asian and only 40 percent of that is Chinese, so I'm definitely a minority. But in California and in any school system, being Asian or Chinese is a majority. So I wasn't sure if for that scholarship, am I a majority or a minority? I'm still confused.

Even though neither Chinese Americans nor Asian Americans are a majority among the enrollment in the UC, Jestine has received messages that schools and other social institutions view them as a majority or minority depending on the circumstance.

Like Jestine, Ruth<sup>19</sup> has also contemplated the meanings of “minority” and “majority” based on her search for scholarships. She explained,

Sometimes I look for scholarships and grants or whatever for minorities. And I'm like “Oh yea, I'm a minority,” but it's only for Latinos or Black people. Do we not need help or something? I mean there's a stereotype that Asians are rich and they don't need the money, but it's not true. We do need to be recognized as a minority here and wherever there's help, we could use it.

Thus, Ruth believes that in excluding Asian Americans from eligibility, scholarship programs are operating on an assumption that Asian Americans are all wealthy.

Gary<sup>20</sup> explained that the exclusion of Asian Americans from programs promoting minorities in the sciences was likely based on the assumption that Asian nationals are the same as Asian Americans. He shared,

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<sup>18</sup> Jestine is a second-generation Chinese American woman, transfer student studying film.

<sup>19</sup> Ruth is a second-generation Chinese American woman majoring in a STEM field.

I wanted to apply to this program that has to do with minorities at UCLA, and I was looking through the requirements and it did not say Asians on it... I didn't think it was fair because we're still minorities in the sciences. In the science field Asian Americans aren't that represented. I feel like there are more Asians than Asian Americans.

Whether these statistics are true or not, Gary believes that as an Asian American in the sciences, he is outnumbered by Asian international students. However, he brings up a significant point about the relative representation of Asian Americans in different academic fields. As seen in chapter 4, Asian Americans at UCLA are much less likely than other students to major in humanities and social sciences.

Overall, experiences with racial microaggressions can also go beyond interpersonal interactions to the relationship between student and institution. By excluding Asian Americans from scholarships and other educational opportunities that call for minority students with no explanation, Asian Americans are left to consider the implications of being left out and having their experiences of having a minority racial status questioned. They are forced to consider their experiences, which do not benefit from White privilege, but are not validated by some minority programs.

**Invisibility.** Encounters with racial microaggressions characterized by the theme invisibility were also common. Sue and his colleagues (2007) explain that these incidents occur when Asian Americans are left out of discussions of race and inequality. As in incidents related to the denial of racial reality theme, Asian American experiences with racial inequality and discrimination are dismissed as irrelevant. In fact, the similarities

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<sup>20</sup> Gary is a second-generation Thai American man majority in a STEM field.

between the two themes confused many interview subjects who did not see a difference. Experiences related to both themes effectively exclude Asian Americans from participating in dialogues on social inequalities related to racism. Indeed, based on interviews, it seems that despite the fact that Asian Americans make up a significant critical mass of undergraduates at UCLA, their experiences and stories remain largely invisible and dismissed.

Race in the U.S. has predominantly been understood and viewed through a Black-White binary framework (Takaki, 1992). However, Asian Americans continue to be excluded from the discourse on social problems stemming from racism. As Matthew<sup>21</sup> stated,

I talk with other people of color that just don't see problems for Asian Americans as being as real or important as theirs. A lot of it has to do with race in America being a Black or Brown versus White issue. Maybe certain types of racial issues aren't as tangible as like nooses hanging off a tree in a high school, but I mean these microaggressions, I would say, build up for people everyday. A fantastic place to see this is... have you ever been to juicy campus? It's the worst fucking thing in the world. People say shit that you wouldn't imagine people would say. There was one today. I go there to ... it keeps me inspired to keep doing work, for lack of a better word. Every time I think things are going better, I go there and some guy wrote ching-chong ching-chong for 30 lines. People say the most ridiculous racist things that like you know they would never say to somebody in a conversation, even if it was someone their best friend, they wouldn't say it, but with the anonymity of the internet like which isn't even that anonymous, you can trace this stuff. It seems virtually anonymous and people say terrible things. [looks for web site] Oh yea, this is it. Talks about the Asians last night at Jefferson. Someone was asking about why there was a big fight, and there was a bunch of cops. And then, "Ching chang chong I eat dog. I like rice. I come to UCLA and cheat on tests, go to med school so my papa won't beat me. I have small wee wee. Ching chang chong.

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew is a mixed-race, second-generation Asian American who is part White and Chinese American. He is a transfer student majoring in history.



Matthew expressed frustration over his experiences with having more subtle experiences or even more blatant experiences with racism being dismissed as irrelevant, but he explained that he uses these experiences to drive him in social justice work. Indeed, Bonilla-Silva (2006) demonstrates that since the civil rights movement, White liberalism has defined racism as overt and blatantly violent incidents; leaving the subtler and less visible ways that racism operates go largely unexamined. And with the anonymity of the Internet, such incidents go on in more hidden forums.

Shirley's<sup>22</sup> comments also spoke to how the invisibility of Asian Americans in racial discourse left her confused about her racial identity. Shirley shared, "It's really interesting how I personally never thought of myself as a person of color until I got here. It was like, why would I be a person of color? I didn't really get it because usually [race] is a Black issue or a Latino issue. We are that weird invisible minority." She went on and discussed the implications of invisibility on being overlooked as students requiring support in the campus environment,

We have issues, but people don't really worry about it, just because they don't really consider us a minority. Though we make up a large percentage of the campus, I think it makes people think that we have no problems and we're still the model minority, which is annoying because I don't consider myself a model minority at all.

Interestingly, Shirley's comments point to the contradiction between the large numbers of Asian Americans on campus and the relative institutional negligence in recognizing and addressing their issues.

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<sup>22</sup> Shirley is a second-generation, queer identified Filipina American woman majoring in humanities.

Although universities are often viewed as spaces that are more liberal and educated on diversity, interview subjects discussed incidents in classrooms when others dismissed Asian American experiences with racism and social inequalities as irrelevant. These experiences largely led to a silencing of Asian American students from participating in class discussions and from sharing their perspectives with others. Raakhi stated,

I took the inter-racial dynamics [general education] cluster [during freshman year]. It was really charged. There were a lot of Asian people, some Black people. It was predominantly Asian. I found in the discussion that Asian experiences were... some of the Black students would roll their eyes. They just weren't met with as much empathy as when Black students spoke. I found people to be not listening. I think people generally understand the discrimination and derogatory words against Black people and against Hispanics, but they don't understand how bad it is to call someone a Gook or a Paki. They don't understand. They're like "What? Why is that bad?"

Ken's comments on Asian American invisibility in the classroom particularly spoke to humanities classes and show how he has silenced himself in discourses related to race.

In one of my classes, I tried to take a comparative literature class over the summer and I ended up dropping it. In one of the discussions, there was an African American girl, and she was very outspoken. Throughout my life, I've never really complained about race in terms of academics or talked about it. Because of the model minority image, it doesn't seem like racism affects us as much in a negative way. So why should we even discuss it? I definitely feel like for other ethnicities, especially for African Americans and Latinos, race is a huge issue. I never want to be like that. I don't know... I always viewed talking back in that way to be negative, so I just avoided it. As such, I guess I became invisible.

Ken's comments indicate that he has chosen to avoid publicly discussing how racism affects his life as an Asian American, which has led to his own actions contributing to his

own invisibility and silence. Mark<sup>23</sup> also discussed how he did not feel comfortable being open with his perspectives in class because of the invisibility of Asian Americans in course materials that include Asian or Asian American issues. He shared, “If I told a story, but a Black or Latino student told their story, I think theirs would take prominence because it comes with the image of Filipinos and Asians having reached a lot of success.” Therefore, in Mark’s case, the racialization that Asian American experiences with social inequalities are not as legitimate as other minorities’ has contributed toward his lack of classroom participation. In these situations, one must ask what the role of the professor or teaching assistant is in facilitating class discussion.

The lack of inclusion of Asian Americans in course materials and class discussions related to race might be an outcome of how invisibility contributes toward the dismissal of Asian Americans as an important population for research. As Ruth stated,

The invisibility thing, that really struck me because just this summer I got this flyer for this Los Angeles AIDS Society. They’re doing a research study on women and their use of lubricant during sex and they’re compensated pretty well. I wanted to participate because it was for minorities. But they were like “Oh ok, great. So, what race are you?” I’m like, “I’m Chinese,” and they were like, “Oh, I’m sorry, this is only for Black people or Latino people.” I was like, really? Are you serious? She was like, “Yea, I know. I’m Asian. I didn’t think that was right too.” I was like oh, ok. Well that sucks because Asian women have sex and use lube. I’m sure they could have some valuable things to say for that study.

The overall, relative ignorance about social inequalities experienced by Asian Americans creates a burden for Asian Americans to educate their peers and others, even in spaces that value diversity. Lee, who is heavily involved in student-initiated retention organizations on campus with many other students of color shared,

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<sup>23</sup> Mark is a second-generation Filipino American male pursuing studying biological sciences.

I explained to [the professional staff advisor] like the sentiment of Southeast Asian community feeling like delegitimized [sic], always having to prove ourselves and show people that we face adversities too. He was so surprised. He was like “Really? You feel that?” I’m really frustrated about it. As a person of color, I try really hard to educate myself to be conscious of what other communities’ struggles are. I think it’s really important to identify with the struggle and align myself with the commonalities. While we have different struggles, it’s the understanding that within a political structure we’re positioned, all of us are marginalized. It’s really frustrating to feel that while I have people’s backs, in certain moments when I need it, they don’t have my back. But whenever I talk about Asian American experiences, other people are just blown away. They’re like, “What? That happened to you in your lifetime? Your parents went through that?” They had no idea. It’s good they’re learning about it, but it also shows that people aren’t taking the effort to educate themselves.

Despite being a critical mass, and perhaps due to their significant representation on campus, Asian American experiences with racism are largely dismissed as irrelevant. Black and Latino experiences are used as the benchmark for racial oppression, based largely on under-representation and other educational attainment factors. The narrow definition of racial marginalization further silences and excludes Asian American experiences in the campus racial climate. As Lee has explained so poignantly, the notion that legitimate racism and inequalities is only experienced by African Americans and Latinos sets up a dangerous blind-spot that restricts educational leaders and researchers from fully comprehending and identifying systemic inequalities, which is necessary to effectively develop and implement solutions to address problems.

**Invalidation of inter-ethnic differences.** One of the most common experiences of racial microaggressions expressed by the interview subjects was the invalidation of

inter-ethnic differences. In the study by Sue, et al. (2007), these types of microaggressions suggest,

That all Asian Americans are alike and that differences between groups do not exist and/or do not matter. The intent of the aggressor in this situation is to express that they are familiar with Asians, but instead the message received is that the aggressor assumes that all Asians are Chinese or Japanese. Moreover, it is assumed by the aggressor that most Asians are familiar with each other, regardless of their Asian ethnic background (p.76).

Students not only felt annoyed in these circumstances, they also saw an East Asian centrality in the way Asian Americans are racialized, which also led to a systemic oversight in recognizing and addressing disparities experienced by Asian Americans who were not East Asian (i.e. Chinese, Korean, or Japanese).

Overall, some students recognized the ignorance among their peers when it came to diversity among Asian Americans. As Gary explained, “It annoys me often. Sometimes people don’t realize that the Asian American community is so diverse.” Jason<sup>24</sup> discussed his frustration over some people’s lack of respect for his ethnic heritage as a Taiwanese American. He stated, “I identify as Taiwanese. I don’t identify as Chinese. So there are times when I have to explain to people that it’s different.” Ignorance among peers over world politics and geography also frustrated Raakhi, who shared, “I feel that people don’t know the difference between Indian people and Middle Eastern. Also, I’ve had to deal with stuff like when people ask, ‘Are you from Indonesia?’ and ask ‘What’s the difference between India and Indonesia?’” While

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<sup>24</sup> Jason is a second-generation Taiwanese American male studying psychology and arts.

subjects recognized that these experiences are not the worst kinds of racist incidents, they found them annoying nonetheless. As Joe explained,

I know the hole lumping all Asians together happens a lot. It's kind of like, "yeah, whatever, you're all Asian," sort of thing. They don't want to figure out which ethnic... I can understand. There's a lot of Asians. But yea, Chinese are different from Japanese, are different from Koreans, etc. A lot of times, [my friends] like to do this joke because the marching band staff always mix me up with another Asian American. It's funny a lot of times... well... but, sometimes a lot of people do it too much.

Similarly, students also discussed how people often assume that all Asian Americans are East Asians (i.e. Chinese, Japanese or Korean). Gary didn't find these incidents that annoying, "except when they assume I'm already something. That's when I find it annoying, but if they're just like an open question, I don't mind." As Gary's comment alludes to, these incidents are microaggressions because the perpetrators have already made assumptions about the Asian American person, without taking the time or effort to get to know her or him. These suppositions essentially deny a person's individuality.

East Asian American identified subjects also discussed the effects of the presumption that all Asian Americans are Chinese Americans. As a Chinese American woman, Ruth admitted, "It doesn't bother me terribly because I am Chinese, and everyone is assumed to be Chinese. If I was a really small minority then I'd be bothered by it, but I could definitely see why [non-Chinese] would be bothered by it." Although assumptions that Asian Americans are all Chinese did not bother Ruth, it was something that Kyle had thought about in relation to his identity. Kyle explained, "I call it East Asian syndrome. It's having the belief that East Asians represent all Asians, and that

East Asian cultures or people are somehow better than other Asians.” Given this “syndrome,” Kyle shared that as a Taiwanese American, he has taken steps to try to learn more about other Asian Americans. He enrolled in Southeast Asian Studies courses, became involved in Southeast Asian American student organizations, and even went to Vietnam for a study abroad experience.

Although experiences with the invalidation of inter-ethnic differences seem relatively harmless, some students explained that these assumptions connect to an institutional neglect of educational disparities faced by different Asian American ethnic sub-populations. Gary explained,

If you lump people together, you kind of assume that there’s this broader stereotype of how everyone doesn’t have problems, but that’s not really true for other groups. In many ways it could harm smaller under-represented groups within the Asian American community. For example like the model minority kind of thing... you see Chinese, Japanese or certain communities do well in the general population, but then Hmong, Khmer groups aren’t. They’re still struggling. So that’s kind of harming people, grouping everyone together.

Gary’s comments are related to the institutional practice of collecting demographic and educational data without allowing respondents to select different ethnicities under the Asian American racial category.

Lee further explained the challenges of the lack of ethnically disaggregated data on Asian Americans,

Part of the problem is that Asian Americans being an umbrella term and basically most think the population is really academically successful, socially mobile, all that stuff. They don’t see a lot of the small issues within that umbrella, under that umbrella of the different communities. Like Southeast Asian communities are marginalized by refugee experiences, like undocumented status, and other problems.

While Lee has been active in organizations that work on educational inequalities and Asian Americans for several years, Shirley had just started learning about these issues through her recent involvement in Asian American student organizations. She shared,

Yesterday was general meetings for many of the Asian American student organizations and I went to a couple of them. I learned that United Khmer Students had only 50 new freshmen at UCLA. I was like, “Oh, I thought they were bigger.” And the Lao Student Association couldn’t find any new freshmen. Then the Pacific Islander Student Association said that only about 25 Pacific Islanders got admitted this year and half of them were athletes, and the other half they didn’t know where they were. They’re not coming to meetings. So it’s really annoying how people just group everyone together. It’s more; I realize it more now that I’m getting numbers in my head.

Both Lee and Shirley’s comments show that the institution can also perpetuate the invalidation of inter-ethnic differences by neglecting to collect data in an ethnically disaggregated fashion, so that educational inequalities for certain groups are not overlooked and excluded from institutional attention.<sup>25</sup>

**Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles.** Describing racial microaggressions that pathologize Asian American cultural values or communication styles, Sue, et al. (2007) focused on classroom settings where teachers require all students to participate in discussion, and argued that such expectations can be unfair to Asian Americans who are raised to value silence. In this theme, they also included experiences where Asian American cultural practices are derided for being strange, exotic, and

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<sup>25</sup> In response to the lack of full ethnic disaggregation of data on Asian Americans in the UC, Asian American undergraduates led a successful campaign that resulted in the further disaggregation of ethnic categories in UC data collection procedures. This campaign will be discussed in detail in chapter 7.



outside of American norms. Even though all of my subjects were students at UCLA, very few of them discussed this theme of microaggressions in much depth.

As someone who is proud of her Hindu culture, Raakhi shared that some of her peers have asked her questions about her cultural practices in a way that made her feel uncomfortable. She explained,

People will ask me with this attitude, “You have a monkey god? You have an elephant god? What’s up with that?” Our elephant god is seated on a mouse. People are like, “I don’t get it.” To me, I understand the significance. I don’t know a lot about other religions like Judaism or Islam, but I’m not going to be like... especially with that look on your face. I am very interested in religion, so I ask my friends questions like, “I’m not sure how to say it, but can you tell me more about that?” I feel like people don’t have the politeness or sensitivity to phrase it right. Sometimes I’m just like, “Yea, we have a lot of gods” when I don’t want to deal.

Again, like Gary explained earlier, the offense is not in the questions asked, but in the attitudes conveyed in how people ask their questions. Raakhi’s comments indicate that while she is willing to share about her religion and culture, she gets tired and frustrated by negative and judgmental attitudes about her heritage.

Lee’s experiences in the student-initiated retention programs offices were also indicative of cultural stereotypes that Asian Americans must face. At the time of her interview, Southeast Asian American student staff and leaders were facing significant conflict with the professional staff, none of whom were Asian American. Throughout the interview, Lee wanted to discuss her frustrations with how Asian American students and experiences were treated by non-Asian American peers and professional staff. One of the problems that the Southeast Asian American students were facing, in Lee’s opinion, was

that the professional staff seemed caught off guard by the voicing of concerns by students. Lee shared,

It's finally coming out. That's why people are all surprised, like, "Why are they complaining?" They're not used to us, but what if it was African Americans. It would probably be totally different. But because it happened to us, it's because we're stepping so much out of our stereotype. Like we're demanding so much. We're being so outspoken that people are like, "What's your issue? What's your beef?" I don't know ... maybe it's cultural. Maybe we've been socialized somewhat to take part in the role where anytime these issues happen to us we've been so compromising. We just want to resolve it with as little conflict as possible.

By articulating their concerns, the Southeast Asian American students may be acting in ways that other students and staff do not expect from them. The lodging of complaints seemed to come after several incidents, which were not addressed by Southeast Asian American students at earlier points in time. Lee admits that perhaps it was possible that they had been socialized to avoid conflict. The avoidance of conflict coupled with the staff possibly being surprised by the students acting outside of the stereotypically expected behaviors of Asian Americans may have led to the significant clash experienced. Interestingly, Lee noted that had she been African American it might have been possible for staff to not feel so surprised by the students articulating their complaints.

The pathologizing of Asian American cultural values and communication styles, invalidation of inter-ethnic differences, invisibility, denial of racial realities, and second-class citizenship were all articulated and defined by Sue, et al. (2007) as unique themes of racial microaggressions experienced by Asian Americans. However, through my analysis of interview data, these themes are all related to each other in the ways they exclude

Asian Americans from public discourse and recognition as an important population in the campus racial climate and in society in general.

### **Racial Microaggression Category: Alien in Own Land**

Of course, exclusion has largely characterized the history of Asians in the U.S. given the policies and laws that barred immigration from Asia. The historical legacy of exclusionary policies has led to Asian Americans remaining a largely immigrant population (Ong & Liu, 1994). Data from the American Community Survey (2005-07) by the U.S. Census shows that less than 40 percent of Asians in America were U.S. born. Therefore, regardless of citizenship or generational status, Asian Americans continue to be viewed as foreigners. This leads to the second theme of racial microaggressions – alien in own land. Within the campus racial climate, it may contribute toward the low sense of belonging in the University of California expressed by Asian American undergraduates in the UCUES data (Samura, 2010). In addition to encountering individuals who assume that they are from outside of the U.S., Asian Americans often have their cultural citizenship as Americans questioned, and Asian Americans studying non-STEM majors go through experiences that undermine their belonging in non-STEM fields. Interestingly, many subjects stated that they were often made to feel uncertain of their English language skills even when they were born in the U.S. and barely speak another language, if at all. Ironically, Asian American students also expressed anxiety over not feeling a sense of belonging or sufficient familiarity and knowledge about their ethnic heritage. These experiences can make Asian Americans question and seek a sense

of belonging in society, especially if the messages they receive from peers and others communicate that they neither belong in U.S. society nor do they authentically belong as a member of their ethnic communities.

Like other children of immigrants from Asia, many of the subjects interviewed shared the common experience of being asked, “Where are you from?” When answering the questioner with a U.S. location, Asian Americans next field the question, “No, where are you *really* from?” None of the subjects discussed this experience in depth. Rather, they recognized it as part and parcel of the Asian American experience based on their racialization.

Some of the interview subjects discussed how some ethnic cultural practices, beyond their physical characteristics, also mark them as foreigners and outsiders to the U.S. mainstream. Rita<sup>26</sup> shared a story from when she was volunteering for Barack Obama’s presidential campaign over the summer of 2008 that made her consider how accepting of diversity society is.

I was talking to a friend of mine, who goes to USC, and he was working with a group of people in the campaign, and three of the girls had hijabs<sup>27</sup> on while they were canvassing. He... it was a philosophical dilemma for him because... He was thinking this may or may not be good for the campaign to have people so openly Muslim wearing hijab out campaigning on behalf of Obama, especially since the perceptions out there are that his religious identity... his name, his father... all these things.

Interestingly, Rita tended to be sympathetic to her friend at USC who expressed concern over having people who were “openly Muslim” publicly supporting Obama. Although

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<sup>26</sup> Rita is a second-generation Indian American woman studying international development.

<sup>27</sup> Muslim head scarves.

she recognized the unfortunate nature of the situation, Rita acknowledged that certain characteristics marked people as outsiders in mainstream U.S. culture.

Raakhi also shared experiences of being made to feel alien to U.S. culture even as a second-generation American particularly related to how people remained largely ignorant about non-White cultures. She explained,

People ask me, “Do you speak Hindu?” I’m like ok, I guess I’ll forgive that. It’s not a language. It’s a religion. Are you Hindi? Why do you wear a dot? Is the dot really cow feces? Or do you really have 1,000 gods? Do you have to worship them all? I’m like, that’s ok, I can explain that to you. It’s a polytheistic religion. That’s fine. If you’re interested in the culture, I’ll tell you about it. Don’t come at me with “Do you put cow feces on your head?” American people do a lot of disgusting things that I’m not mentioning.

Again, Raakhi shows concern over how people ask questions about her background. She is generally open to people’s curiosity and even tends to accept what is essentially a burden of educating others about her cultural background as a cultural spokesperson. What is also interesting is that she also mentions “American people” as being separate from her, even though in another part of her interview she says, “I’m American born,” acknowledging that her frustration with people assuming that she is from a place outside of the U.S. Her use of the term “American” may indicate a level of an internalized definition of “American” that does not include South Asian Americans and perhaps other Asian Americans.

Kyle also shared an experience on campus where a White student’s questions and behavior made him feel uncomfortable and defensive over having Asian cultures exoticified. He explained,

I was at Thai cultural day and I was at our table for Thai Smakom, and this White guy came up and was like, “You know what? I’ve never been to Thailand, but I’m fascinated by the culture and I love the food.” It made me feel like he was objectifying and exotifying the culture.

Basically, the experience made Kyle feel as though Thai culture cannot be normal and exist inside of the borders of the U.S.

Within the classroom, Raakhi also shared that she had observed White students expressing disdain with the large numbers of students perceived to be Chinese. She stated,

I’ve heard in class like, “Oh my god. It’s an Asian invasion.” I’ve heard that all around me in accounting classes, in my business and econ classes. It is predominantly Asian, but I don’t expect people to make comments like that. Or like, “Wow, this class is going to be ridiculously hard. Everyone’s from China.” When first of all, that’s not true. You can’t possibly know everyone’s from China.

As a South Asian American, Raakhi may be able to observe such comments because her racial identity is unclear for many of her peers.

Amber also shared stories about her experiences as one of the few Asian Americans studying political science. She stated,

In the seminar classes I’ve taken there’s so many people who are very political, who have very strong opinions. I have strong opinions, but I don’t necessarily voice them. When I took a seminar class, I had the person next to me say, “Do you have any opinion about this? Because I don’t see you Asian people talking about these issues.” It really struck me because I was sitting there, and I’m definitely interested in political science. Just because I didn’t voice them out loud doesn’t mean I don’t have a strong opinion about it or that Asian people don’t have a strong opinion about it. I was just taken aback. I didn’t know what to say at that moment. It was weird because I looked around and I was like one of two Asian females in the class.

Although there is an overall critical mass of Asian Americans at UCLA, in certain academic departments, they are not well represented. In Amber's case, it may have led to an experience of feeling alien in her class, and being forced into serving as a racial spokesperson. As indicated in chapter 4, unlike other students at UCLA, the significant majority of Asian Americans are majoring in STEM fields. This pattern of academic major distribution may lead to a sense of isolation among Asian American students in non-STEM fields, which will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

Interestingly, several interview subjects explained that they often experienced encounters with primarily White people that made them feel like their English language skills were not very good, even though they were either born in the U.S. or had spent most of their lives in the U.S. Even though Shirley was born and raised in northern California, she often encountered incidents that made her feel self-conscious about her English speaking skills and made her feel like she was a foreigner. She shared,

I still have kind of an accent way of talking but when I was little it was worse. It was a really strange accent too. It wasn't a Filipino accent. It's hard to explain. I guess I had a weird speech impediment. I couldn't say Rs correctly. So when I would talk, a lot of people would think I was from somewhere else, like I was foreign. And I'm like, "no I've been in California all my life." Then they'd be like, "Is English your first language?" And I was like, "Yea, I can't even speak Ilocano or Tagalog." Even last year, a friend of mine knew I was born here, but she was like, "Yea, I get confused because I know you were born here, but I don't know where your accent came from.

When I met Shirley, I did not detect any type of unique accent that would mark her as someone who was not from California. Yet, even though her first language is English, people she met would perceive some type of foreign accent in her speech.

Indeed, interview subjects identified one's speech pattern as a marker of acceptance or difference in U.S. society. As Joe explained, "If you have an accent, a lot of times people wish just call you 'FOB,'<sup>28</sup> even if you've lived here a long time. People will be like, 'Oh you speak weird, FOB.'" Ken also suggested that language skills and accents are indicators of whether a person is foreign or not. He shares, "People generally, unless they have reason to believe I'm a FOB, like if my English wasn't good...." Some expressed a sense of anxiety and self-consciousness in their own speech patterns that might indicate that they were foreign, even if they had been born in the U.S. or had lived most of their lives here. Raakhi had some experiences where people asked if she was from outside of the U.S. based on her speech patterns, but she never really knew how to respond. She shared, "I was born and raised here, and one thing I found interesting is that people will say, 'Some things you say have an accent.' I would be shocked. They'd be like, 'I can tell you're Indian.' I don't know how to respond to that." Both Wilson<sup>29</sup> and his twin sister Jill<sup>30</sup> felt especially self-conscious about their English speaking skills when they were around Whites and assimilated Asian Americans. Wilson explained,

I feel a lot more confident around Asian people, but then there's also a difference between white-washed Asians who grew up mostly in Caucasian areas, and they speak... but I guess I'm getting more confident. When I'm around Caucasians and white-washed Asians, they usually say "Huh? What?" So I assume they can't understand me. Or I might be mumbling or I might not be speaking clear or I might be speaking too fast. So it makes me worry, especially since I notice it's mostly Caucasians who are like "What? Huh?"

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<sup>28</sup> FOB stands for fresh off the boat, and is used to mock a recent immigrant.

<sup>29</sup> Wilson is a second-generation Thai American male studying arts.

<sup>30</sup> Jill is a second-generation Thai American woman studying anthropology.



Wilson's remarks indicated that past experiences had made him question his own level of acculturation as related to his speech patterns. His mention of both Whites and assimilated Asian Americans also suggest that his anxiety over language involves both race and class issues. Thus language patterns may also indicate a class status. His twin sister Jill also remarked, "I feel like because the White people have been here longer ... and my parents' English isn't so good. So sometimes I'll say something similar to them and I'll realize what I said wasn't grammatically correct." So although she was born and raised in California, Jill felt that being raised by immigrant parents put her at a disadvantage in her English skills compared to Whites.

Ironically, although it was common for the interview subjects to experience incidents marking them as foreign to the U.S., they also felt a sense of alienation from their ethnic cultures. Much of their sense of disconnection from their ethnic heritage was largely connected to their limited Asian language skills and what they perceived as their ethnic culture. Seung was born in Korea, but moved to Las Vegas when he was a toddler, and learned English in elementary school at the age of six. His remarks indicate that he struggled with being somewhat caught between living in the U.S. and a desire to maintain a connection to his Korean background. About his speech patterns, he explained,

My S's and T-H's. I have to REALLY try to enunciate. I think that's because my parents, when I first moved here, I only knew Korean and only spoke Korean until I was six years old. Then once we started going to school, [my parents] were like "Speak English. English!" After I started speaking English, they were afraid I was going to lose my Korean, so they were like "Speak Korean!" So I never got to fully learn one language. I'm a little limited in both. I'm more limited in Korean, but then my English pronunciation, enunciation is a little harder to do.

Partly in an effort to maintain his Korean language skills, Seung joined a Christian fellowship on campus with a predominantly Korean membership, so that, “I could practice my language, even though it’s more Americanized and we use way more English.”

While others view Asian Americans, even 1.5 and second-generation who have been largely acculturated to U.S. society, as representatives of Asian cultures in the U.S. and essentially as what Sue, et al. (2007) call “aliens in their own land,” interview subjects expressed some concern over their limited knowledge of their ethnic cultures. Amber comments demonstrate how identity and language have interacted to make her struggle with belonging in mainstream American culture and in her Chinese ethnic community.

You know how some people say, “You speak really good English”? That didn’t start happening for me until I got a little older. I would get something like the reverse walking in Chinatown. They would talk about you in Chinese, and when we would start talking to them in Chinese, they’d be like, “Wow, you speak really great Chinese.” It’s like the opposite is happening in the Chinese community because they see you as kind of an Americanized person, but you don’t really belong with other Americans in the system because you’re not really American because of the color of your skin.

In addition to non-Asian Americans making assumptions about their identities as foreign, Asian Americans also made assumptions about each other, making some like Amber feel marked as being not Chinese enough, yet still being marked as not American enough by her skin color.

Some of the interview subjects felt a desire to learn more about their ethnic cultures. Eun-Mi shared,

I wish I knew more about my own culture. I'm not that familiar with traditional cultures. From my parents, I got pride of being Korean, but they didn't really tell me much about traditional stuff. We have a Korean folktale book. I went through that when I was growing up.

Although Eun-Mi explained that she had her own reasons for not taking initiative to learn more about Korean culture and language, others did enroll in language classes at UCLA. Even though Joe had expressed a concern that some Asian Americans get ridiculed for having an accent when speaking English that marked them as foreign, he enrolled that year in Chinese language courses. He said,

I'm taking Chinese 1A right now. I wanted to learn the language because my family goes to China pretty much every year. So when we go to China, it's pretty much embarrassing not to know any Chinese. Here it's kind of almost sad to say like, "Oh, I'm Chinese, but I can't really speak or read or write Chinese."

Interestingly while Joe had discussed the shame involved with being marked as a FOB, he also discussed the embarrassment of not being literate in his ancestral language.

It seems that negotiating language – both English and one's ethnic language – and culture as an Asian American young person is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, as children of immigrants they are striving to make it in U.S. society, which requires a fluency in mainstream dominant culture, which has marked and racialized them as foreigners. On the other hand, they don't want to lose their connection to their ethnic heritage, and seem to feel somewhat alienated from their ethnic communities based on their limited language skills and cultural knowledge. They also seem to almost treat culture as something that they can connect with and learn about in a class or workshop. Overall, interview subjects shared that Asian Americans experienced racial microaggressions that conveyed the idea that Asian Americans are not true Americans

and that they are cultural outsiders to the U.S. And at the same time, they are not authentically members of their ethnic communities. Thus, they are challenged with the task of negotiating between the borders of U.S. dominant cultures and their Asian ethnic cultures, with which some have had limited contact.

### **Racial Microaggression Category: Gendered Racial Microaggressions**

The third category discussed in this chapter is gendered racial microaggressions. While CRT is primarily interested in racism, it also recognizes the intersectionality of one's racial identity with other social identities including gender. While Sue, et al. (2007) found that Asian and Asian American women are exoticized, the students I interviewed not only provided more details about racial microaggressions targeting Asian American women, they also identified gendered racial microaggressions that affect Asian American men. For many, college is a time to explore intimate relationships and their sexuality. For Asian Americans, how they are both racialized and gendered as sexual beings in U.S. society affects how others view them, and in effect how and with whom they develop intimate relationships. This section provides summary of ways in which Asian American women are objectified as observed by the interview subjects. It then discusses how Asian American men are also affected by gendered racial microaggressions.

The interview subjects in the study provided extensive details about how Asian American women are racialized and how it affects their lives. Many students shared their opinions about men with "yellow fever," which is a term they used to explain White men

who exclusively dated Asian and Asian American women because of their assumptions and images of what Asian women were. Interestingly, the term excuses the behavior of the men who objectify and exotify Asian women by explaining their desire for Asian women as an illness.

Several students discussed how uncomfortable incidents characterized by an exotification of Asian women made them feel. Ruth shared,

I really feel that Asian women are exotified. It really bothers me. I don't want people to look at me and say, "Oh she'll be my little sex slave" or something. That's disgusting, and I really don't like it when men have yellow fever. I don't think I could date someone with yellow fever, just because all you see is the color of my skin. That really bothers me.

In the same light, Joe acknowledged,

I know a lot of people who just love Asian women. I understand, you can have your preferences, but some people are just over the top. Sometimes when people say things like, "Oh I really love Asian women" or "I'd really love to be with an Asian woman" or "I'd really love to get with an Asian woman," it just makes me feel uncomfortable.

Even as an Asian American man, Joe is bothered by these incidents. While he could not pinpoint and articulate why these experiences made him uncomfortable, he knew that he did not like them. Tasanee<sup>31</sup> shared that her resident assistant in her dorm made her uncomfortable,

One of my RAs, he's White, but I guess from knowing his past girlfriends, they're all Asian. My Asian friends were like, "Ugh, let's not hang out with him too much." It's weird because he's got like yellow fever or something. It kind of sucks that your boyfriend likes you for your race, but I don't know. I like to think that people don't think like that because it's so... makes me uncomfortable.

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<sup>31</sup> Tasanee is a 1.5-generation Thai American woman studying business.

For Amber, her awareness of the exotification of Asian women came from first-hand experience. She explained,

It's funny because I never really thought it was true until I went out on a date with a White guy and he kept talking all about Asian women, and it felt very uncomfortable. So I went out with him last year. It was really odd because he asked my friend and then that's how the exchange happened. I felt very uncomfortable at the same time because he would talk about how all his ex-girlfriends were Asian, and how he liked Asian women and movies. I was uncomfortable because he didn't see me for my personality or like I didn't know what sparked his interest in asking me out. Was it just because of race? Was he just looking for another Asian girlfriend?

Amber essentially felt reduced to a racial caricature for her date's pleasure.

As a South Asian American woman, Raakhi's experiences with these gendered racial microaggressions were inter-related with the assumption that she was foreign.

When guys say things like that, "Oh you're exotic" or "What are you?" they mean it as a compliment, but I don't see it that way. The connotation is that you're from this far off land that I don't know of, and you look really different. You don't really belong here. Maybe I'm reading too much into it, but I don't take it as a compliment. They're reducing me to being just exotic. They're not asking me, "Where do you study?" or "What are you doing with your life?" I get like "Where are you from? No really, where are you from?" They also ask me about the Kama sutra, which isn't even really about sex.

Mark explained this interplay between the hyper-feminization of Asian women with the idea of Asians being foreign with the following,

I think one of the reasons why Asian American women are coveted and considered exotic is... I think a lot of men value obedience and subservience, and I think a lot of people assume that Asian women are going to be subservient and the perfect obedient girl. Plus they're exotic because they're from a different land, I guess.

In addition to sharing a plethora of incidents where others objectified Asian women, some subjects also described how Asian Americans also perpetuated stereotypes of the exotically sexual Asian woman. Walter<sup>32</sup> shared,

I see clubbing events by Asian organizations and sometimes on the flyers there are Asian girls there just... They think it would draw more people to go to their events because there's an Asian girl on the flyer dressed very scandalous. I think it's wrong. It further promotes the exotification of Asian American women.

Walter was describing party flyers distributed on campus by Asian American fraternities. However, Matthew, who is a member of a predominantly White fraternity, also acknowledged, "I definitely see exotification of Asian American women. I'm in a fraternity, so I definitely know a lot of White guys with yellow fever."

While Sue, et al. (2007) detailed how Asian women are objects of exotification, some interview subjects in this study also discussed ways in which Asian American women can be subjects in the relationship between Asian women and White men. Mark shared, "There's a lot of Asian American girls that I've talked to that only prefer White guys, and it really sucks. My first girlfriend, she explicitly told me, 'Yea, I didn't think I'd date you because you're not White, and I always thought I'd be with a White guy.'"

Gary also commented that,

Females are also like exotifying the White guy... well not really exotifying, but just like they're differentiating them in a way that they're putting them on a pedestal. "Oh, I want to marry a White guy." It might be personal preference, power structure. I don't know.

Claire<sup>33</sup> admitted that she was more attracted to White men and how the exotification of Asian women worked to her benefit,

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<sup>32</sup> Walter is a 1.5-generation Chinese American male studying engineering.

Yea it's like oh, there's a cute White guy. Cool, White guy. And the White guy's like, "Oh, Asian girl." And from what I've heard from my friends, White guys, they're like, "Oh yea, quote unquote White girls are not as clean." They say like Asian girls, we're like well groomed or something. That's when I was like, that's weird.

Claire's comments reveal that while some Asian American women prefer White men in intimate relationships, she also felt uncomfortable about how her White male friends described the grooming habits of women from different racial backgrounds.

Although Sue, et al. (2007) did not describe racial microaggressions that especially targeted Asian American men, several interview subjects detailed how gendered racial microaggressions that emasculate Asian American men affected them. In relation to how some Asian American women preferred White men in dating, Mark shared, "If you're going for an Asian American woman, and she says, 'I only want to date White guys,' it definitely affects you. People joke around about it, but sometimes it gets to you." These microaggressions can negatively affect the self-esteem of Asian American men. Ken explained,

There's a part of me as an Asian guy that's like, "Why can't the Asian guys get the Asian girls? The stereotypes of us are that we're socially awkward, always good at academics, but we can't approach women. That's why some of us are so bitter. We feel like we have a knife in our backs, like from the Asian girls who don't want us. As an Asian guy, I definitely feel it. We're just not really noticed. We're the nice friend, who all the girls come crying to.

Subjects also described that Asian American men are characterized as effeminate and unassertive through these types of gendered racial microaggressions. Matthew shared,

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<sup>33</sup> Claire is a second-generation Filipina American woman studying biological sciences.



Emasculation of Asian males. I would say that people don't take me as seriously as if I was White and had the same type of communications type. I can be very forceful when I talk, and I can talk my way around most people. I think to a certain degree I would get more clout if I weren't Asian. Also physically, this always crosses my mind ... is when I'm walking up Bruin walk or somewhere crowded and I move my shoulder to not hit someone. I wonder why they didn't move their shoulder. Why did they wait for me to move? Because I'm pretty nice, but I'm not so nice to the point where I'm not going to knock someone down to prove a point, because sometimes over the years these things do irritate you. I think race affects the space people give you.

Matthew's description of his experiences, suspecting that his race affects how people treat him, includes a brief discussion of how racial microaggressions can build up for people. Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) describe this effect as racial battle fatigue, which refers to the psychological accumulation of the negative effects of racial microaggressions.

For gay Asian American men, the emasculation of Asian American men via racial microaggressions operates somewhat more like the exotification of Asian American women. Two openly queer students interviewed explained that gay White men often target Asian American men because they are viewed as hyper-feminine. They called these White men "rice queens." Shirley discussed this phenomenon.

So there's this club in West Hollywood called Rage. On Friday, it's game boy night, which basically is when all the Asian boys go. I've been once or twice, and you can tell that the White men there are going to cruise. They're usually older White men. They're going for the younger Asian boys. Since they're more feminine, they get exoticized. I notice, now that that because they're gay, the gender norms switch over. So I see how White males go for the gay Asians, the gaysians. But it's really funny with the women. We're such the minority, I think. People don't really think there are queer Asian American women. I guess it's good that there aren't really a lot of stereotypes about us.

As we have seen, perceptions of gender, race, and sexuality interact, resulting in a variety of outcomes. These gendered racial microaggressions can affect individual self-esteem, create tension between Asian American men and women, and generally create a significant amount of discomfort. Experiences with these gendered racial microaggressions, like other types, can develop into racial battle fatigue, as Matthew described. They also affect people in different ways depending on their social identities.

### **Racial Microaggression Category: Ascription of Intelligence**

The fourth and final category discussed in this chapter is ascription of intelligence. Because Asian Americans are racialized as innately intellectually gifted, especially in the STEM fields, some of the subjects' experiences especially through racial microaggressions may communicate that they should be academically self-sufficient. This may also lead to an institutional ignorance of Asian American students' needs and a general negligence in conducting effective outreach to support their educational endeavors. This section will conclude this chapter by discussing how racial microaggressions characterized by the ascription of intelligence, as identified by Sue, et al. (2007), affected Asian American students.

Many of the interview subjects identified with this theme of racial microaggressions. For some of the students, academic achievement, particularly in STEM fields, is integral to being Asian American. While some acknowledged that stereotypes of Asian American intelligence gave them somewhat of a boost, which Shih, Ambady, Richeson, Fujita, and Gray (2002) call a "stereotype performance boost," many

also discussed how the stereotypes can lead to an institutional neglect of Asian American students.

Some students found the stereotype of the academically gifted Asian American to be uncomfortable, but were not sure how it was a negative stereotype, like Jason. He shared,

I guess a lot of people think of me as being really good at math or science, but I don't know. I guess it's because I actually was, but I mean, I don't think of it as a bad thing. People would come ask me for help... I guess it can be hurtful, but also I don't know. It's kind of not like it's a negative thing. So should I be mad about it or not?

Ruth, on the other hand, discussed how even so-called positive stereotypes can harm people, and also critiqued how this type of microaggression can make some feel uncertain of their Asian American identity if they did not have significant academic achievements. She observed,

The ascription of intelligence thing is definitely... I mean I guess some people consider it a positive stereotype or whatever, but I don't think there's such a thing as a positive stereotype. I think stereotypes in general just serve to trap people in these molds, and people will try to make them fit in the mold. If they don't, then they're suddenly ostracized. So for the intelligence thing... I remember there were Asians who didn't do well in my high school. They just really felt like they weren't Asian or something.

Delores' reflections on these types of racial microaggressions also indicate that being Asian American means being academically strong in STEM fields, and how peers treated her for not being good or liking at math.

My classmates would be like, "Oh, you're Asian. Why are you so bad at math?" I didn't really care, but our honors classes... everyone who was Asian was in the honors class. It was really easy for people who were Asian to get into honors classes. There was a lot more encouragement between us. My friend Joanie, she was in the regular class, and then

senior year, her friends... I guess we were the big Asian group. We were like, "Oh, take the honors class. You'll get in. They'll let you." And [administration] did let her, but I've always wondered like is it really that easy for anybody else? There was one Chicana student, and we were always telling her, "Oh yea, you're practically Asian because you're so smart."

Her comments also indicate that her high school might have been either intentionally or unintentionally practicing tracking, or within school segregation (Oakes, 2005). The stereotype of Asian American students as being academically gifted may have allowed one of Delores' peers to easily gain entry into the honors classes. On the other hand, tracking positioned the one Chicana student in honors classes as a token, but due to her academic abilities Asian Americans labeled her an honorary Asian American.

Indeed, racial microaggressions that defined Asian Americans as whiz kids particularly in STEM fields started before high school and continued into high school. Walter commented, "There's a term we used in high school called 'super Asians.' Basically they do well in every class, tons of extra-curriculars, after school SAT and AP tutoring classes, tons of volunteer work. All that so they could get into a good college." Walter wondered if these peers in high school were doing anything they actually enjoyed or had a genuine interest in. As will be seen in chapter 6, research has shown that familial expectations are the primary motivation for Asian American behaviors in career development, which are less driven by personal interests.

Several subjects discussed how others held an assumption that Asian American students had an easy time in school and that they were STEM students. Raakhi stated, "People assume that Indians are really smart. They always assumed I got straight As and don't have any problems." Jill also shared, "People assume that when you're Asian,

you're taking some sort of science class.” Claire also explained that people had assumed she had an easier time in school because she was Asian, “It’s just the fact that... you would hear it. Like, ‘Oh, you’re Asian. You don’t need to study as hard. You have it easy.’ You ever hear that? I used to hear that in high school a lot too. ‘You’re Asian. You’re naturally smart. You have it easy.’”

Indeed, it seemed through these racial microaggressions, Asian American identity was somewhat defined by academic success. Shih, et al. (2002) have shown how this stereotype can be a boost to Asian American academic performance. Additionally, Conchas and Perez (2003) identify some benefits of the “model minority” stereotype for Asian American high school students. They found that teachers and parents had higher expectations for Asian American students, which also placed significant additional pressures on these youth. They described these students’ experiences as “surfing the model minority myth,” to indicate the tenuous nature of the phenomenon. While Shih, et al. (2002) found that Asian Americans can experience a boost from a subtle activation of the stereotype that Asian Americans do well in school, they also found that a blatant activation significantly depresses their academic performance. Blatant activation of this stereotype can be enacted through racial microaggressions.

In addition to a complex stereotype threat effect, racial microaggressions connected to the ascription of intelligence can also lead to educators overlooking Asian American education needs. In their review of literature on Asian American education, Ng, Lee, and Pak (2007) discuss several studies showing how the stereotype of Asian Americans in higher education settings can lead to institutional neglect of Asian

American educational needs and even of racist incidents targeting Asian American students. Mark's comments on how the ascription of intelligence affects him as an Asian American student,

Everybody always assumes that since you're Asian, you're not allowed to struggle in class. If you're talking about what you had on a test, everybody's just like, "No, you did fine." Or if I say, "I have to retake this math class," they're like, "What are you good for if you can't pass this math class?" I think that's definitely a big stereotype, even on South campus<sup>34</sup>. I think there's a lot of Asian students, but everybody here at UCLA is smart, but there's no way to get around the racial issue. I'm expected to do well. I'm not allowed to struggle. I think it sets unrealistic expectations. I think you're defined by your race, rather than who you are as an individual.

As Mark's comments indicate, Asian Americans at UCLA are expected to be academically successful, which he feels is an unfair pressure. Despite this assumption, Walter shared that uniform academic success is not what he sees among his Asian American peers. He explained,

I know a bunch of Asian people who are on academic probation and subject to dismissal (STD). You get on STD if you can't get your grades up, and they kick you out after that. I know people who are Asian and when you look at them, you wouldn't think they would be in the academic status they're in. They were really good students in high school, and I would classify them as super-Asians back in high school.

As Walter's comments indicate, stereotypes of academic success often hide adversities faced by Asian Americans. Hidden problems experienced by Asian Americans can be exacerbated if Asian American students are reluctant to seek help or take advantage of campus resources given the message that as Asian Americans they should not need assistance.

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<sup>34</sup> South campus is where all the STEM departments are.

## **Chapter Summary**

As seen in this chapter, racial microaggressions may seem harmless, but they have real effects on the lives of Asian American students. Racial microaggressions are outcomes of the campus racial climate. They communicate specific messages to targets about their role and place within a community based on their social identities. It is surprising that UC survey data indicates that despite the critical mass of Asian Americans in the university, Asian Americans are less likely than other students to feel a sense of belonging (Samura, 2010).

The examination of their experiences of racial microaggressions indicates that Asian American students continue to be racially marginalized even at a campus where there is a critical mass of Asian Americans. Their lower sense of belonging on campus may be connected to the different racial microaggressions they experienced. The first category of racial microaggressions discussed in this chapter communicated that Asian Americans are both foreign and excluded from dialogues on race, as Americans, and largely invisible as a diverse population. Ultimately, these racial microaggressions can make Asian Americans feel like outsiders to the campus environment. During the college experience, racial microaggressions related to their gender identities may also present challenges in how they explore intimate relationships. Finally, racial microaggressions that communicate that Asian Americans are academically gifted can result in institutional

neglect of Asian American educational difficulties, as well as Asian American student reluctance to take advantage of campus resources.



## Chapter 6

### Racial Microaggressions as Social Constraints and Barriers in Asian American

#### Academic and Vocational Choices

Ruth: *Being a physician assistant or doctor or whatever isn't my dream job. Like it's something that I do want to do, but if I could have any job in the world, I wouldn't choose that one.*

Oiyan: *What would you choose?*

Ruth: *I don't know. I'm not sure. I have a lot of interests. Something more artsy definitely. I really like to sing and act, and I like to write too. But none of those things are ... I feel like would come very easily to me, just because of my background and because of my upbringing. It's also something that my parents instilled in me. They think the arts are much more unstable, so they want me to have something financially stable.*

Oiyan: *So it's about money?*

Ruth: *Yea, that and the stability. It's so hard for Asian Americans to break out into the entertainment industry in America. It's really hard. There are a lot who go back to Asia and make it big there. It's just really hard to break in here. The idea of the U.S. being the land of opportunity doesn't apply to everyone in all fields.*

The excerpt from my interview with Ruth exemplifies how racial microaggressions have shaped and limited her vocational pathway. Indeed, racial microaggressions characterized by the ascription of intelligence theme may create social barriers that hinder Asian Americans from taking advantage of resources on campus, and from pursuing academic majors outside of STEM fields or generally vocational pursuits that are atypical for Asian Americans - viewed as financially insecure or even closed off to Asian Americans. Although racial microaggressions may seem incidental, these subtle daily experiences contribute significantly toward defining social identities and shaping the social context, including the campus racial climate. Chapter 5 identified and discussed the different types of racial microaggressions experienced by Asian American

students at UCLA. It also briefly reviewed how the racial microaggressions could negatively affect Asian American students' experiences in college.

This chapter will take one of those racial microaggression categories, ascription of intelligence, and provide a more in-depth examination of how racial microaggressions create social barriers and constraints on Asian American academic and vocational choices. These limitations can affect the current and future socio-economic status and outlook of Asian Americans, both as individuals and as a racial group. After a brief review of literature on Asian American career development, the remaining sections of the chapter will demonstrate how Asian Americans learn about acceptable and unacceptable, or atypical, career choices during college through family influence, observations of racial discrimination in the labor market, isolation in non-STEM fields, and from their peers. Although occupational patterns among Asian Americans have largely been shaped by immigration policies that privileged and allowed a professional and technically educated class of immigrants to settle in the U.S., the occupational segregation among Asian Americans continues among children of immigrants and subsequent generations. Many messages of what vocational paths are acceptable or unacceptable are conveyed through racial microaggressions.

### ***Asian American Career Development Literature***

By and large, as predominantly immigrant population, Asian Americans have achieved a significant level of success in their occupational pursuits. According to the American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, between the years

2005 and 2007 it is estimated that 47.1 percent of all civilian, employed Asian Americans at least 16 years of age are in management, professional, and related occupations. In comparison, only 34.5 percent of all residents in the U.S., who are at least 16 years old and employed civilians are in management, professional, and related occupations. With nearly half of all civilian, employed Asian Americans in management and professional occupations, it is simple to conclude that Asian Americans are an extremely successful population. However, Leong and Serafica (1995) found a couple of studies indicating that Asian Americans are the most occupationally segregated population in the nation. In other words, they are more likely to pursue certain professions and less likely to pursue others than would be expected. Processes shaping Asian American career choices can explain these occupational patterns.

Generally, the limited research available on Asian American career development identifies family dynamics as a primary factor influencing Asian American career choices. Leong, Kao, and Lee (2004) found that family influence is a more important factor shaping the career choices of Chinese Americans than it is for Whites, whose choices are more affected by personal interests. In fact, a path model analysis by Tang, Fouad, and Smith (1999) determined that personal interest is not significantly correlated with Asian American career choice, whereas parental influence has a significant effect. Additionally, they found that the level of acculturation affects self-efficacy, which in turn was revealed to impact career choice and interest among Asian Americans (Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999). According to Leong and Chou (1994), the more acculturated Asian Americans are, the more likely they are to choose careers that are atypical (i.e. non-

STEM) of Asian Americans. Thus, less acculturated Asian Americans are more likely to follow existing occupational patterns among Asian Americans.

Both stereotypes and discrimination have led to severe occupational segregation among Asian Americans. The correlation between acculturation and self-efficacy may be tied to the relationship between labor market discrimination against Asian Americans and stereotypes of Asian Americans in the work world. The stereotype of Asian Americans as highly educated STEM professionals has its roots in U.S. immigration policies since 1965 that have prioritized the settlement of highly educated and professional immigrants (Leong & Serafica, 1995). This outcome of historical context may have created a stereotype effect that influences educators (e.g. teachers, counselors, college advisors, etc.) to encourage Asian Americans, even those born in the U.S., to pursue careers in STEM fields. Additionally, employment discrimination has limited Asian American career choices, which further reinforces occupational stereotypes (Leong & Serafica, 1995).

Whether conscious or unconscious of the social forces at play, Asian American youth may be affected by racial barriers in their career and academic choices. For Asian American youth, Leong and Serafica (1995) contend that because immigrant Asian American parents recognize discrimination in the work place and have a limited knowledge of vocational possibilities, they also encourage their children to pursue careers that have been observed among their social networks to provide financial and social stability. Louie (2004) also found that immigrant Chinese American parents placed significant pressure on their children to excel academically due to their understanding of

continuing racial discrimination in U.S. society. Because the immigrant parents never intentionally discussed racial discrimination, their children did not realize or understand their parents' insights on racism and often concluded that academic excellence was simply a Chinese cultural trait. Findings in Park's study (2005) also reinforce the significance of Asian American parental influence on their children's academic and vocational choices. Park (2005) identified a "repayment fantasy" among Asian American youth, who selected academic majors that they believed would help them to obtain great financial success in order to reward and repay their immigrant parents for the sacrifices they had made.

The remainder of this chapter will show how Asian Americans are socially disciplined through racial microaggressions and limited in their academic and vocational pathways. While parental influence is critical to career development decisions made by Asian American youth, it is also evident that social forces, which include racial discrimination, are important factors that shape the behaviors of Asian American immigrant parents. Therefore, it is important to understand career development choices as an outcome of the forces within the social context. Indeed, Leong and Chou (1994) concluded that there is an important relationship between Asian American career development and ethnic identity development. Thus, racial microaggressions, which are direct outcomes of the social context, play a significant role in shaping Asian American college student academic and career choices. Asian American career choices are not simply a result of their families' preferences, but rather, both their families' influence and

their own choices are largely shaped by the social context that has made Asian Americans the most occupationally segregated population in the nation.

### ***Family Influence on Career Choice***

Consistent with the extant research on Asian American career development, this study found that familial influence played a significant role in Asian American career choices, which may differ from their career interests. When discussing experiences of racial microaggressions related to the ascription of intelligence theme, interview subjects' comments showed that among their families, intelligence is defined as being connected to pursuing careers in STEM fields or other professions (e.g. business, finance, law, etc.), which they perceived to be more effective for achieving economic and social status stability. Jason explained,

*My mom and my oldest brother... I revealed that I'm considering going to film school after college, and they're just like "Why!?" And they're like, "You're a UCLA. You're so smart. You get good grades. Why aren't you using your talents? You're so talented." But it's just my passion is for arts. I just told my mom that I'm considering a music profession because I think she<sup>35</sup> can understand that more than film. I don't think she understand film as art. She just thinks it's like Hollywood and you make movies and have this Hollywood lifestyle or whatever.*

Even though his grades are very strong, Jason is not very interested in his Psychobiology major. For his family, Jason's decision to pursue a career in the arts is a waste of his intelligence. Unfortunately, as Jason understands it, his family members do not view a film career as one that requires much intelligence.

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<sup>35</sup> Jason's mother makes a living as a music teacher.

As an engineering major who has a passion for his chosen career path, Walter noticed many Asian American peers in science majors who did not belong there based on their lack of interest in the area. He believed that many of these peers were forcing themselves into STEM majors because of,

*Parents mostly, and also the high school too. My high school offered a lot of AP sciences more than the AP English, history, and things like that. I think just having a stronger background in math and sciences would stray them from the North campus<sup>36</sup> majors, and direct them into South campus majors. So like the San Gabriel Valley... all the schools with heavy Asian populations. Also I know a lot of math and sciences make more money. In the eyes of Asian parents, they work so hard to get here, they want their children to be successful. [Oiyan: What does successful mean?] Financially well off. So they push them to be engineers for stability. Lawyers... well not lawyers because that's more North campus. Doctors, pre-health professions... even like finance because you need a strong background in math. Not every Asian is into math and science, but they still want to please their parents. So they go into econ or applied math if they don't do science.*

Walter's comments indicate that high schools, which are shaped by school district politics and constituents, structure Asian American academic pathways to focus more on STEM fields based on parental concerns over their children's future financial outlook. Rita's comments also reinforce this idea. She explained that her public school district did not support the arts, abiding by the wishes of parents in the district who were concerned with,

*Financial security issues because most of the parents were immigrants and had struggled. Every parent is well intentioned theoretically, in making sure their child is successful and has opportunities they didn't have. I think in a lot of ways though, they crush the spirit of their children by not supporting their real interests, and just prescribing what they think is important.*

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<sup>36</sup> North campus is where social science and humanities departments are located at UCLA.

Both of the school districts that Walter and Rita attended were predominantly populated by Asian immigrants and their 1.5 and second-generation children. While Walter grew up in southern California, Rita grew up in northern California, which indicates that these parental concerns among Asian immigrants did not differ by geography. Their remarks also indicate that career development among Asian American college students may be significantly shaped by parental involvement in K-12 public schools, which can be largely influenced by how parents activate their social capital, which is also affected by race (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Moreover, they may point to education policy as a pathway and opportunity for Asian American populations, especially in areas with significant numbers of middle class Asian Americans, to gain political power and influence.

According to a few of the interview subjects, STEM majors were not the only pathways toward financial stability. For those who are not scientifically inclined, families encouraged them to pursue business oriented academic pathways. Although Jill is pursuing a degree in anthropology based on her personal interests, she is being pressured by her mother to go into accounting as a career. She shared, “My mom’s always like, ‘Do accounting. You’ll get a job with that.’ I’m like well, I’m thinking about it, but... I took an accounting class this summer, and I don’t want to do it!”

Similar to Jill’s experience, Raakhi explained why she was completing an economics and accounting degree even though she would prefer to major in political science,

*I really don’t like it, but my dad is like, “You have to do accounting. You have to get your CPA. I know he’s saying it because he wants me to make*



*my own living and not depend on them because they're not going to be there forever. I get that. I'm going to do it, but there's always going to be a little bit of resentment. I could have been doing something I really would have liked. I'm interested in politics. I have an internship with a Congressman. He's really powerful. I really like the internship. Compared to the I-banking internship I did, which was horrible, I really like working in politics.*

Unfortunately, Raakhi is making the choice to follow her father's desires for her despite knowing that it will create strain on her relationship with him. Her choice to follow her father's demands were reinforced by her desire to avoid the significant conflict she watched her older sister go through when she tried to break away from her parents' wishes. Raakhi described it this way,

*My sister's pre-med, and she wanted to do journalism. Her getting into med school was the hardest thing for our family. It was so much drama. She didn't get in the first time, and you have to wait a year. That year was hell on earth. She was like, "I wanted to do journalism. You didn't let me!" I think because my parents were really poor growing up, especially my dad. My dad was second youngest of eight in dirt poor India. They really want us to be financially successful.*

While Raakhi's father may have experienced extreme poverty before immigrating to the U.S., he and his wife have achieved a significant of economic wealth, sending their two daughters to one of the most prestigious and expensive private schools in northern California. Despite her family's upper-middle class standing, Raakhi believed that she needed to strive toward a high level of income as well, and believed that a political career after college would not lead her to that desired outcome.

Like Raakhi, according to Seung, some of his friends who are pursuing pre-med majors are also planning on making some money with their parent-approved degrees and then making a career change later in life to pursue their interests. Seung explained,

*Some of my friends, they're pre-med, but they don't want to be doctors. It's tough on them because pre-med's hard and they don't want to do it, but they're doing it. It's kind of ... I think some of their parents' thinking rubbed off on them, and so they want to make money. And they only want to do it for a couple years, make the money, and then do something else they want to do. To me, it's kind of like wasting your life.*

Unlike his friends, Seung had broken away from the STEM path after high school. He attended a math and science charter high school because his parents wanted him to become a medical doctor. Seung did not get much negative feedback from his parents about his choice to become a communications major. He believes that the lack of protest from his parents was because he framed the communications major as a highly competitive and respectable major.

While Seung's parents did not balk at his academic choice, Amber's mother ridiculed her daughter for pursuing a major in Ethnic Studies and political science and continuing on to graduate school for a master's in social work, which she did not view as a financially stable career. Amber explained,

*I do want to say something about the intelligence thing. I always thought that for me ... I have three older brothers, who were all very interested in math and science, and I always felt trapped by that stereotype. I think that was true even within immediate family. My oldest brother is very smart. He's a chemical engineer major. And my second brother was also a science major. My third brother was a math major, and so when I told my mom I was really interested in political science and Asian American Studies, she basically said, "What's that?" And I had a very difficult time explaining that, and even as I'm applying for grad school in social welfare, she doesn't understand the humanities and what that offers. I think she really cares about "What's the bottom line? What will get you the job?" She always taught all of us to believe that the sciences... that's what you should be good at, that's where you'll find a job because it has stability. I know that in my own family, it's been a struggle because I was always viewed as the dumb one because I was the youngest, and I was a girl, and my math and science was definitely not to the level of my*

*brothers. They're very gifted, so it's just like that gift didn't get to me, but I feel my talents lie in different areas.*

Unfortunately, Amber's family did not accept that she was gifted in a non-STEM area, which was not viewed with much respect, causing considerable pain for her and some conflict in her family. However, as a future social worker, Amber also believed she understood the reasons for her mother's behavior. She shared,

*I think stability for [my mom] is defined by economic stability, not necessarily in terms of your emotional happiness and things like that. I think part of her wants us to be happy, but I think economic stability is a priority for her. I think it's because we grew up and we weren't financially stable. So I think with her pushing us toward those fields, it's more seen as economic stability because you can be guaranteed a specific income. I think that's how she defines stability, and I think that's the reason why... she wants us to not suffer. I mean she works as a seamstress. So she always tells us we're spoiled and we're able to go to school, and we shouldn't be complaining about working or going to school or anything. I guess the culture is different because I know that with her experiences she's had to endure a lot. So I guess she sees what we got as a privilege.*

Although Amber's mother believes that higher education and a professional occupation in the sciences will guarantee a stable income, she might not be aware of the significant workplace discrimination that Asian Americans experience found in studies cited by Leong and Serafica (1995).

In order for Asian Americans to be prepared to face adversities in the labor market like racial discrimination, it is important for them to also gain skills in interpersonal communications, leadership, diversity competencies, which are more related to the humanities and social sciences (Pham, Hokoyama, & Hokoyama, 2006). However, as Rita observed, some immigrant Asian American parents were pressuring K-12 school districts to target arts and social sciences for cost efficiencies in difficult budget time and

to prioritize and even expand math and science offerings. Sharing her frustrations, she said,

*Where I grew up because everyone was college-bound and because people's parents had to struggle so hard to become successful and there was only one guaranteed path to success in our parents' minds... because of that, things like art, the magazine I worked on my senior year was cut. I was on it for three years – sophomore through senior year. My brother was coming to high school, and he was really excited to join our literary magazine, but they cut funding for it to put in another AP class. Things like that were happening – trade off's of art and music and sports and things I think are really enriching in high school for more cramming, more information, making you a competitive candidate to get into this college because that is X goal. I was always frustrated by that.*

In addition to financial stability, interview subjects believed that their parents were also interested in their children pursuing certain careers in order to bring social prestige and status. As Jason mentioned,

*I think for my mom, she thinks the best thing is to be a doctor. She cares about what other people think of me. If I'm a doctor, people will be like, "Oh, you're a doctor!" But I think she's thinking for herself, what she wants. So she can be like, "Oh, my son. He's a doctor!"*

Similarly, Seung's parents also believed that if their son became a medical doctor it would not only bring financial benefits but also social status benefits, essentially to live the American dream. Seung explained,

*I was born in Korea, and came to the U.S. when I was two years old. So I guess they wanted me to live the American life – money and get rich and respect, and to gain respect in the family and make money. They thought being doctors and being engineers or something would help you achieve it.*

Like Seung's family, Shirley's family was eventually accepting of her academic choices, even though her mother's social network expressed their skepticism over her humanities major. Shirley shared,

*I remember a lot of my mom's friends talking about doing pre-med or whatever. And I was like, no. They were like disappointed though. I'm sorry, I'm not going to be a doctor or nurse. Because I think my parents really thought I would end up as a doctor or nurse when I was little just because, I don't know. I guess I used to like the idea of being a doctor. And then in high school I changed more towards an English focus, and my parents were ok with it.*

Seung and Shirley's comments are a reminder that Asian American immigrant parents are not tyrannical, and although they have preferences and wishes for their children, not all of them will impose restrictive and unreasonable demands on them. Moreover, they prompt scholars and educators to better understand the motivating factors that influence parental behaviors. While it would be easy to dismiss some of the interviewed students' parents as ignorant and over-bearing, it would not allow us to understand the origins and development of these behaviors especially among immigrant Asian parents. The interviews indicate that parental influence plays an important role in Asian American students' academic and career choices, but they also demonstrate that the parents' views are also powerfully affected by experiences of poverty and other social inequalities, which they do not wish for their children. As a result, familial expectations may have created a stereotype effect that has influenced more Asian Americans to pursue STEM majors at UCLA than their non-Asian peers. Therefore, the large numbers of Asian American students in STEM fields is not necessarily due to a biological or cultural inclination, but rather, the parental influence that pushes Asian American youth into these fields may be connected to the historical legacy of immigration policies, economic inequalities, and experiences of racial discrimination in the labor market.

### ***Labor Market Inequalities***

In the opening quote in this chapter, Ruth pointed out that racial discrimination continues to hinder Asian Americans in certain industries making her question the moniker of the U.S. as the “land of opportunity.” Indeed, several interview subjects discussed how their identities as Asian Americans also hinder them from pursuing their career interests, as these fields are seen as unrealistic for Asian Americans to enter due to their race. Seung’s reflections on the ascription of intelligence microaggression theme reveals that the assumption that Asian Americans are innately talented in STEM fields also communicates that their racial identity means that they lack talent and ability in non-STEM fields. Thus, the stereotype that Asian Americans belong in STEM fields also meant that they did not belong in other professions, potentially creating a stereotype threat for Asian Americans in non-STEM fields, such as the arts. Seung shared his anxieties in pursuing a career in the film industry,

*Because I’m really into film and editing and stuff like that, it’ll be harder for me to go into that industry than for other people. Even in like music, it’s harder for us, for an Asian person to go into. Seems like a little bit of the intelligence finding... theme two, ascription of intelligence. Asians are only good for engineering, things like that, sciences and math. But when it comes to those other industries like music and film and anything else, it seems harder for them. I think it draws people away from saying like, “I want to go into that career,” to “I’ll just make it a hobby.”*

Seung’s observations of Asian American vocational patterns and of the film industry lead him to believe that there are more significant barriers to Asian Americans in film and music industries than in STEM fields. Like Seung, Jason is also interested in pursuing a career in the film or entertainment industry, and has also reflected on the lack of Asian Americans in these fields. Jason shared,

*I thought about the lack of Asian Americans in the arts the other day. I don't know any Asian bands, like rock bands. There's like Linkin Park. And in the film industry all I can think of is George Takei or Bobby Lee or like John Cho and Harold and Kumar. I'm not sure. I try to think of why, and I think people don't think it's a possible career choice.*

As they graduate from college and pursue their career interests, Seung and Jason may face being one of very few Asian Americans in the film and entertainment industries, which may present them with feelings of anxiety that may potentially result in a stereotype effect in his own career advancement.

Although Seung has taken initiative and worked during college on short films to prepare himself for his desired career as a film editor, other students might not be as proactive. Many Asian American students may be significantly hindered by stereotypes, a lack of Asian American role models in atypical career paths, and their assessment of discrimination in labor markets. They might be so affected that they will not even make an effort to explore possibilities in their desired vocational areas. Ruth's understanding of the adversities her father has faced in the work world has prevented her from feeling that career paths outside of STEM fields are viable. About pursuing a career as a physician assistant rather than exploring a career in arts, she shared,

*My dad was a communications major in Taiwan, and then he came to America and got a masters degree in communications, and he still couldn't find a good job. So he went back to school and got a degree in computer science. Now he's doing really well. I feel like Asians, and this is another stereotype, at least from my upbringing, and I see it's true... Asians really ascribe a lot of value to being set or stable. Math and science, engineering, medicine, law, those things are really stable, clear cut. You know you can do well, but to take a big risk on things like art, it's ... and I don't see a lot of Asian parents encouraging their children to pursue their interests... it's not safe.*

Ruth's comments indicate that for Asian Americans, safety along one's career path may be found in STEM fields and other occupations like being an attorney that are perceived to provide financial security, and perhaps a level of social status security and safety from racial discrimination. For immigrants in the U.S., the occupations that Ruth listed are also more common or familiar and seem to be unobstructed pathways to social and economic class stability.

In addition to observations of discrimination in labor markets, other students cited a lack of role models in atypical occupations for Asian Americans as a barrier to career exploration. For example, Jill has not explored her career interest of becoming an interior designer due to the lack of role models in the field that show her that a stable living can be achieved through this career path. She admitted to never considering a visit to the UCLA career services office. Although she is interested in being an interior designer, she stated, "I don't think I can make a living with that because I've never met one before and I don't know how they do. My parents are worried about if I'm going to make money." Unfortunately, Jill is willing to give up her interest in an interior design career without trying to explore such opportunities. Like Jill, none of the students interviewed had mentioned visiting the career services center to investigate options and possibilities and to seek resources for negotiating familial expectations, addressing anxiety over financial stability, and exploring their personal interests in carving out a career path. This finding reinforces the importance of family members as information sources for Asian American students and the need for intentional outreach efforts and targeted programming by academic and career counseling services on campuses.



Asian American fears and concerns over future earnings potential may be based on real economic disparities experienced by Asian Americans in the labor market. Studies cited by Leong and Serafica (1995) showed that controlling for educational attainment, gender, immigration status/nativity, amount of time worked, and gender, race continued to have a significant effect on Asian American salaries and wages lagging behind those of Whites and African Americans. These study findings suggest that due to race, Asian Americans experience considerable salary disparities, and that high educational attainment has not allowed Asian Americans to overcome racial inequalities to achieve equitable financial returns on their educational investments. However, these studies did not distinguish by occupation, and therefore include Asian Americans pursuing both STEM and non-STEM career paths.

### ***Isolation in Atypical Fields***

For students who chose to work toward degrees and careers in areas that are atypical for Asian Americans, the paths they follow can be somewhat racially isolating. Although about 40 percent of the undergraduate population at UCLA is Asian American, 58 percent of this group is majoring in a STEM field, spatially locating them primarily on the south end of the UCLA campus. Thus, with only 42 percent pursuing degrees in non-STEM fields, Asian Americans only represent about 17 percent of students within the academic spaces of North campus. Some of the interview subjects discussed their experiences on North campus, where there are significantly fewer Asian Americans, especially compared to classrooms on south campus, where about one in four students

identify as Asian American. For some, these relatively lower numbers of Asian Americans in North campus academic departments can lead to feelings of being the only one or one of the few Asian Americans in their classrooms. Shirley shared about her experiences of being one of the only Asian Americans in her classes,

*It's just really interesting how even in my Latin classes I noticed I'm the only Asian there. Maybe the one other random Asian there... they're only there because they're pre-med and they want to learn the terms. It's very strange. Because if I'm not in econ, because I feel like econ is an acceptable major for Asian Americans or whatever. But then literature and especially Latin class... especially this last summer I took a Latin class and I noticed I was the only Asian in class. Most everyone else, they were like White. Or it's funny... most of [the White students] were either Classics or English literature people. So it was like, you're kind of related to my field, but they're not. I don't feel connected to them. Sometimes I'll just notice, "Oh hey. I'm the only Asian in here."*

Shirley noticed how strange it is to be Asian American and enrolled at UCLA to encounter few to no other Asian Americans in her classes, and to be surrounded by White students. Even though her academic field is similar to her White classmates, she indicates that she does not feel a connection with them. Her experiences as the "only one" mirror the racially isolating experiences that many under-represented minority students go through. She also noted that economics might be one of the few majors on North campus that is acceptable for Asian American students.

Generally, other Asian American students also felt racially isolated on North campus. Jill commented, "A lot of my Asian American friends are science majors or business majors. I only know three Asian Americans, including my brother (Wilson) who are North campus." As a fine arts major, Jill's twin brother, Wilson also commented on his experiences of being one of the only non-Whites in his academic field on campus.

He stated, “In the art department, it’s mostly Caucasian. I think the art department is also mostly female. The professors are all Caucasian, and the students are mostly Caucasian. So it’s kind of awkward for me sometimes.”

In addition to familial pressures and observed labor market inequalities and obstacles that steer Asian Americans toward STEM or business related career choices, Asian American college students who deviate from these vocational pathways may face some social isolation in the campus racial climate as discussed in this section. Indeed, in observation of Asian American friends in art majors, Tasanee commented that she could not imagine being an art major as an Asian American even though she had a strong interest in arts. She shared, “I feel like if I was an art major, I might be an outcast because it’s not the typical Asian thing.” Her comment again points to the importance of role models and the lack of Asian American role models in atypical fields. The next and final section of this chapter will discuss how social networks also reinforce the idea that Asian Americans are best suited for academic and career pursuits in STEM or business fields.

### ***Social Networks***

The concluding section in this chapter will discuss ways in which interactions with peers reinforce create social constraints that tend to limit Asian American career choices to STEM and business fields. The idea that only certain professions are stable for Asian Americans is not only formed by inequalities in the labor market, familial expectations, and isolation in atypical fields for Asian Americans, it is also reinforced by

their social networks of peers as exhibited by Tasanee's comments. Tasanee, a business major, stated,

*I think a lot of Asians are going into accounting and like tax jobs, like in my major. I have a lot of friends who are doing audit tax because it's a very secure stable job, and that's... and at my internship over the summer at an accounting firm a lot of the people were heavily Asian as well.*

As demonstrated in Tasanee's observations, Asian American college students' social networks also influence the directions they take in their career development paths.

Some of the interview subjects majoring in non-STEM areas shared that their STEM major friends would often ask them why they would choose to study social science or humanities. Wilson had shared that some of his STEM major friends had teased him about his future prospects as an art major. However, in addition to teasing him about his economic potential as an art major, they also insulted his intelligence.

Wilson explained,

*The more frustrating part for me was they're like, "South campus is better than North campus." If you're on North campus it means you're not smart. That's frustrating because I did well in a lot of subjects in high school. For people to say that you're not good at math or physics, it's just frustrating because they say, "We're on South campus, we're smarter," and it mostly comes from other Asian people. It's just frustrating. It's more an offense toward my intelligence and less about my Asian identity.*

While these interactions with Asian American peers did not seem to make Wilson feel anxious about his financial prospects as an artist, they did further reinforce his sister's anxiety over her career path and ability to financially sustain herself. Jill shared, "The majority of my friends, once they graduate they'll find a job and get money." Like Wilson and Jill, Seung encountered classmates who questioned his decision to be a communications major on North campus. Seung stated, "I guess a lot of times, people

will ask what my major is, and they're like, 'Oh really? Not south campus? Not pre-med?' And things like that." Most of Jill's friends are both Asian American and STEM majors, which supported the idea that Asian Americans belong on South campus and that STEM degrees automatically lead to financial security for Asian Americans. Seung's interactions also reinforced the idea that it was strange for him as an Asian American to not be on South campus and be pre-med.

As a business major, Tasanee did not experience the social isolation and marginalization of Asian Americans in atypical majors on North campus, but she did empathize with a close friend who experienced significant difficulties. She shared,

*I had a friend who was a music major. She's Korean, and her twin brother is very smart, loves math, was bio, pre-dental. She always told me it was hard in her family because she felt like an outcast because music wasn't something a lot of Asian parents specifically want their children to do. She used to complain to me a lot, and she goes to Cal State for music. It's a very good program. She doesn't like that a lot of people are like "Oh, you go to a Cal State?" She says she gets that a lot especially from Asian American communities. I didn't know that it's a very good program, but now I do. She would tell me all the time she would get a lot of comments and then she said she's one of the few Asian people in the program as well. She says growing up, people would make fun of her a lot.*

For Tasanee, her friend's experiences were a lesson to her about the added stress that an atypical academic major or career choice brings for Asian Americans, who are viewed as less intelligent and ridiculed for following a career path with less prestige.

The idea that certain forms of academic inquiry are more valuable than others due to the relative economic gains garnered is a neoliberal notion that has affected both campuses and student behaviors to conform to market forces (Giroux, 2002). As Giroux (2002) argues, the pursuit of higher education and how educational institutions are

structured today are increasingly intertwined in meeting self-interests and corporate interests. The relationship between education and market forces can also be seen in recent test-driven educational reforms in the K-12 system, which tries to train students to view higher education as an investment for personal gain. These recent developments in education policy have eroded the value of education as a public institution that develops engaged citizenry for critical participation in democracy. Rita offered an interesting commentary on her K-12 school district and its priorities as resulting from parental demands to devalue the arts and a well-rounded education, which affected her peers. She stated,

*It wasn't just the parents. It trickled down to the students, and it made everything hyper-competitive. It wasn't collaborative learning or enjoying the material or being curious having reflection. Students' questions were always, "What's going to be on the test?" or "How can I prepare for this test?" or "How can I do well by these standards laid out for me?"*

Given the social context shaping the functions of educational institutions from K-12 through post-secondary education, the students' behaviors in valuing more economically lucrative disciplines and careers simply reflect a larger neoliberal movement in education. Students who ridiculed their Asian American peers for exploring an academic field that are not valued within the neoliberal system were enacting a social discipline to reproduce and reinforce Asian American career choices that maintained their occupational segregation, and choices that made sense within the neoliberal, market-driven society in which they lived.

### ***Chapter summary***

Asian American career development should be understood and studied as a complex outcome of the racialization of Asian Americans, which includes discrimination, the context of immigration history and patterns, which produce social mechanisms of discipline to continue limiting Asian American vocational pathways. The high levels of Asian American occupational segregation should not be viewed as a result of a cultural inclination of Asian Americans to pursue STEM related careers or of immigrant Asian parental ignorance and domineering parenting behaviors. Stereotypes and assumptions of what Asian Americans are best suited to pursue as careers are reinforced through interactions with their families and peers. Their families communicate to them what careers are acceptable given market conditions and racial realities in the neoliberal social order. These messages are reinforced by the labor market inequalities, which they have observed on their own. They lead to a racial isolation for Asian Americans in non-STEM fields that are unrelated to business, which further reinforce messages that Asian Americans at UCLA belong on South campus and not North campus. Finally, through interactions with peers, Asian Americans are disciplined within social networks to conform to vocational expectations.

The findings discussed in this chapter challenge and complicate the assumption that Asian Americans are moving smoothly along an upwardly mobile path of immigrant adaptation and the idea that the U.S. provides unfettered freedom of self-determination to the largely immigrant Asian American population. They also suggest a number of important ways for Student Affairs professionals and other educators to better serve this growing segment of college students. It is critical for Student Affairs practitioners to be

aware of the complex experiences that many Asian American students may encounter, and how social and historical contexts have served to shape their academic and career trajectories. As a population that is generally reluctant to seek counseling services, it is imperative for student services professionals to conduct outreach to Asian Americans, especially since they may be more open to career exploration activities (Leong & Serafica, 1995).

Educators and student services staff should intentionally seek to develop and implement interventions and opportunities for academic and career exploration appropriate that target Asian Americans. Given the importance of family influence in Asian American career development, campuses should consider developing programs that expose parents of Asian American students to the broad range of career opportunities available to their children. Many Asian American students are first-generation college goers (Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007). Therefore, many parents of Asian American students are unfamiliar with the mission of higher education and resources and opportunities available in college. As Parent Programs continue to expand on college campuses to facilitate the involvement of mostly college educated “helicopter parents,” institutional leaders should also use these initiatives to help parents of first-generation college students to better understand higher education, campus resources, and academic and career choices (Lum, 2006). They may also do well to provide bilingual materials for parents who are limited in their English proficiency. It would be important for these programs to empower parents with knowledge and to position the parents as partners in their children’s education.



Programs and initiatives should also target Asian American students to support their academic and career decision-making processes in a way that acknowledges the social forces that shape their lived experiences. For example, to address the concerns among Asian Americans over discrimination in atypical fields, student services practitioners might consider partnering with alumni services offices to bring together Asian American students with Asian American alumni with established careers in a diversity of professions. Via mentoring programs or dialogues, students can be exposed to different career possibilities and even ask other Asian Americans about their experiences, receive advice from them about pursuing different careers as Asian Americans, and even mentorship on negotiating potential conflicts between family expectations and personal interests.

Overall, it is imperative for educators to become more knowledgeable about the lived experiences of Asian American students - an under-researched, under-served, and yet increasing population in post-secondary education. While these challenges may seem innocuous especially given that the forces of occupational segregation often lead to middle-class lives, they can lead to academic difficulties, family conflict, and other problems. For example, as a former academic advisor at two different public universities with large numbers of Asian American students, I often found that these students struggled to negotiate the conflict between social expectations and personal interest in their academic and vocational pursuits. These conflicts sometimes led to circumstances that created significant barriers to academic progression (Poon, 2003). Therefore, it is important for institutional leaders, educators, and student services professionals to be

cognizant of these challenges and to work with Asian American students and communities to address these educational needs.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Asian American Responses to Racial Microaggressions**

As discussed in chapter 4, this study utilizes a critical race theory methodology, which not only instructs research to examine the experiences of people of color with racism and other forms of oppression, but it also calls on scholars to identify and study ways people of color respond to experiences of racism and other oppressions. Solórzano, Allen, and Carroll (2002) also assert that it is important to study campus racial climate by examining student experiences with racial microaggressions and their responses to such incidents. By studying how students respond to racial microaggressions, I am able to gain a better understanding of how students' actions and reactions in light of microaggressions feed back into the campus racial climate.

In this last findings chapter, I present my summary and analysis of the various ways in which Asian American college students respond to racial microaggressions. The Asian American college students interviewed for this dissertation discussed a number of ways in which they responded to experiences of racial microaggressions. Some internalized and reinforced dominant racist ideology through their responses. Many believed in a California or west coast exceptionalism that framed racism and other forms of oppression as being abnormal or even outside of their experiences, even though during other parts of their interviews they discussed how racism affected their lives. Most of the interview subjects generally conformed to dominant ideologies of race, and even sought to cover parts of their non-dominant social identities through dress, language, and behavior in order to conform to dominant cultural norms. Many students rationalized

their experiences of racial microaggressions, learning to both accept their racially subordinate position in society and to passively let go of any negative feelings that arose from these incidents. Another interesting way in which students responded to racial microaggressions was to learn how to “pick their battles” in choosing whether or not to actively and directly respond to such occurrences.

A smaller group of students participated in transformative acts in response to racial microaggressions and generally to inequalities in society. According to Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), transformative resistance is behavior that demonstrates both a social justice motivation and critique of social oppression. Such behavior can also be categorized as either internal or external, which indicates that transformational resistance can take many different forms. The remainder of this chapter will discuss ways in which Asian American college students generally conform to and reproduce dominant ideologies and also how they engage in transformational resistance.

### **Reproducing Dominant Ideology**

Through the coding and analysis of the interviews transcripts, I found that many of the Asian American students’ behaviors in response to racial microaggressions largely conformed to dominant ideology. Their behaviors fell into four different categories: internalization, denial and exceptionalism, conformity and covering, and rationalization.

**Internalization.** Pyke and Dang (2003) explain that, “by accepting and internalizing mainstream racist values and rationales, . . . subordinates, often without a conscious awareness of doing so, justify the oppression of their group with a belief in

their own inferiority” (p. 151). They assert that internalized racism is an adaptive response that reproduces racism and racial inequalities. The internalization of racism serves as a barrier for individuals from developing a social justice orientation or a conscious and critical understanding of racism and racial inequalities. It is oppression perpetuated through the actions of the oppressed. Indeed, Freire (1993) argues that oppression can live within and be perpetuated through the acts of the oppressed.

Less than a handful of responses by students interviewed exhibited such behavior. Their comments indicated only a marginal consciousness of their internalization and acceptance of dominant values. As Tasanee discussed how her Asian American friends held stereotypes against other people of color, I noticed that her comments positioned Asian Americans as foreigners. In the following passage, the term “American” is used to refer to non-Asians,

I think one problem I have is with my own Asian American friends, like stereotypes they have about African Americans and White people. They talk about it in an ignorant manner. I get offended when that happens. I think there’s a stereotype that Koreans don’t really like African Americans or Mexicans. To me, my sense is that they wouldn’t even talk to them on a regular basis, but I think that’s a lot of that too. Not just Americans discriminating against Asians, but I think Asians also discriminate against Americans as well. I personally don’t like people like that because ... I mean I don’t think they should discriminate on basis of skin. Anyone can do that to you as well.

Interestingly, Tasanee admitted that she never confronted her friends about their behaviors. Also later in the interview, she disclosed that all of her friends at UCLA were Asian Americans and that she had made little effort to be friends with non-Asians. What is also evident in her statement above is that she does not refer to Asian Americans as

“American,” indicating that she has somewhat internalized the idea of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners to the U.S.

Later, Tasanee also shared a thought that suggests that she has internalized White ideals of feminine beauty. Discussing media images of women, she explained,

A lot of videos on perhaps women’s images of themselves like trying to be...but then saying, “Oh you don’t have to be thin.” And then... sorry, I don’t know where I’m going with this. But generally I do think that the typical blonde, pretty, skinny, that’s the hot image. Maybe I... yea, I probably do this a lot too. I want to be blond too.

As a Thai American woman, Tasanee does not fit the blond ideal of White beauty.

Unfortunately the quote above suggests that she has also internalized and idealized this racialized and gendered image of feminine beauty, denigrating her own physical characteristics.

In relation to public policy and how they affected Asian Americans, Joe had also internalized and conformed to dominant ideologies about racial inequalities and where Asian Americans in within a racial hierarchy. He commented,

I think financially and academically, Asians tend to be the higher groups, pretty close up with White people on academic proficiency and economic proficiency. I know they say polls, studies show that the Asian male is the highest academically proficient person on average. When it comes to affirmative action, kind of giving it to people who may not necessarily work as hard but are from a different race... It has to take away from somebody. You can’t just let in extra people. It takes away from the top, and a lot of the top just happens to be Asian American.

Joe has internalized the idea that affirmative action policies harm Asian Americans, and that Asian Americans are a monolithic group of people that have self-sufficiently achieved broad academic and financial successes that hide the inequalities that continue to affect different Asian American populations.

Claire's comments about what people should do about racial inequalities took Joe's sentiments a step further. Rather than address social inequalities experienced by Asian Americans, Claire argues that they should not complain and instead they should work harder. Talking about what she would do if she experienced a racial microaggression, she asserted,

I prefer to just be like, "Oh, ok," and if you overlook me, maybe it's because I could do something better like if it's for a job or something. You overlooked me not because of my race, but because someone else was more qualified. So I need to step up. That's just how I prefer to look at it. I guess rather than being angry at someone for discriminating against me, instead of placing the blame on them or like, "Oh, it's not my fault I didn't get this job or I didn't get into this school." It's like saying, "It's your fault because you're being racist." I'd rather not think of something like that.

The passage above shows that Claire prefers a color-blind ideology. Even if an incident were clearly caused by racism, she would rather blame herself for something that seems unfair than to understand a problem as being racist. Indeed, throughout the interview Claire seemed very agitated by the questions posed, and she confessed that she prefers to believe that racism does not happen in modern everyday society. Toward the end of her interview, Claire even explained that she prefers to, "live in a bubble" that allows her to think of the world as a fair and equitable meritocracy.

**California exceptionalism.** Like Claire, many other students believed they lived in a California bubble of diversity and acceptance. These students, though, understood and acknowledged racism continues to plague U.S. society. However, they did not believe racism directly affected their lives as Asian Americans in southern California or

at UCLA. This attitude is best exhibited in Jestine's comments as she reviewed the racial microaggression themes as articulated by Sue, et al. (2007),

I know exoticification of Asian women exists, but yea... Most people I know... they're pretty open. I'm sure if I go to the Midwest this stuff would happen, but in California it's more diverse. You don't really see Asian Americans treated like second-class citizens in California. I'm sure my parents might have something to say about when they first immigrated to the Midwest in towns and stuff. In California though, no, I don't think anyone has right out discriminated against me. I think a lot of it is implied or very subtle. Things like that, but nothing really.

Although in these comments Jestine does not acknowledge the existence of discrimination against Asian Americans in California, in another part of her interview she recognizes that Asian Americans are often discriminated against in the film industry, which is largely located in Los Angeles, as someone who wishes to pursue an acting career.

Especially in response to the description of the racial microaggression theme of second-class citizen, many of the interview subjects expressed a disbelief that such incidents could occur in California. Ken stated,

Second class citizenship... never felt this one before, especially in California. If anything like this ever happened to me, I think it would be a very big outrage. Everyone in California is very PC and very tolerant of everyone. Things like this might happen out there in a less tolerant state. I wouldn't be surprised, but it would still feel very negative.

For Ken, racial microaggressions that positioned Asian Americans as second-class citizens are things that happen outside of California, but in his mind such incidents are unlikely to happen in California. Jason's opinion on these types of racial microaggressions also indicated skepticism of such occurrences in today's society. He stated, "Theme 7 [second-class citizen] is pretty extreme. I've never heard of incidents



like this. I can't see it happening in this modern society and stuff." Joe also explained how he believes that anti-Asian discrimination was much more prevalent outside of California based on his family history. He stated,

When my parents first immigrated to the U.S., they were going from hospital to hospital; they faced a lot of racial discrimination. It was really rough for my parents because they always got the worst hours for everything and they were always expected to do things that other people weren't expected to do. It was really difficult. It was pretty much why we moved to California, partially because there was less racial discrimination against us here.

Tasaneer also commented that while she recognizes that Asian Americans experience certain racial microaggressions, she finds it hard to believe that they are possible in a place as diverse as Los Angeles. She shared,

I know some of my friends they get really offended because they've gotten the question, "Where are you really from?" OK, I think maybe freshman year they would ask like where in California, and I'd say South Pas, and they're like... I don't think anyone asked me like, "Where are you really from?" Maybe a few, but if I'd say South Pas, then ok, I'm fine. I think maybe UCLA is more... maybe it's unique. There's a lot of Asians so people assume I'm American already, so I don't really have that problem. Maybe if I were somewhere that has less heavily concentrated... I might get that more, but I think being in Los Angeles, because it's diverse enough already, I don't get that too much.

Interestingly, in this passage, Tasaneer refers to herself as American, whereas in other parts of her interview she subconsciously does not include Asian Americans in her definition of American. In her comment here, she also asserts a belief that in a place as racially diverse as Los Angeles racial misunderstandings are less likely to occur. Also, if the friends she is referring to live in southern California it seems that such experiences do indeed occur. However, she has framed the Los Angeles experience of racial diversity as being accepting and conflict-free.

Like Tasanee, Mark also acknowledges that Asian Americans continue to experience racism, but he also understands racism to be a Black and White conflict that does not affect him in California. He explained,

I think in California, I haven't really experienced the whole White and Black racism, but that's just something I haven't experienced. I still think it exists. My relatives go to the Deep South and they experience a lot of racism. I think there's still a lot of racism out there. I don't think I've experienced it here because I think with as many Asian people here at UCLA, I think they're a lot of more accepted. But I think probably elsewhere, you don't get the same amount of equality. I haven't experience it, but I'm very aware of it. If you're not White, you're a second-class citizen.

The quote above suggests that Mark believes that racism entails only blatant and overt, finite events. He also seems to believe that racial acceptance and incorporation is achieved through the large numbers of Asian Americans on campus. Yet, Mark is active on campus in a variety of educational equity projects because he believes that there are significant racial disparities that must be addressed. While he recognizes the existence of racial inequalities in California and works toward addressing them, he seems to also think that racism occurs only in places like the Deep South, which seems to be positioned as a very foreign place compared to California and UCLA in his quote.

Interestingly, while Rita understands and recognizes racial inequalities in society, she does not believe that racism continues to be conveyed through inter-personal interactions. She explained,

I just don't think we live in a society of overt racism anymore. It happens without knowing. Just being... where I grew up because of racial dynamics there and because this is an academic institution, and ... It seems like you're more judged based on your academic capacity and your involvement, and how you carry yourself more than your race. I guess I just don't really feel this way.

Rita was the only student interviewed who felt that none of the racial microaggressions described by Sue, et al. (2007) applied to her lived experiences. However, throughout her interview, she did share stories of incidents that seemed to fit the definition of racial microaggressions. Later in the interview, she said, “I think these themes are all probably experiences that happen all the time. They just don’t happen to me.” Thus, she recognizes the validity of such racial microaggressions, but believed they did not affect her own life.

As seen in this section, several interview subjects explained racial dynamics and conflict in society using California exceptionalism, which framed California as a place and space unaffected by the larger system of racism and White dominance. Some acknowledged that racism did in fact occur, but that such incidents occurred rarely in California and mostly they took place outside of California. Interestingly, some of the interview subjects’ who prescribed to California or Los Angeles exceptionalism also contradicted some of their other comments that came at different times in their interviews. The contradictions in what they said suggest that the students’ thought processes around racial conflict and social inequalities have not been fully developed.

**Covering and conforming.** Yoshino (2006) defines covering as the ways in which people restrain and diminish their marginalized identities through their appearance, affiliation with the culture, their activism or political identity, and their association with people who also share the marginalized identity. Covering can be either conscious or unconscious performative acts that require a lot of work in an effort to ensure that people

in power feel comfortable. Thus in the case of racial covering, individuals engage in activities that are viewed to be characteristic of mainstream White, middle-class culture. Covering is similar to conformist resistance, which is described as behavior that demonstrates a person's desire for social justice but also a lack of a critique of social inequalities, which leads to acts that generally conform to dominant structures of inequality (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

When asked to discuss their responses and reactions to racial microaggressions, several students shared comments that suggested conscious or unconscious strategies of covering or conforming to dominant ideologies and social systems. Rita, as discussed at the end of the last section, recognized systemic racism and inequalities in social systems of housing and educational inequalities, but did not necessarily acknowledge interpersonal incidents that were indicative of a larger system of inequality. Regarding the philosophical challenge over whether to allow three Muslim women who wore hijab head scarves to do canvassing and door knocking for the Obama campaign in 2008 that her friend faced, Rita explained the dilemma this way,

It was just kind of something he thought of because they were quiet, subservient, I guess not like me, not outspoken. You can kind of get beyond the way you look if you can project another identity for yourself and engage with people, and they eventually stop seeing just the exterior.

In other words, for Rita, it is important to cover one's marginalized identities to project a more outgoing and socially acceptable identity. The exterior appearance, as Rita discusses, can be a social barrier that can be overcome through a process of covering.

Students also use language to cover their marginalized status. Throughout interviews with Wilson, Jill, and Seung, the three students discussed how they have tried

to carefully pronounce and enunciate their English words so that others do not believe they are foreigners. Ruth also discussed this linguistic form of covering. She discussed a recent experience,

I think my doctor asked me that, "Where are you really from?" I was just like... I wasn't really angry, but it was annoying. Sometimes I find myself doing this... which is really bad, but I find myself wanting to establish really quickly that I speak English, so people won't think like, "What is this immigrant doing here?" or something. I shouldn't have to do that.

Ruth's comments suggest that she consciously asserts her English language proficiency in order to avoid being assumed as an immigrant, which would ascribe her to a lower status in U.S. society.

Ken also expressed a need to adapt his behavior to fit in with normative expectations for the work world. He explained,

In terms of overcoming our own Asian American upbringing, to speak up, that's just something we have to overcome. It may seem it's the institution being biased against us, but that's just something we have to deal with especially in the American professional world. The one who speaks the loudest is the one who also rises. If we want to succeed and we always have that drive to succeed, we'll adapt to it. So yea, we're still an adaptable people.

His comments indicate that biases should not be blamed on institutions, but rather it is the responsibility of Asian Americans to change their behaviors. He also suggests that it is important for Asian Americans to overcome their upbringing, essentially arguing that Asian American cultures are deficient in the professional world and must be muted if not discarded to advance in the U.S. labor force.

Covering can involve one's choice to not confront someone who says something offensive as Tasanee and Raakhi's comments suggest. Regarding racial microaggressions and discrimination, Tasanee explained,

I mean I'm sure there are cases of like hate crimes and personal discriminations that personally I haven't really experienced so I can't too much about it. I think questions like, "Where are you from?" is a simple innocent question. I really don't think Asian Americans should get too offended, personally.

Unlike Tasanee, Raakhi sometimes felt an uncertainty over how to respond to offensive things said to her. She shared,

After all these questions about the Kama Sutra, he asked, "Where would you say that the women have bigger butts? The north or the south of India?" I didn't even know what to say. When I get nervous I laugh. So I laughed about it, and was like, "I really can't answer that. I don't know. Probably on average the same." I just laughed at it because I can't believe he would ask something like that.

To cover her discomfort and avoid engaging in a difficult confrontation, Raakhi chose to laugh along with the White male who asked the question. Rather than explaining to him that his question was inappropriate, she went along with the situation.

Another form of covering involves cultural practices. Joe believed that his engagement with mostly mainstream American activities marked him as culturally American, or as he labeled it "White-washed," and separate from being a FOB. He explained, "I think a lot of it just has to do with American culture and if you do more Asian cultural things than American cultural things, then it's FOB. Everything I do is pretty much what we do in America, like movies and just hanging out I guess." Similarly, Raakhi understands that clothing could be used as a tool for covering class and immigrant status. She explained,

I haven't really experienced theme 7 [second-class citizen]. Well, I would say my mom and my dad do. They are... my dad is really successful. Both of them are, but they're really simple. They never go shopping for themselves. They wear simple old clothes. I'm always like, "You go to nice places, you should dress up!" And they don't, and sometimes they can get treated really badly. I find that to be a lot. I don't get treated that way because my sister and I spend all their money on clothes so we never have that problem.

In order to conform to normative expectations of the dominant White, middle class, Raakhi understands that dress can be used to cover one's class or immigrant status to gain access to better social treatment.

A primary characteristic of conformist behavior demonstrates that the student does not desire transformative systemic change. Rather, conformity involves agreeing with dominant ideology and structures. In addition to covering, several students exhibited conformist behaviors, like Jestine. As a budding actress and film producer, Jestine discussed how Asian Americans were treated in the film industry. During her interview, she shared that she was interested in becoming involved with Visual Communications, which is an Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) non-profit organization promoting the development of AAPI film making and inclusion of AAPIs in visual media – both television and film. She explained,

Because we're all Asian American, you kind of help each other and... it does... The number of Asian Americans involved with film making gets bigger and bigger with each film festival, and it attracts attention. It attracts Quentin Tarantino, people like that. They can make a difference because they're White. They have power. They have money. They produce.

Her comments suggest that while she believes in the importance of Asian Americans helping each other in the industry, she also views the support of Whites as equally, if not

more, important. Rather than acting to challenge the system to become more inclusive and to empower Asian American filmmakers, Jestine's comments indicate that she understands that Whites have power in the industry and must become benefactors to promote the cause of increasing the number of Asian Americans in the industry.

Through most of her interview, Claire remained rather quiet in most of her responses until I asked her what she believed Asian Americans should do in the face of racial microaggressions. At that point, she went on a lengthy tirade about the college admissions system and critiques of the UC being discriminatory in its admissions process particularly against under-represented minority groups. She asserted,

I feel like it's not really right to be like, "Oh, you're discriminating against us. You need to have more here because your numbers are low." But to me, it's like if they worked hard, if they made the grade. Or they had the same... I'm not saying they're dumb. I'm just saying that if they had the same academic level that I guess Asians and other expect out of us, just like we expect out of ourselves then I truthfully don't see why there should be a problem because if they're saying we're discriminating against... to me, they would be discriminating against Asians too because not all of us get in here. There are a ton of Asians who go to community college. There are Asians that go to Cal State. Or there are a ton of Asians who don't go to college. And so, I guess it makes me mad sometimes when people are like, "Oh yea, like they're discriminating against me because I'm not Asian." I don't think it's fair. I guess in a way, sure, there are a lot of Asians, but it's just because Asians compete. We compete with one another and we get our GPAs up. There is that academic level here that you have to be in order to come here. I guess I'm trying to be fair to UCLA. I think that I would hope that they're not that type of institution that would do that. I would hope they would want to maintain that level of intelligence and standards. I prefer not to think that, "Oh, you're being racist." I prefer not to think that the school I love and the school I go to is racist like that. Yea, just work hard because I mean if you're going to say they're discriminating against you then technically... OK, I got in on appeal but I make through appeal. To me it's like, oh you were Japanese, so if you're going to complain... then I can complain, "Oh, Filipinos are like we're under-represented in UCLA, like oh it's not fair, you're being racist against Filipinos. We want Chinese," or something



like that. To me it's like, why would you complain about something like that when you know... I guess my thinking... it's not true. I mean yes, their numbers are low, but I would... it seems it's more on them because if every single group complained, "Oh, we're under-represented," I mean if you look like. If you look at the 1% Native Americans, "Oh we're under-represented." You're being racist against us. I don't see it. I see it as they want to complain so they can get their numbers up so they can get an easier time to get into a university rather than putting in that extra effort and work.

Based on her commentary, it seems that Claire does not believe in raising concerns about racial inequalities. She prefers to give the benefit of the doubt to the institution and would rather not believe that institutions can produce racial inequalities. Rather, she believes that the responsibility lies with the individual to work harder to gain equitable education access. Interestingly, Claire admitted to being accepted to UCLA on appeal, which means her admissions the university initially rejected her on the merits of her application. Regardless of this personal experience and knowledge that not all students at UCLA are accepted simply based on admissions materials, Claire still believes that it is wrong to complain or raise concerns about inequalities. Her comments also indicate that she believes that the education system is a colorblind meritocracy. Her comments also suggest that she is unaware of or does not acknowledge the extreme inequalities in resources and opportunities across the K-12 educational system (Rogers, Fanelli, Medina, Zhu, Freelon, Bertrand, & Razo, 2009).

Indeed, some argued that it is important to maintain a façade of well-being as Asian Americans rather than speak up to ask for help or be viewed as someone who complains. When asked what it would mean to be an Asian American who was facing economic difficulties, Ken seemed somewhat disturbed by the idea. He explained,

The idea of economically struggling Asian Americans... just seems very strange, and it would be sad, but we... For me, we really wouldn't talk about that. It's a sweet it under the rug kind of thing. It's the idea of saving face. At least on the outside, we should be prim, proper, conduct yourself formally. This would just destroy that... You might have problems on the inside, but on the outside you always put up that front.

Ken also shared a story about his father teaching him at a young age to be strong, silent, and stoic even in the face of racism. At the age of 6, Ken was with his family at a local mall in a Los Angeles suburb. While there, Ken and his family were verbally attacked with racial slurs, which violently disrupted their relaxing weekend shopping at the mall. When asked what his family did, he said that they all silently got in the car and rode in silence home, as if nothing had happened, but the silence conspicuously indicated that something bad had happened. That day at the mall, Ken learned to be silent in the face of racism and other injustices. He also learned that he had no power in such instances, but only had power over his own actions.

**Rationalize and let go or accept the situation.**

I don't think I do anything in response to racial microaggressions. It's more that I think I've just accepted it. I just accept that it's part of living in America where there's a bunch of different cultures. Ideally every culture would be equal and no one would notice culture, but that's not the case. So it's just part of life, I guess. - Mark

Mark's comment about how he responds to racial microaggressions indicates that he simply accepts these incidents as part of life as a Filipino American male in the U.S., as a minority whose culture is not equally accepted in the mainstream. He has rationalized these experiences as part and parcel of his experience as a racially

subordinate person. Even though he believes these experiences should not happen, he does not feel empowered to do much, if at all, to combat them.

Like Mark, many of the interview subjects rationalized their experiences with racial microaggressions and accepted them as part of their lot in life in the U.S. as a person of color. They also tried to simply let go of any discomforts that came with these experiences because like Mark, they did not feel empowered to be able to counter the dominant culture and system that these racial microaggressions represented. Many shared a belief that racial microaggressions were extensions of individual ignorance, which came from a lack of exposure to Asian Americans. Others rationalized and excused racial microaggressions as not being representative of anything related to racism. While still others chose to simply let the incidents pass and try not to be bothered by them.

For some, it is important to have patience with people, especially Whites, whose ignorance may just be a function of their lack of exposure to racial diversity. Jason explained,

I would say that American society just has kind of built up that way to think subconsciously that Whites are better than other people, so you're not really thinking about it. It just comes out. I mean... I learned in my psychology classes that any sort of racial or discriminating feelings are purely psychological or purely cultural. I think with time, people will start feeling the same way, but I think right now, everything is still new. It's kind of about understanding. For Caucasians, they don't understand Asian American or Asian culture yet. They think it's just this exotic thing and like whatever. So they don't understand it so they'll say things to us, and we feel offended. But I think in some cases, you have a right to feel offended, but you should also not feel so offended and get so mad about it because people don't understand yet. I think over time, people will start to understand.

Jason's comments indicate that he is willing to be patient with others who commit racial microaggressions. For him, their lack of exposure to diversity leads to Whites committing racial microaggressions, which is no fault of their own in Jason's perspective. The view on racial microaggressions seems to absolve people who commit them of responsibility.

Like Jason, Raakhi's comments about people who commit racial microaggressions also pardon them from responsibility based on an assumption that they are not exposed to diversity. She shared,

I don't totally blame them because if you're not around a certain type of people, how are you going to learn about it? I was around... I was blessed because where I went to school there were Black people, there were everything. You name it. There were mixed, Hispanic, Indian, every different type of Asian. And I think that really ... I had a diverse group of friends too. We had a diversity club and diversity day. I went up with an Indian friend and explained Holi to the whole school what it means. So people were really culturally knowledgeable.

For Raakhi, racial microaggressions are a result of a lack of exposure to decorum in how to interact with different people. And as someone who went to an expensive private high school, Raakhi's comments might suggest that knowledge of cultural diversity is actually a privilege and a type of social capital that only some are able to access.

While some interviewees excused racial microaggressions by assuming that people who commit them have not been exposed to diversity in the past, others simply tried to not let the incidents bother them, like Kai<sup>37</sup> who stated, "When people make simple comments like that, usually I just shove it off. I don't find it's a big deal for me." Seung also commented on stereotypes that denigrate Asian American masculinity, "It

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<sup>37</sup> Kai is a second-generation Hmong American male studying engineering.

doesn't really bother me though because I don't listen to it, but yea, they're there." Even though I felt that Raakhi was one of the interview subjects most irritated recalling and retelling experiences with racial microaggressions, she argued that she did not believe the incidents affected her emotionally. She explained, "If emotionally you feel like you're being discriminated against... and I don't. I mean the comments are hurtful, but I guess I feel like I'm not going to let it stick to me. I let it go."

Other students rationalized and explained the incidents as not necessarily connected to racism. They used discursive strategies to rationalize racial microaggressions as normative experiences. For example, in explaining why the racial demographics of the UCLA marching band were so different from the overall undergraduate demographics, meaning it is predominantly White, Joe explained,

I'm not sure exactly why band is like that. I feel like band might simply be because a lot of Asians coming out of high school don't want to do band. A lot of times people think it's because the band director discriminates. I don't think he does as far as auditions go. If there's a good player, he'll take him no matter what. I know for my business frat, a lot of it comes from recruiting. A big room of Asians, we'll be recruiting and then a random White person will come along and be like, "Oh this is an Asian frat," so they'll kind of walk away. I know that's what happened for when I was going to recruit. I went with a friend, kind of Spanish or something. We got there and he was like, "Oh, they all look Asian. I won't fit in." And then he ended up leaving and I went alone. There's still that stick to your own race kind of thing.

In explaining the possible causes of the demographics of band members, Joe first defended the band director's practices. Then he used his business fraternity's own challenges recruiting non-Asian members to demonstrate how band is not the only organization with a membership that does not reflect the campus demographics. He also uses the business fraternity example to show that one of the causes of the skewed

demographics may lie in human behavior. He argued that people still self-segregate, based on his experiences and observations.

Tasanee used a similar discursive method to rationalize and normalize racial microaggressions that frame Asian Americans as foreigners. She explained,

If a White person went to China or Thailand and the like if they grew up there... I'm sure if people are still going to ask them, "Oh, are you from America?" So I don't think it should be too much of an issue because I guess it's just they look different from people who look native, but I mean I guess I could see how it could offend someone. I personally don't think I would be offended. I personally don't think that it should be interpreted as offensive to me because I think just like... I guess on the plane recently, I think people who sat next to me were two African American kids, and they were like, "Oh are you from Japan?" Like they couldn't tell what part of Asia I'm from. I don't really mind. I think yea, if I have to pinpoint where they're from, like natively from Africa, I couldn't do that either. So I don't think it should be such a big deal like, "Oh, I can't believe he asked me where I'm from" because I think it's how much you... and it's probably just ignorance, so they don't mean malice.

First, Tasanee explained that Asian Americans should not be offended by the question, "Where are you from?" by arguing that White people in Asia will likely get the same question because they do not look "native." Interestingly, this comment positions Whites as "native," and not American Indians as the indigenous native peoples of the U.S. She then discussed a recent incident where African Americans asked her if she was from Japan, an experience of both positioning Tasanee as a foreigner and an assumption she was Japanese. She rationalized the experience as a casual question of curiosity by explaining that she would not be able to correctly identify the part of Africa they were originally from. The tragedy in this statement is that most African American descendants of the slave trade would also be unable to pinpoint what part of Africa their ancestors were from either, given the brutal severance of ancestral ties and the continual separation

of families in the era of slavery. Interestingly, Tasanee's own comments demonstrate her own ignorance about the history of occupation and displacement of Indigenous peoples in the U.S., as well as the migration history of African Americans. Whether she is taking any effort to learn about the diverse peoples in the U.S., including Asian American history is unclear.

However, Tasanee does express a desire for UCLA's campus to be more racially diverse so that she could interact with a more diverse set of classmates. She explained,

I really wish it were more diverse because I don't like that most of my friends are Asian. I didn't do it on purpose. I guess sometimes that Asians like to stick together. I wish I could break that. I think racism... not just among Asians, but you know White people hang out together. Black people hang out together. Even Indians only hang out with each other. That's my impression. They don't interact with a lot of non-Indian people. So I guess I wish it were that way. I don't know. Maybe it's human nature that makes us do that, but ... I know there are people don't exclusively interact with their own people. I think if we could be all more open-minded, I think that would help us get over a lot of issues we have.

Tasanee seems to use the discourse of a lack of racial diversity at UCLA as an excuse for why her friends are almost exclusively Asian Americans. She then, like Joe, explained that a secondary reason for her mono-racial group of friends is human nature, which they both described as a driving force for people to stick to their own. Therefore, while Tasanee admitted that her own lack of exposure to different people hindered her from learning about diversity, she absolved herself from taking initiative to get to know different people on her own based on the campus' lack of diversity and due to human nature.

With that said, it is still important to note that the under-representation of African American, Latino, American Indian, and Pacific Islander students at UCLA is an

important factor that shapes the campus racial climate at UCLA. In fact, some students' comments in the interviews demonstrated the potential harms that Asian Americans endure on a campus whose enrollment does not reflect a critical mass of under-represented minority students. Gary's comments on racial microaggressions suggest that being in a space where there is a critical mass of Asian Americans provides certain benefits, particularly with not having to feel one's ethnic heritage is out of the ordinary. He explained,

There are so many Asian Americans on this campus; it's easier to see that there are difference within the community. If there were only like ten, then your assumptions would only be based on those ten. But since there's like 40% of the campus undergrads, you're able to see a whole strata of personalities and differences within like the Asian American community. So I can see how stereotypes can come out on campuses that don't have as many Asians or communities like White suburbia, like you're the only Asian there.

Although having a large critical mass of Asian Americans on campus may be comforting to a degree, some subjects expressed somewhat of an anxiety that UCLA is not preparing them well to be engaged citizens in a multi-racial society. As a student leader among Southeast Asian American students at UCLA, Kai explained both the benefits and disadvantages to having a largely Southeast Asian American social network. He stated,

Most of my friends are Southeast Asian. Because of that, they're less likely to assume you're a certain nationality because they themselves have probably faced that kind of assumption before. They're more open minded, but then otherwise, I can't really comment on experiences with non-Asians, because I haven't been... unfortunately, I don't really get with them all too much, which is kind of a bad thing I want to say...



Indeed, Kai found it difficult to share many in-depth comments on experiences with racial microaggressions because his social network largely shielded him from interactions with non-Asian Americans.

Like Kai, Ken felt that being in California and at UCLA also shielded him from experiencing a large amount of racial microaggressions. However, he too felt he was missing out on learning experiences that would prepare him for life outside of California if he were to ever leave the state. He explained, “I would say at UCLA, in California in general, it’s much less [racial microaggressions]. I could see it happening much more often outside of California. In this state, we’re very tolerant of us, but as soon as we move out we’re done for, I guess.” Although Ken was joking when he said that leaving California meant certain doom for Asian Americans, his comments do indicate a fear of leaving a largely Asian American dominated space like UCLA. However, few post-college spaces are as heavily Asian American as it is at UCLA.

These students’ intuition that their college years at UCLA are missing something may be right. An extensive body of research literature has demonstrated the multitude of benefits of diversity on college campuses. According to Park (2009), past research has shown that racial diversity in student enrollments can benefit student civic engagement in democracy, cross-racial interpersonal interactions, and critical thinking skills.

In the face of racial microaggressions, which represent dominant ideologies and a system of inequality in society, Asian American college students respond in different ways. This section discussed ways in which student responses consciously or unconsciously reproduced dominant ideologies, particularly an ideology of racism and

systems of racial inequality. Student interviews suggested that they internalized and accepted racist values and rationales and their position as racial subordinates. Others recognized that racism and racial microaggressions occurred, but chose to view these phenomena foreign to California applying a concept of California exceptionalism. These students' assertions of California exceptionalism often contradicted their own stories of racial microaggressions experienced at UCLA and generally in California. Still other students engaged in a process of covering and conformity in an effort to minimize or eliminate negative social effects connected to marginalized social identities. Another group of interview subjects chose to rationalize and normalize their experiences with racial microaggressions. None of these response types serve to challenge dominant ideologies or systems of inequality that result in such negative experiences. Instead, they demonstrate that these interview subjects' behaviors conform to normative expectations and serve to unintentionally or intentionally reinforce dominant systems and ideologies of race.

### **Transformational Resistance**

Within the campus racial climate and social context of racial formation, Asian Americans were found to act in ways that reinforce social reproduction of dominant ideologies and systems as seen in the last section, but they also participated in acts of transformational resistance. Through acts of transformational resistance, students are both motivated by social justice values and a critique of social inequalities (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). These actions and behaviors can take a myriad of forms and

include, but are not limited to, the development of a strong identity and engagement in critical literacy development projects as either participants or as leaders. This section discusses ways in which Asian American college students engage in transformational resistance through their development of identity and critical literacy, and how these actions are rooted in spaces of critical race pedagogy. Unfortunately, according to interview subjects, many of these spaces of empowerment are both rare and under attack within the university.

**Identity Development.** Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) state that within the student affairs literature, identity is understood to be a social construct, and is, “one's personally held beliefs about the self in relation to social groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation) and the ways one expresses that relationship” (p. 577). Indeed, identity plays an important role in how a person understands her experiences in society. Some students, when asked what they did in response to racial microaggressions, argued that the development of a strong sense of identity was important for resiliency.

As a leader in the Filipino Transfer Student Association (FTSA), Michelle<sup>38</sup> explained that it was important for her organization and other Filipino American student groups on campus to educate the student community about the Filipino American experience in order to empower students in exploring their identity in relation to society. She shared,

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<sup>38</sup> Michelle is a second generation Filipina American woman studying history and education as a transfer student.

In Fil Am organizations, we learn about different things about being Filipino like Filipino veterans, language... I just had a meeting with Filipino transfer students, and we talked about things we wished we knew about Filipino culture and why people don't know the language.

Through student community spaces, according to Michelle, Filipino American students are able to learn about their own history, culture and language, which most have not had the opportunity to learn about as 1.5 and second-generation Filipino Americans. Mark also shared his thoughts about his participation in *Samahang Pilipino* (SP), which is the largest Filipino American student organization on campus, and how the organization educated him about Filipino American issues and history of which he was largely unaware. He shared, "When I got here, I joined Samahang, and they made me aware of a lot of issues facing Filipinos such as health issues, stereotypes like if you're Filipino you're supposed to be a nurse or in the military. So that's made me more culturally aware."

According to Kai, it is also important to develop a strong identity to have a sense of belonging. He explained,

I guess just for security to know that you actually belong somewhere. You could say it's human nature to belong to a group, and if you don't know why you belong to that group, then I think you can feel at a loss. So in order to regain that knowledge, you want to seek to find where your roots are at. It comes to a point where if you don't have that information available to find where your roots are at, then you basically won't... you lose that security you want to have.

As a second-generation Hmong American, whose family came to the U.S. as refugees, Kai explained that the sense of belonging and security might be a heightened priority given the history of the Hmong people. For him, a strong connection and awareness of Hmong history and identity is key to a sense of belonging, particularly as a first-

generation college student. Indeed, very few Hmong Americans have a college education (Chang, et al., 2007). Kai and his Hmong American classmates, in many ways, are pioneers in post-secondary education, among the first waves of Hmong Americans entering and completing college. Kai went on to say, “If you lose track of where you came from and your traditions and culture, if you don’t know those, you could say that it’s an identity crisis.”

Kai’s argument for the importance of a strong ethnic and cultural identity is supported by research by Yip and Fuligni (2002), who acknowledge that a strong sense of ethnic identity can allow youth to better negotiate challenging social situations, “such as being faced with negative stereotypes and unfair treatment” (p. 1559). Priscilla’s comments about the need to develop a strong ethnic identity also support this idea. She shared,

If someone were to say a racial slur about you, you need to be able to respond in an intelligent manner and be like, “No, I’m Asian American, and this is why your comment is racist.” People are going to judge you based on the color of your skin, and I think it’s good to know your cultural ties because it’s like community building... I think there’s underlying racism everywhere, but then I think people don’t really understand they’re being racialized until a particular incident happens. That’s why I think everyone should be aware of their culture and identity.

For Priscilla, the task of developing a strong ethnic identity is also connected to have an understanding of racial microaggressions as unjust. It is connected to the development of critical literacy and *conscientization*.

**Critical literacy development.** According to Knobel and Lankshear (2002), critical literacy, “closely examines the ways in which language practices carve up the

world according to certain socially-valued criteria; draws attention to inequities; and calls for a rethinking of theories considered ‘natural’ or unassailable” (p. 4). Critical literacy projects provide opportunities for students to learn strategies to counteract experiences that reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies and systems of inequality. They learn to not accept them as normative, like the students in the previous section who framed their racial microaggression experiences as normative, which disempowered them from engaging in socially transformative acts.

Through important critical literacy projects, students learned how to engage in acts of transformative resistance. Osajima (2007) describes five elements that combine to contribute toward the development of critical consciousness among Asian Americans, which can also be used to characterize critical literacy projects. First, through these projects, students gain information and, “conceptual tools that [help] them to cognitively understand how their lives and the lives of others are shaped by larger historical and social structural forces” (Osajima, 2007, p.74-75). The second element can be described as a process of building community through dialogue so that students know that they are not alone in their experiences. Through such a space, students can feel free and safe to engage in dialogue for *conscientization*. Third, Osajima (2007) found that the process of developing a critical consciousness involves strong emotions that result from learning about injustices and community efforts for resistance. The fourth element explained that,

... Commitment to Asian American issues was deepened when they transformed understanding into action. Involvement in protests, organizing, programming, teaching, and research gave respondents a chance to extend their knowledge and learn from efforts to make change (Osajima, 2007, p. 75).

The final element explains that Asian American *conscientization* occurs through a combination of the first four elements.

Critical literacy projects incorporate the elements described by Osajima (2007). Through the interviews, I found that they include student-initiated community pedagogy projects, where students initiate and coordinate programs that empower peers to explore their identities in relation to society. They also include Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and other critical theory classes, which generally emerged in university curriculum through student movements. Students also identified Asian American participation in media productions as important to critical literacy development.

***Student-initiated community pedagogy projects.*** Several interview subjects identified a variety of critical literacy projects, one of which was the practice of community pedagogy. Freire (1993) contends that through dialogue and a process of problematization, students can develop a critical consciousness and ability to begin offering solutions to address social problems of oppression. In developing *conscientization* and a critical understanding, the person can begin engaging in critical community action. Thus, the practice of community pedagogy allows participants to continually develop their consciousness for strategic community action.

Ruth's involvement with the student production of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* is an example of a project that allowed students to participate in community pedagogy. Ruth shared,

My first year, I became involved with the UCLA production of *The Vagina Monologues*. It really turned me on to social justice. I took an

acting class my first quarter. It's just a rec class. It wasn't for a grade. And I thought it was really fun, and I found out that *VM* was having auditions, and I was like, "I'll just audition and see what happens," and I got in, and so, it was such a great experience. I've been involved every year. I made some really good friends through it. That really turned me on to doing something about the whole thing about violence against women, just everywhere.

Before *The Vagina Monologues*, Ruth had not been exposed very much to gender issues and violence against women. Not only did it allow her to explore acting, it also let her engage in a social justice community, learn about social injustices, and participate in a project against sexual and gender violence.

Kyle was able to explore his ethnic identity and gain a better understanding about the world in which he lives through his participation in a student organization. He explained that he became involved with the Asian Pacific Coalition (APC) through the organization's internship, which was led by another student, because he was interested in learning more about AAPI issues. Also, Kyle joined the internship program because like many other Asian American students (Chang, et al., 2007), he also wanted to become a community leader. Kyle stated,

Through internship, Lee really challenged me to develop my identity as a person of color. I would never have labeled myself as a person of color because that to me was beyond my imagination before being involved with APC. Like, "Asians? People of color? No no." But I guess that was an important thing because now that I am a person of color, it says my position with other people is just different because of my skin color, but lets me build coalition for social justice.

Through APC internship, Kyle was exposed to a curriculum developed by classmates, which challenged him to reconsider what it means to be Asian American.



Other students also benefited from the community education projects coordinated by APC students. Gary shared,

I joined the community committee of APC. We got to talk about hate crimes, Islamophobia, like South Asians and Muslims being targeted. We also talked about homophobia, and also discrimination against the undocumented. So like all those are issues for Asian American communities. So I got to experience that. And then through APC internship, we did a film project on food justice.

Like Gary, Jason was also exposed to a lot of social issues that he was not aware of prior to his involvement in APC programs. He explained,

From going to APC meetings, we've talked about issues in the API community, so I have learned that there are some cultures that don't... that are facing a lot of racism and discrimination. But it's hard for me to relate because I haven't experienced it myself, but I think it's important to break down that assumption that all Asians are doing well because it's not true. I've been learning about Vietnamese laborers or about immigration in general. I go to APC meetings and every once in a while they'll have a topic kind of thing. Or they'll bring in someone from a different organization. So they had VSU come in and talk about that issue. Or they'd have PAQ to talk about discrimination they face as LGBT Asian Americans.

Walter also talked about how APC gave him an opportunity learn about community issues. He stated,

APC is different than engineering classes. You actually learn about real issues that I can relate to, and not a certain process will overheat and what do we do to solve it. Last year, the deportation of families of refugees from Southeast Asian countries... I wouldn't have known otherwise. They had a rally at Kerckhoff patio. Had I not known about the issue from APC, I would have just thought it's just more extremely liberal people trying to sway the rest of campus. Now that I know about the issue, yes it's unfair that the U.S. has these contracts with Southeast Asians countries to send people back for something as little as shoplifting for small crime that was done maybe eight years ago before such contract were established.

When asked how these issues affect him as a Chinese American, he shared,

It's something affecting people around me. It doesn't have to be something that directly affects me. If it affects friends and students on campus, if it affects communities in southern California... it's just how unfair. I can relate to it. You feel like you should be part of something like that to make this injustice known to everybody. So we can do something about it. It's all about the people, and having more people know about it, that will pressure the government to do something about it.

Through the community education projects by APC, Walter and other students gained an awareness of social inequalities. In addition to learning about various issues, some participated in projects to counter the injustices they learned about.

Like Walter, Mark explained how he is invested in social issues that do not directly affect him. As a tutor in the Academic Advancement Program (AAP), Mark contributes toward AAP's mission of working toward educational equity and access. He feels his activities at AAP have not only been a service to the community, but he has also learned about the world around him. He shared,

I work in AAP tutoring, so I'm more aware of admissions issues and trouble with education. I realize a lot of minorities just don't have the same educational opportunities. The reason why I like AAP a lot is because you get to deal with the whole gambit of students. It's very eye opening to me because you learn a lot about different educational backgrounds, different races, and stuff. I think it's been about becoming self aware of everything in the world today.

Mark feels that his involvement in AAP has allowed him to not only contribute toward the tutoring resources offered by the department, but also it has given him an opportunity to learn from the peers he is tutoring about educational inequalities.

As demonstrated through these reflections, the learning process in these community pedagogy projects deconstructs the hierarchical learning model of a teacher and student. Matthew wanted to develop a community-based curriculum to challenge his

classmates to understand the historical context of race relations and conflict, like Lee, but he quickly became too busy during the school year to implement his idea. On why he wanted to initiate such a project, he explained,

I personally wanted to do a teaching theme, go to orgs and give my presentation. That's one of the things I wanted to do this year that sort of got lost in the shuffle. I wanted to present these histories, and ask questions to get people thinking about privilege and inequality. It's not easy to feel you have a privilege because you feel some amount of guilt in your life, and nobody wants to feel like they had anything to do with inequalities.

Had the project been implemented, Matthew would have been coordinating a community pedagogical project that involved having his peers problematize social inequalities, dialogue, and gain a critical consciousness.

Akin to Matthew's desire to create a community pedagogical project, Shirley also wanted to create an organization that helped her peers understand their identities in relation to society. She explained how she and a friend who were involved in Queer Alliance created PAQ (Pan-Asian Queers),

Me and another person, we sort of revived Mahu into Pan-Asian Queers. Mahu was part of APC originally. So my logic, I didn't know what APC was, but my logic was, "Oh, since Mahu is part of it, PAQ should be part of it, but part of me didn't really get why bother working for Asian, API issues or what not. I guess over the year I became more political.

Interestingly, Shirley and her friend founded PAQ out of a desire to have an Asian American specific queer student organization, but did not understand the value in building coalition with other Asian American student organizations. However, through her time working on queer Asian American issues, organizing the community, and

working with APC, she realized the importance of connecting her work with what APC was doing too.

Through attending meetings and programs by APC and by Queer Alliance when she first got to UCLA, Shirley said she began to learn about herself and the world around her. She admitted,

It wasn't until I came to UCLA... I became involved in APC, that I kind of realized, "Oh, hey I don't know anything." The first APC meeting... I remember the first meeting I went to, we talked about admissions because they were doing the "Count Me In"<sup>39</sup> campaign and they were talking about this 40% Asian thing. Then it sort of made me realize... I guess going to their workshops made me realize, "Oh we're kind of oppressed." I think that's when I started to realize it.

She discussed how attending a Queer Alliance retreat also helped her to develop a critical consciousness around her identity as a queer Asian American woman. She explained,

It wasn't until I went to the Queer Alliance general retreat that I was like, "Ok, I like these people. I should be more involved." Then hanging out more with Pan-Asian Queers and really I saw Queer Alliance, there were a lot of poor people of color there and it started raising questions in my mind. They would often talk about the whole gay male-centered kind of world. I'd be like, "Oh, I never noticed that." I didn't know we were oppressed. Now I know. Once you start thinking about it... it was people bringing things up and suddenly I noticed them. I started noticing them in my daily life. When I started to think about my past experiences, suddenly it's like OK that was a little racist.

Shirley's comments demonstrate that it was through her experiences with two student organizations – APC and QA – that she participated in dialogues and activities that helped her develop a critical consciousness.

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<sup>39</sup> "Count Me In" was the name of the student campaign to demand the University of California collect ethnically disaggregated data on Asian American and Pacific Islander students. The campaign won when the UC Office of the President announced in Fall 2007 that it would begin collecting ethnically disaggregated data on AAPI students starting Fall 2008.

Critical literacy development opportunities can also happen in spaces that are not specifically defined by a particular social identity. Wilson described such a situation that occurred during the resident assistant training retreat. He explained,

We were at training the first few weeks. The first week was in Malibu, and we had an affinity group of Asian Americans, and I went to that one. There were different types of affinity groups. It was the best part of training. We talked about anything and nothing in particular about Asian Americans. We were mostly Asian Americans, second-generation, and they were like, "Oh, I remember in school they would take us to ESL class, even though I spoke English," and I was like, "Hey! I got taken away to bungalow classes too." So I realized, "Oh man, maybe they took us there because we look a certain way." I remember my friends went there who were Hispanic, and we'd go there.

Even though the affinity group was not facilitated or led by anyone in particular, the students who participated in the student-only group were able to engage in a dialogue for *conscientization*. Wilson was able to see that his own experiences of being segregated from other students when he got, "taken away to bungalow classes," in elementary school were not isolated incidents. He realized that perhaps because of his race, teachers and school administrators assumed that his English skills were deficient even though he remembers being proficient in English.

Interestingly, Wilson shared that the next day he attended a staff-led workshop on Asian American student experiences, and he felt silenced by the experience. In that session, he explained,

The resident director who was leading the talk wasn't as well educated in Asian American Studies as I felt she should be. I was like, "You don't know what you're saying," but I didn't say it out loud. She was Asian American but she grew up in a Caucasian neighborhood. She did relate, but I don't think she has the classes or education necessary. She went to a conference, and she learned about Asian American identity theory. She basically handed it out to us and read through the different stages and said

how she related to it. When she was lecturing I was like, “I don’t think you know your stuff.” I was really critical, and I thought this was a really bad session. I did not talk as much. I don’t think we talked at all. The other time, we talked a lot.

Unlike the first session that was solely student-led, this session made Wilson feel silenced. When asked if he provided any spoken or written feedback to the staff that coordinated the session, he acknowledged that he had not. So even though he had plenty of critiques about how the session was facilitated, he did not feel it was worthwhile to actually provide the feedback.

***Ethnic studies.*** Critical literacy development opportunities were also available to students through Ethnic Studies courses. Several students discussed the importance of these spaces of learning in the UCLA curriculum. They felt that Asian American Studies helped to validate their own experiences, allowed them to feel more of a sense of belonging on campus, and they also believed that the course material was relevant for their lived experiences and future plans.

At the time of her interview, Eun-Mi was busy helping to coordinate a conference to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Asian American Studies at UCLA and to reflect on the mission and roots of the inter-disciplinary field. So, she had been reflecting on the meaning of Asian American Studies for herself. She stated,

It’s like Freire who talks about turning education upside down. I guess it’s that whole concept, which is the vision, the original vision of Asian American Studies. Right now I’m helping with a conference celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA, also to celebrate the student activism too that helped get Asian American Studies. I think that’s one of the goals – to celebrate what’s happened and the achievements and progress we’ve seen so far. Still recognizing today

that it's a legitimate field of research and belongs on campus as an academic field. At the same time, maintaining a critical lens, kind of looking at future directions. We've been talking about if we should include Pacific Islander Studies. Should that be separate? It's healthy to continue evaluating how we're doing especially since it was student initiated.

As her commentary notes, Asian American Studies started as a student-initiated critical literacy project. Today at UCLA, it has become a full academic department, but Eun-Mi hopes to see that those who engage in the discipline value the importance of the community-based mission and continue to reflect on its roots and values in making progress in the future.

Asian American Studies was indeed founded on the idea that the university must provide a curriculum that is relevant to the community (Wei, 1993). Walter's comments maintain that these courses continue to be important in preparing Asian American college graduates. He shared,

When you start working you work with a diversity of people, not only engineers, business people, lawyers. Even when you're not working, you're dealing with people from a bunch of different professions, ethnic and social backgrounds. I think having a diversity of classes to learn about the kind of diversity that we have outside of the engineering world is good for anybody. People don't realize that engineers communicate with more people than they think we do. During my internship this summer, I spent a third of my time in meetings with people just talking to each other. People talking to each other across the nation through a telecom.

Unfortunately as an engineering major, Walter has limited opportunities to fit in non-engineering courses in his schedule. So although he believes that Ethnic Studies courses would help him become a better professional and citizen, he is unable to do so.

Asian American Studies courses have also helped Amber, a transfer student, feel a stronger sense of belonging in the UCLA campus community. She explained,

In my Asian American Studies classes, I always feel like I belong. In my poli-sci classes it felt different. I do see some Asian people in my poli-sci classes, but those classes are a lot bigger. It's not like we have that much interaction because they're mostly lecture hall classes. In my Asian American Studies classes, I feel like I can relate to the subject matter better too, and when they talk about history and immigration, things like that, I feel like what we're studying is more relatable. Also, as a transfer student taking Asian American Studies classes helped me feel more like I belonged here.

Amber's statement indicates that her political science classes due to both the content and large lecture-style of the courses made her feel somewhat alienated.

In addition to increasing Amber's sense of belonging at UCLA, Asian American Studies classes helped to provide a sense of validation for both Priscilla and Raakhi.

According to Priscilla,

Asian American Studies totally legitimizes everything because it's one thing to live it but it's another thing to have it written in a book. I think that's really empowering to have that information be known to everyone and like to say, "Well my existence does matter because someone's written a book about it."

Similarly, taking an Asian American Studies course for Raakhi helped her to understand experiences with racial microaggressions as racist and not something she has to passively accept. She stated,

I remember I took a class in the Asian American Studies department. It was an introductory class and we were talking about labeling someone exotic is offensive in a way because you're implying they're not from here, and they're from some far off land. The more I thought about it, the more I agreed with it. I'd gotten that. I hadn't known how to respond to it.



For Priscilla, taking Asian American Studies classes was very powerful. The courses helped her to actually claim her existence and understand her experiences as valid. Likewise for Raakhi, taking an Asian American Studies course helped her to understand some of her experiences as racial microaggressions.

***Media productions.*** The media industry sustains and reproduces hegemonic messages about power relations in society (Kellner, 1995). Media serves as a very powerful teacher in modern societies through narratives, words, and images, cultural productions send powerful messages to audiences about power and race, gender, and class. The students interviewed for this dissertation recognized the power of media. They commented on the need for more positive representations of Asian Americans in the mass media, the popularity of emerging Asian American celebrities via Internet, and their own participation in new media production, as well as the messages conveyed through these media productions.

Although Ruth has decided that a career in the arts, particularly in acting and singing, is not possible for her as an Asian American woman, she supports other Asian Americans who are pursuing careers in these areas. As discussed in chapter 6, she recognizes that there are racial barriers facing Asian Americans in the entertainment industry. Based on this perception, she is particularly enthusiastic about the careers of artists like Far East Movement. She explained,

We need more people in entertainment, in sports, in politics, in every field of life to show we're not invisible. We're not all engineers and doctors and lawyers. We can do other things. We have opinions. Then I got to thinking. It really depends on us. We can't expect role models to show up

and say, “I’m going to be a champion for the Asian American cause.” It’s really us. So Far East Movement, they’re really cool. I learned about them when I came to UCLA. I feel they’re really championing for Asian Americans in the music industry, which I think is great because I really like to sing. I’d love to see an Asian singer on the pop charts and stuff. So I think if we really want change, we really have to start within.

Like Ruth, Wilson appreciated marginal increases in Asian American representation in mass media. He stated,

It’s nice to see Asians on TV. We always see stereotypes of Asians. I get really annoyed when I see the Asian nerd or whatever. It’s usually Asian nerds. Actually, I think it’s getting better. Asians are being on TV with not kung fu roles like on *Lost* and *Heroes*. Asians in the dancing world in terms of reality TV, *Kaba Modern*. I know Wong Fu is trying to make it. They’re a group of kids from UCSD. They did film making for fun, and they recently started their own production company. I’ve been following them. My friend introduced me to Wong Fu, and I told my friends and my sister, and it got around.

While Wilson sees some improvement in the representations of Asians in U.S. media, both he and Ruth recognize the need for Asian Americans to take the initiative to produce media like Far East Movement, an increasingly popular hip hop group, and Wong Fu Productions.

Several other students actually discussed Wong Fu Productions in their interviews as an example of media that promotes a level of critical literacy. Founded in 2003 by three Asian American men who graduated from UC San Diego, Wong Fu Productions started by making short films distributed virally on the Internet. Most recently the fledgling production company has continued creating online content, created a t-shirt line, and worked with other Asian American artists to produce music videos and stage shows. The popularity and profitability of Wong Fu Productions speaks to the overall invisibility of accurate portrayals of Asian Americans in mainstream media. For a few of

the students interviewed, Wong Fu's short film *Yellow Fever* was groundbreaking and significantly validating of their own experiences. When he discussed experiences with racial microaggressions that emasculated Asian American masculinity, Mark shared,

There's a funny video by Wong Fu Productions. They made a video called *Yellow Fever*, and it's about why Asian guys can't get White girls and why White guys get Asian girls. It was a pretty satirical look, but I think a lot of it... I think one of the reasons it was so popular was because all these Asian guys were clicking on the link and were like, "YES! Someone finally understands my struggle."

For Mark, *Yellow Truth* played a role in validating his own anxieties of being an Asian American male on the dating scene. Similarly, Ken also explained that being exposed to *Yellow Truth* allowed him to acknowledge racial dynamics in dating. He stated, "Theme four [the exotification of Asian women], it's one of the things I notice a lot. Have you ever seen the YouTube video *Yellow Fever* by Wong Fu? That opened my eyes to look out for it more." Delores was also a fan of Wong Fu, as she discussed, "I was a big fan of theirs. I have a picture with Phil Wang. I saw *Yellow Truth* and I was like, "Yea, it's true. It does seem like there's a lot like that." And I just agreed with it back then, even though now I'm not so sure I like how they portrayed women." Delores' comment suggests that Wong Fu's message in *Yellow Truth*, while empowering for some, might not be as positive for women.

Students at UCLA are also engaging in film production to tell their own stories. Each year, Professor Robert Nakamura offers a two-quarter class on film production. Using these skills in film making, students have made some very powerful short films. Gary is one of these students. As an APC intern, Gary participated in the group production of a short documentary on food justice in Los Angeles. According to Wekerle

(2004) the term “food justice” is a reframing of the concept of food security, which is defined as access by all to enough nutritious and fresh food to lead a healthy life (Campbell, 1991). Asian American college students, Gary and his peers conducted an analysis using Census data and interviews of people purchasing food in West Los Angeles, a more affluent area of the city and where UCLA is located, and people buying food in South Los Angeles. While their project did not receive as many Internet hits as a typical Wong Fu short film, it did reach more than 1,000 viewers in the two weeks it was posted on YouTube. Indeed, the availability of the Internet has allowed a more open access forum for the production of media.

Media produced by other people of color can also provide a forum to validate challenges of double consciousness. According to DuBois (1994) a double consciousness exists for many people of color who must also understand their behaviors as Whites might view them and the potential costs it may bring. Matthew explained experiences of double consciousness using an example provided by *Chappelle's Show* to discuss his guilt as an Asian American male that likes custom-enhanced cars. According to Matthew,

I get comments like, “nice rice rocket.” I’m not going to not do these things I really enjoy. I mean I’m not going to censor my own enjoyments and self to actively not fit stereotypes, but people do that. That really does happen. There’s a really good Dave Chappelle skit about it. He was giving an example of, you know what people think you’re gonna say, so you don’t want to say it, just to not validate their thoughts, even though it’s what you were going to say anyway. So he’s on a plane and the flight attendant asks if he wants chicken or fish. And he asks for fish to not look like he’s the stereotypical Black man who eats fried chicken. And the flight attendant comes back and says they only have chicken, and this character, it’s actually a minstrel that starts dancing around, and says, “Maybe it’s catfish!” But then his neighbor offers him the fish. It’s a very

silly sketch, but it's a very deep point in terms of it sucks that we feel the need to not give what is our natural response just to not validate what we think might be someone else's preconceived thought.

For Matthew, the Chappelle skit validated this psychologically confusing process of imagining what others might think of him as an Asian American man confirming stereotypes of Asian men just by doing something he genuinely enjoys. The skit seemed to take some of the pressure off of him and allowed him to laugh at the absurdity of racism and stereotypes.

### **Spaces of critical race pedagogy.**

Critical literacy projects play an important role in supporting students as they consider their identities and positions within systems of inequality. Through the interviews, I also found that these projects of community pedagogy and critical literacy development take place with critical race pedagogical spaces or critical race counter-spaces. Through critical literacy development projects, students also create these spaces of critical race pedagogy. According to Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000), "counter-spaces serve as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained" (p. 70). My definition of critical race pedagogical spaces includes the elements of counter-spaces as defined by Solórzano, et al. (2000), but also positions these spaces as places where students can develop strategies of resistance within the broader campus climate. In other words, critical race pedagogical spaces provide safe spaces for marginalized students to find refuge from a hostile campus climate, but they also provide opportunities for

students to gain a critical analysis of racial inequalities, and develop strategies of resistance that influence the campus racial climate and broader social context.

Based on interviews with students, spaces of critical race pedagogy are rare and under attack. Oftentimes student engagement in these spaces is initiated through peer invitation or self-initiative. These spaces serve important functions of countering racial microaggressions and providing opportunities for students to develop leadership skills to apply within Asian American communities and beyond.

*Limited spaces of critical race pedagogy under attack.* In 2008, an Arizona Senate bill on Homeland Security was amended to prohibit any public school to support curriculum or organizations that, "...promote, assert as truth or feature as an exclusive focus any political, religious, ideological or cultural beliefs or values that denigrate, disparage or overtly encourage dissent from the values of American democracy and Western Civilization" (Arizona SB 1108, 2008). While the legislation was declared unconstitutional due to a violation of First Amendment rights to freedom of association and speech, it is yet another example of the ongoing neo-conservative attacks on these important spaces of education that provide significant benefits for college students to become critically engaged in a dynamic democratic society.

Many students' comments indicated that critical race pedagogical spaces were both rare and lacking at UCLA. For Gary, a primary deficiency of the campus racial climate was the under-representation of other students of color. Because of the low numbers of non-Asian students of color, Gary said, "I do not know that many Black

people or Latino people. I don't even think I know any American Indians. So, I feel like it would be important because they also have large populations in the country." For Gary the limited numbers of other minority students may seem particularly disconcerting since he grew up in a part of Los Angeles where nearly all of his classmates were Chicano or Latino.

One of the most positive experiences with a space of critical race pedagogy that some students experienced was the Interracial Dynamics General Education (GE) Cluster. Many commented on the importance of the GE classes in this series. Unfortunately for some students, it was a rare exception to have that kind of opportunity to dialogue across racial lines. Seung acknowledged, "I have never been in a class as diverse as that since then... Not as much as that class. That class was unique." The class gave Seung a full year of interacting with racially diverse classmates, teaching assistants, and professors. He chose that specific GE cluster for his freshman year because,

I just wanted to learn more about the LA uprising for myself. It was a great experience. I learned there that there were faults on both ends. We got both sides, the Black side, the Korean side, and the American side, the newscast side. We got to watch tons of footage and how the media portrayed it, and even how there were peace marches, like churches coming together, Black and Korean praying for peace. So it was a good experience. I learned and saw more of a perspective than I saw just when I was little with my family going crazy. There were a lot of Black people too. It was cool. They spoke out a lot. Then other Koreans spoke a lot. It wasn't clashing. It was just like opinions that they saw and things like that. So it felt cool. Discussions felt better because it was smaller. It wasn't all over the place.

Indeed, some of Seung's earliest memories involved the direct impact on his family of the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest after the Rodney King case. The GE cluster was facilitated in a way that allowed for the diverse enrollment of students in the class to

safely engage in positive inter-group dialogues so students could benefit from diversity on campus (Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado, 2007).

Unfortunately for Ruth, she felt that there were no Asian American related spaces of critical race pedagogy, which suggests limited visibility of organizations like APC on campus. Ruth shared,

I feel like Latinos really have that solidarity. I mean in Central America there's still so much war and everything, but I mean in other places I feel like Latinos really come together to champion Latino causes. I think that's great. There are so many Latino organizations and they really make their voices heard. Not just on campus, but in general like in unions and politically. I really think that's a good thing. I think Asians should do that too. I know it happens, like there's a lot of Asian Americans involved in underground things like music. It's just hard for them to break into the mainstream, but I know that... I hope it's coming. There's the Chinese club, Taiwanese club, Japanese club, Vietnamese club, it's all very separate. I don't really see them working together.

Ruth lamented over what she perceived was a vacuum of pan-Asian American organizations and community coalitions. She might have been heartened to know that the UCLA Asian Pacific Coalition was founded in 1975 and continues to be a very active coalition of over twenty AAPI student organizations on campus, and that most recently in 2007 the organization had successfully campaigned for a new ethnic data collection process in the ten-campus UC system (Vázquez, 2007).

One reason why Ruth may have been unaware of both pan-Asian American coalitions and collective work by students of color in general including Asian Americans was that some of these student leaders felt that their work was under attack, which perhaps has made the leadership more timid in their visibility in collective organizing. For example, with recent university budget cuts, AAP has also endured its share of



budget cuts. Historically, AAP was founded to increase the educational access of under-represented and low-income UCLA students. Over the last several years, AAP has sustained attacks on its existence. Over the last academic year, AAP's budget and programs were being cut. Priscilla recounted her response to tutor Ethnic Studies tutor positions proposed for elimination,

I think the other thing about APC is that it's not just pan-Asian; it also allies itself with other groups like MECHA and African Student Union. I think that's something that we really need to bring out especially like when people think, "Oh, minorities are like Black and Latinos." And like, no Asian Americans have been like put down too, and you sort of have to know that kind of history to go further in life, and be more critical about your surroundings. I think that's one of the main reasons I applied to be the Asian Am tutor for the Academic Advancement Program, because that was how I sort of got motivated to check out APC in the first place, because it was through education. They're actually going to cut down the program but then I talked to the Director and I'm like, "this is bullshit, because next year is the 40<sup>th</sup> year anniversary for ethnic studies and you're cutting us? That means you're cutting all legitimacy for what we fought for.

The support she received from being engaged in the APC and AAP, both of which are important critical race pedagogical spaces, allowed Priscilla to strategically develop and engage in her community to fight the cuts.

In addition to financial threats to such spaces, Lee explained that she felt that the steady disappearance of a collective consciousness among student organizing communities was also threatening the existence of these spaces. She asked,

Where's the collective consciousness? That has been really lacking in the student retention space, and everyone is kind of like, "Oh, I'm just gonna be like all about me and my [ethnic] community. You know like I'm going to stick with my community." And I'm seeing that more and more where African American community maybe a little with the Chicano community, but it's just like this utter disrespect for Southeast Asian community. It's really destroying the unified student front.

In relation to the availability of spaces for Asian Americans to develop a critical consciousness, she also commented,

I definitely think that space is becoming... less and less spaces where Asian American community can develop its consciousness in this way - the collective consciousness versus the... Because you know with the process of assimilation with like a lot of Asian Americans not even identifying as Asian American, but identifying more as like simply American. There's a huge threat of people just not really recognizing a sense of responsibility.

As the limited spaces of critical race pedagogy on campuses are attacked, students recognized that the vacuum of these types of learning opportunities in pre-college spaces continues to be maintained. Prior to UCLA, APC, and Asian American Studies, Kyle knew as a high school student that he was missing out on something, which he was able to access when he got to college. He shared that,

Throughout the American educational system, we're only learning certain things in certain perspectives. So it's just easy to fall into that. And coming here, with me discovering Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies through APC, it definitely made me feel like my curiosity and fervor for learning about my own history and the history of other marginalized people.

For Kyle, the opportunity to engage in these spaces of critical race pedagogy helped him spark a renewed intellectual curiosity and interest in engaging with academics. The lack of inclusion in the K-12 curriculum and opportunity to learn about race relations angered Shirley. According to her,

What really disturbed me was for the past 18 years I didn't realize there's some racist stuff happening, that I've been marginalized and oppressed a couple of times really bad and I've let it go by. I know better now, but there's still people on this campus. I'm sad thinking about this when I see this, but they still don't get the whole model minority thing. They don't understand. That I feel like racism will still happen to them and they

won't realize it and that freaks me out. Now, I can't imagine letting things go by. I feel like it's a struggle in APC, especially within our orgs getting them to be more political, being more conscious of inequalities. It's like getting people in South campus who aren't involved in student orgs and kind of just study a lot, and don't think about race, don't think about community.

For Shirley, the lack of acknowledgement of experiences as unjust and racist or homophobic restricted her from having the knowledge and sense of empowerment to act in resistance. Based on her experiences, she fears for other Asian Americans who are not exposed to the information she has. She also recognizes a demarcation between South and North campus. Spatially, her comments indicate that South campus students have less of an opportunity to access the empowering information that she values.

*Entry.* In addition to the lack of spaces and ongoing attacks on spaces of critical race pedagogy, interviews indicated that students who engaged in these spaces were mostly either invited by a peer or found these spaces through a self-initiated search for social justice oriented groups. Most of the students, who discussed how they became involved in student organizations that provided spaces of critical race pedagogy, said they became involved due to someone in the organization outreaching to them or because a friend encouraged them to look into the organization. According to Gary, he got involved,

Because my friend was doing it. My friend dragged me along to the APC orientation. He signed up for two committees with me, and he ended up going to none and I ended up going to all of the meetings. But then what made me stay was the issues they talked about, the people I got to work with.

Like Gary, Kyle was introduced to APC through a friend and found the space to be empowering. He shared,

My friend introduced me. She said it was a coalition of a lot of API orgs. I thought it was interesting to me, so I went to internship, and then from there like being able to discuss about identity and my own personal history and the API community, something that I never ever done before coming to APC and UCLA. So that was really empowering and made me want to come back for more.

Mark also became very involved with Samahang Culture Night through his friends' encouragement and remains involved due to what he believes is a positive mission. He explained,

My friends were like come out to Samahang. Do culture night and everything. At first it was just to meet people. There's not too many people from my high school who wanted to meet new people. The thing that keeps me staying there is culture night because it really teaches me about my culture. I grew up here. I was born here. So I don't know as much about my culture as I think I should. So that keeps me coming back. They tackle issues like the experiences of Filipinos in America, so it makes me more aware of my culture.

Although their initial entry into the spaces was based on peer invitations, they continued to be engaged in these spaces due to the spaces providing supportive and educational opportunities.

Some students' initial involvement in one space led to engagement in other spaces. Amber first became involved in the Asian Pacific Islander Undergraduate Association (APIUA) through a friend. She explained,

She invited me along and it was like it's not going to hurt at least to see. So I got really interested in it. Then I did the travel study program to Hawaii. That was fun, and I met more people, who I realized knew each other. They were part of different organizations, but it was some how inter-related and they knew each other. It was great, a great feeling. It was kind of this network that kind of worked like clockwork because they

told me about different events, and they'd tell me about things and it seemed like everybody was connected to facebook, and they were inviting me to groups. It was great because all of a sudden I felt like I started belonging a little bit because as a transfer student I feel like I'm a bit older and I felt I didn't really belong.

For Amber, one thing led to another. Her entry into these networks of UCLA student organizations began with her friend's invitation to APIUA, which then led to her participation in the Hawaii program, and a greater sense of belonging at UCLA.

It was interesting to see how many students were invited to enter these spaces of critical race pedagogy. Ideally, these types of spaces would be very visible and open to all to join. These organizations should be wary of and over-dependence on social networks to recruit new members, as social networks are limited in reaching out to a broad spectrum of students who could greatly benefit from these opportunities.

Unlike the other students who were invited by peers into spaces of critical race pedagogy, Delores was still exploring a variety of opportunities for involvement in Asian American communities. Her search was motivated by her own interest in giving back to the community. Explaining the three organizations she was looking into, she stated,

Kollaboration is very big on getting more Asian Americans into the media scene. So it's almost become very mundane. It's just like yea; we need to get more people in the entertainment industry. But the staff doesn't seem very big on issues other than like "Oh, this is fun." It just feels like there's no real meaning. I don't want to be the token Asian American Studies person. I don't know how I want to fit in. I went to two meetings and went to help out the last two weekends. I'm also looking into APC. Also, looking into the Association of Chinese Americans, even though they're really social. I really want to get involved in the Chinese community more because... I don't like people saying that the Chinese community doesn't do anything. It's kind of depressing that we don't do anything for the community almost. So I really want to see how I can push that a little and stress more activism. So far I'm not sure. I was going to do APC internship.

Delores' experiences suggest that her search for an organizational activity came after she had already developed a level of consciousness, which was relatively rare compared to the others interviewed.

***Counter racial microaggressions.*** Through these spaces of critical race pedagogy, students are able to develop strategies of resistance in myriad ways. In the context of this dissertation, I will discuss how they provide spaces for students to counter racial microaggressions and dominant structures of inequality. These spaces also empower students to become leaders in broader spaces.

As we have seen, many different types of spaces can serve as spaces of critical race pedagogy including student organizations and classrooms. As a student leader in the Filipino Transfer Student Association, Michelle expressed a desire to, "show that transfer students belong here too." FTSA and Michelle's efforts were validated recently by a student's comments. According to Michelle, "there was a guy at our club meeting who's from the Philippines and he was like, 'I'm home. I'm in the Philippines.'" For the recent transfer student from the Philippines, the experience transitioning, as a new UCLA student may have been daunting, and finding the FTSA made him feel at home, helping to combat a low sense of belonging found among Asian American students. In additional student organizational space, classrooms can serve as important, validating spaces of critical race pedagogy. The recent offering of a Hmong American class at UCLA through Asian American Studies served to validate Hmong experiences. Kai explained,

We've been trying to get a Hmong class for a few years now. We did petitions for the course to have a place at UCLA... just to have a place at UCLA. Having the class means that we're actually part of UCLA because we're students here and there's actually a course taught about us. Whereas when the school didn't have a course that talked about who we are, then there isn't like... we're not connected to the school as much.

Because UCLA has an Asian American Studies department, and students expressed an interest in such a class, there was a natural academic home for such an offering. For the department it might have meant organizing and spending the resources to create the course offering. For Hmong students, according to Kai, the course offering meant more than just a class and space for learning, but it also meant an academic validation of his existence. In both cases described by Michelle and Kai, spaces of critical race pedagogy allowed students to strengthen their sense of belonging at UCLA.

In addition to providing opportunities for students to counter racial microaggressions, critical race pedagogical spaces also gave opportunities for students to develop leadership skills and to apply these skills in broader spaces. Eun-Mi explained,

APC is very much about leadership development. So it's about speaking out for yourself. Some of the orgs in APC are more vocal than others. They get trained at the Community Projects Office very differently to speak out against administration. APC also helps combat invisibility of Asian Americans too. It exists to help orgs come together in a coalition. I forget whose article it was that said you can't have political power unless you come together because we're too small separately. I think that's the whole point of a coalition.

For Eun-Mi, community leadership requires coalition building and power in numbers. Perhaps through her involvement with APC, Eun-Mi learned to become a community organizer, developing skills for future endeavors. Similarly, Priscilla believes that her involvement in AAP helped her become more self-assured through the relationship with

her supervisor. She stated, “I got more empowered through AAP because my supervisor was very adamant about expressing herself and AAP is a program for motivated individuals that had economic or social adversities that are high achievers in college.”

Through his involvement with APC, Kyle also became empowered to speak out against injustice. In response to the Groseclose controversy, Kyle went with other members of APC and other student organizations to UC Irvine to speak at the UC Regents meeting. He explained, “APC and a bunch of other orgs, the African Student Union and Queer Alliance, we went to the Regents meeting in Irvine. We went to the mic and just addressed the different aspects of the issues to the Regents.”

Spaces of critical race pedagogy provide important opportunities for students to counter racial microaggressions and to develop community organizing and leadership skills. Unfortunately, the existence of these spaces is limited and some believe they are under attack and threatened by both budget cuts and changing community attitudes. Moreover, these organizations are not equally visible to students across campus, and interviews suggest that participation in these spaces tends to be based on peer invitations, which contributes to the limitation of their reach.

## **Chapter Summary**

Asian American students not only endure experiences of racial microaggressions in the campus racial climate, but through their agency they also engage in acts in response to these incidents. Some of these responses serve to consciously or unconsciously reproduce dominant ideology and systems of racism. These behaviors



include an internalization of racism, a belief in California exceptionalism, covering and conforming, and rationalizing to let go or accept situations. Other students engaged in acts of transformation resistance, which included developing a strong ethnic identity and developing critical literacy skills. The development of critical literacy and consciousness often took place through student-initiated community pedagogy projects, in Ethnic Studies classes, and media productions. The last part of this chapter discussed spaces of critical race pedagogy, which is often where critical literacy development took root. However, these spaces are limited in availability and under attack, even though they provide important opportunities for students to counter racial microaggressions and to develop leadership skills.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Conclusion**

It is easy to assume that with a critical mass in enrollments at some colleges and universities, Asian American college students would find an affirming campus environment. Unlike other students of color, the percentage of undergraduates at UCLA that are Asian American exceeds their proportional share in the general population in the state of California.<sup>40</sup> As discussed in chapters 2 and 3, many studies on campus racial climate are concerned with the experiences of minority students and their experiences of under-representation in the campus environment. Furthermore, studies on how the relationship between Asian American students and the campus racial climate are limited to some comparative studies that include multiple racial groups, but do not focus specifically on Asian Americans.

Asian Americans present an interesting population for research in education and race, particularly for campus racial climate. How does their critical mass on campus affect the dynamics of race relations and conflict? As a subordinated racial group in society, does their critical mass diminish their minority status within the campus setting? Guided by Critical Race Theory, the objectives of this study were to understand how Asian Americans (1) are racialized in the campus racial climate at UCLA, which is shaped by broader social forces, and (2) through their behaviors, serve as agents in the process of racial formation on campus to contribute toward the reinforcement or reshaping on their own racialization. In order to understand the campus racial climate

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<sup>40</sup> This study does not identify and discuss the factors that contribute toward the significant differences in enrollment representation by race. Nakanishi (1995) suggests some possible causes.

and the racialization of Asian Americans, this study focused on identifying students' experiences with racial microaggressions and their responses to these incidents and generally to the system of racism and inequalities in society. Thus, the research questions I originally asked were:

- (1) What are the different types of racial microaggressions Asian Americans experience?
- (2) In what ways do Asian American college students respond, if at all, to instances of racial microaggressions?

I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with twenty-five Asian American college students at UCLA, who identified as 1.5 or second-generation Asian Americans. In this chapter, I will review the findings that emerged from the study, the implications of the study, its limitations, and future research directions that may emerge from this dissertation.

## **Findings**

Campus racial climate is definitely, “more complicated than a numbers game,” as Lee pointed out to me during her interview. While critical mass is important to lessen the effects of racial isolation within the campus environment, Asian Americans continue to be marginalized from full participation throughout the institution. As demonstrated by the “Blame the Asians” satirical editorial and the questionable assertions of Professor Timothy Groseclose in 2008, Asian Americans continue to be controversially positioned in the “racial middle” (O’Brien, 2008). The continued racial marginalization of Asian

Americans in college as indicated by a common experience of racial microaggressions indicates that the improvement of campus racial climate must go beyond representation and critical mass. As indicated by the model of campus racial climate (Hurtado, et al, 1998) addressing the under-representation in access of various racial and ethnic groups in college is just one issue that must be comprehensively and fervently addressed to improve campus racial climate.

Based on the analysis of interviews, Asian American college students continue to be marginalized within the campus racial climate through experiences with racial microaggressions, which are direct representations of a larger system of White privilege, despite their large numerical representation as undergraduates at UCLA. Chapter five summarized and discussed examples of racial microaggressions experienced by Asian American students. As Samura (2010) found in her study, Asian Americans at the University of California have been found to have a lower sense of belonging than the overall student population, which might be explained by their continued marginalization in the campus racial climate.

Through the interviews, it was found that all twenty-five students had experienced racial microaggressions. Four categories of racial microaggressions emerged from the interviews. The first was a general experience of exclusion. These racial microaggressions excluded Asian Americans from dialogues on race and racism, rendering them largely invisible as an ethnically diverse population on campus. They generally created barriers for students to feel a sense of belonging on campus. Moreover, one of the more common racial microaggressions Asian Americans experienced was

called “alien in own land” by Sue, et al. (2007). In these experiences, students were made to feel that they were foreigners to the U.S. as Asian Americans. A third category identified in the interviews was gendered racial microaggressions. While Asian American women were hyper-feminized and exoticized as sexual objects, for Asian American men their masculinity was questioned and undermined through gendered racial microaggressions. The fourth category, termed “ascription of intelligence” by Sue, et al. (2007) was also a very common type of racial microaggression experienced by Asian American students interviewed. When discussing this type of racial microaggression, students also expressed a concern over the institutional neglect of Asian American educational difficulties. They may also make Asian American students reluctant to take advantage of campus resources.

Chapter six provided an in-depth discussion of how racial microaggressions can create social constraints and barriers in Asian American academic and vocational choices. The danger of racial microaggressions is that they can be easily dismissed as harmless incidents. However, as shown in chapter six, these daily interpersonal incidents can lead to real effects on people’s socio-economic outlook and prospects. By examining one category of racial microaggressions – ascription of intelligence – we can see how these experiences can contribute toward the high level of occupational segregation among Asian Americans. For many of the students interviewed, their racial background prevents them from freely pursuing their career interests. They see that labor markets continue to discriminate against Asian Americans, particularly in non-STEM fields. Their negative assessment of their chances in these areas is reinforced by their families’ concerns over

their economic prospects and social disciplines from their peers. Moreover, for those who do pursue atypical career fields for Asian Americans, they face a racially isolating vocational pathway. Therefore, the concentration of Asian Americans in STEM careers should not be viewed separately from broader social forces that are also communicated through racial microaggressions they experience.

The final findings chapter discussed ways in which Asian American college students respond to racial microaggressions. Through their actions and behaviors, both conscious and unconscious, Asian American students can either reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies of racism represented by racial microaggressions. Behaviors and actions that may reproduce and reinforce dominant ideology include internalization or racism, dismissing racial microaggressions through California exceptionalism, covering and conforming their identities to gain acceptance, and rationalizing situations to let go or accept circumstances. Generally, many of these students conformed to dominant ideologies, accepting their racially subordinate positions in society.

There were also students who challenged dominant ideologies through their actions in response to racial microaggressions. They engaged in acts of transformational resistance. These students had generally engaged in a process of critical literacy and consciousness development, which often took place in spaces of critical race pedagogy. Through these spaces that can take on many physical, social, and epistemological forms, students were able to find a safe space in which to engage in consciousness raising dialogues, which validated their experiences of oppression, and helped them to develop strategies of resistance within the campus environment and larger society. In the

interviews, students provided examples of these spaces and included student organizations with social justice missions, Ethnic Studies classes, and media productions. Some of them also discussed both the limited visibility of these spaces and attacks on the existence of these spaces, including budgetary and political assaults.

## **Implications**

From this study, several implications emerged related to theory, methodology, student affairs practice, and educational policy. First and foremost, this study contributed to the research on Asian American educational experiences, which continues to be an understudied area in both Education and Asian American Studies. Using a Critical Race Theory framework and methodology, it aimed to challenge and complicate the master narrative of Asian Americans in education by privileging the voices and experiences of Asian American college students, a group whose voice is rarely included in educational research.

In addition, this study contributes toward research on campus racial climate by examining the experiences of Asian American students, focusing on their experiences with racial microaggressions, and also focusing on both how campus racial climate affects them and how they exercise their agency to potentially reshape the campus environment. In the past decade, studies on campus racial climate and the benefits of diversity on campus have contributed significantly to the research knowledge of how the campus environment affects students. These studies, for the most part, have examined a one-way relationship between campus environment and students, investigating the

student effects of campus environment factors, essentially following Astin's Input-Environment-Output model.

This dissertation, on the other hand, has framed the study of campus racial climate as a symbiotic relationship between the social context of racial formation, campus racial climate, and student agency. Therefore, it is important to also study how students respond to experiences within the campus racial climate. Through a grounded CRT methodology, this dissertation attempted to create a CRT model of campus racial climate to represent the symbiotic relationship between the all-encompassing and pervasive process of racial formation, the campus racial climate, which includes a variety of spaces, and student agency (figure 3.1).

Only a handful of studies by Daniel Solórzano and Walter Allen have intentionally highlighted student responses in the campus racial climate to experiences of racial microaggressions. As seen in this dissertation, a CRT study of student experiences with racial microaggressions can provide an important method for examining the campus racial climate. Especially for understudied populations like Asian Americans, CRT methodology is a valuable tool for a deductive research process.

In addition to theoretical and methodological implications for the study of Asian Americans and the campus racial climate, this dissertation contributes to the field of Student Affairs. As a former Student Affairs practitioner, a significant impetus for this study came from my own journey working with Asian American college students at three different public universities – two on the east coast and one in California. Based on my own experiences and a brief review of curriculum used to train future student affairs



administrators, the experiences of Asian Americans are largely marginalized. Without adequate published research Asian Americans in higher education, future student services practitioners are ill prepared to work with the increasing numbers of Asian American college students. Student support services professionals need to view Asian American students as a distinctive racial population that would benefit from programs and interventions that recognize their unique position in American race relations. In inter-group dialogues (Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado, 2007) examining racism and other forms of oppression, facilitators must recognize this population's experiences, which are marginalized and silenced by the dualistic Black-White racial framework.

Additionally, as the research on Asian Americans in higher education increases, it is important to discuss the applied implications. The findings of this dissertation indicate that in general, "sense of belonging" on college campuses remains relatively low for Asian Americans despite critical mass. The lack of feeling integrated and welcomed on campus may have a variety of sources including the invisibility of Asian American issues in the curriculum, an invalidation of their lived experiences as racialized beings, and a general U.S. culture that dismisses them as foreigners. All of these factors can serve to silence Asian Americans and prevent them from developing critical consciousness. Therefore, racial barriers in their lives, such as those found in their career trajectories, may continue to go unidentified.

Finally, I started this project by contemplating the implications of the *Grutter* and *Gratz* Supreme Court decision, and its assertion that critical mass can limit if not eliminate the problem of racial marginalization in the college campus. Interestingly, as

Samura (2010) found, Asian Americans at the UC feel a lower sense of belonging than other students. Set on a campus where there is a critical mass of Asian Americans, this study examined the racialization of Asian Americans in the campus racial climate and found that numerical representation is not enough to entirely counter the racial marginalization of students of color. As outlined by Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (1999), the campus racial climate literature argues that a positive or affirming campus racial climate,

Includes at least four elements: (a) the inclusion of students, faculty, and administrators of color; (b) a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color; (c) programs to support the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of color; and (d) a college/university mission that reinforces the institution's commitment to pluralism (p. 62).

Thus, campus racial climate includes much more than equitable enrollment representation, a daunting challenge on its own. Based on this study, some students felt disconnected from student services and resources. Almost none of the interview subjects who expressed anxiety in career development issues indicated they had ever visited the career services office. Moreover, several students discussed the lack of opportunities on campus to engage in inter-group dialogue. Their comments suggested that the UCLA's student services and programs might benefit from conducting targeted outreach to Asian American students.

As this population continues to grow in numbers on campuses, it is imperative for institutional leaders, Student Affairs professionals and other educators to create and implement programs that target the unique educational needs of Asian Americans. For example, to combat their invisibility and invalidation as an important

population, curriculum should include texts from the broad body of literature in Asian American Studies. Academic advising and career development programs should address the concerns of Asian American families, who play significant roles in shaping their children's career paths. Additionally, because Asian Americans may be more open to seeking career advice over counseling therapy, career counseling services can serve as an entry point for Asian Americans to take advantage of other resources on campus like counseling services (Leong & Serafica, 1995). Although general support services often seek to generally serve the broad campus community, in order to best address the diversity of student needs, programs and services should be developed and targeted toward different populations. Campuses should also facilitate more opportunities for intergroup dialogues, such as the Inter-racial dynamics GE cluster at ULCA.

More importantly, they should also provide opportunities that empower Asian American students and others to engage in projects that serve to address identified problems on campus and in off campus communities. For example, in the UC system, students have taken initiative to create student-initiated outreach and retention projects to address disparities in college access (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). These projects have a stable financial base in student fees, and they allow students to develop interventions that are grounded in their lived experiences. Their activities not only serve to facilitate leadership development and growth, they also serve to address significant problems of inequality within the university and in society in general.

## **Limitations**

With only twenty-five interviews conducted, it is difficult to generalize the findings from this study. Generally, qualitative studies serve to examine a phenomenon (Maxwell, 2005). In this case, I explored the racialization of Asian Americans on a college campus with a critical mass of the population. First of all, the interview subjects were all students who identified as 1.5 or second-generation Asian Americans, but they did not completely mirror the demographics and activities of Asian American students at UCLA. For example, none of the students interviewed are involved with Asian American fraternities or sororities. However, a large proportion of the students were involved in Asian American related student organizations. Only one student claimed no student organization affiliation, and only four were involved in organizations without social justice or culturally related missions, such as marching band or a pre-medical fraternity. Although ethnically diverse, the students interviewed did not include any South Asian American men.

Moreover, there was a significant imbalance in students' majors as compared to the overall Asian American student population. About 60 percent of Asian American undergraduates at UCLA are STEM majors (South campus). The opposite was true for my sample, with about 60 percent of them majoring in non-STEM fields (North campus). Additionally, by conducting the study with a pan-Asian American frame, I was unable to make any meaningful conclusions about whether there were differences between students by ethnic identity. I also did not analyze for gender differences.

In the end, this dissertation sought to verify whether Asian American students do indeed experience forms of racial microaggressions despite critical mass. Therefore, the

results that emerged represented a broad range of Asian American experiences with racial microaggressions. Future studies might choose to focus on specific themes of racial microaggressions to provide depth in understanding these experiences and their magnitude among Asian Americans.

### **Future Research**

Asian Americans continue to be significantly understudied in both empirical and applied education research, which stymies the ability of educational administrators and leaders from best serving this diverse and growing college population. Research on Asian Americans, race and education can reveal interesting findings about race relations and racial inequality in the U.S., which can lead to innovative interventions. Moreover, using a Critical Race Theory lens to explicitly study student experiences as they are shaped by racial microaggressions offers an innovative perspective for understanding student development and how race affects student lives. For example, I did not expect to encounter so much data on career development challenges, but it came up through the grounded generative dialogues with subjects.

This dissertation ultimately serves to contribute toward the developing field of research on Asian Americans in higher education. Based on this dissertation study and findings, I suggest several areas that require additional research. First, while I have found that racial microaggressions may serve to decrease Asian American student sense of belonging on campus, this causal relationship has not been confirmed in this qualitative study. It would be interesting to conduct a survey research project to identify

significant factors and mechanisms that lead to sense of belonging. Additionally, because this study did not intentionally focus on gender or other social identities, a future study could focus on the effects of gender, sexuality or class status in the intersectionality with racism.

One of the findings that were very clear was that there is a relationship between career development and the racialization of Asian Americans. As this continues to be an understudied area of research, more studies should be developed to examine this phenomenon. Additional research would help develop theories on Asian American career development, particularly around behaviors of career exploration, which would lead to opportunities for intervention. Related to career development is academic choices and college choice process – another understudied area. Given the continuing debates over racial equity and college admissions and the challenges of articulating the role of Asian Americans in the discourse, equity-oriented researchers should pursue this line of scholarship to shed light on the mechanisms involved in the college choice processes of this population.

Research also needs to identify and examine spaces of critical literacy development for Asian American students. Are these spaces different than for other populations? How does critical literacy work to help Asian American youth become social change agents? The daughter of Dr. Wen Ho Lee, Alberta Lee, once said that she was motivated to launch a campaign to fight the racial profiling experienced by her father because she had learned about the history of social justice struggles by Asian Americans in the one Asian American Studies course she took in college. What she had learned in

that one class shaped her choice to launch what seemed like an impossible campaign to clear her father of espionage charges. The campaign eventually led to Dr. Lee's release from prison and an unprecedented apology from a federal judge and President Clinton.

Finally, future research should further explore the role of space – on and off campus – in shaping student experiences. As presented in the Critical Race model of Campus Racial Climate, passive and active student engagement in an unlimited range of spaces leads to opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences and identity. Scholars can contribute toward this research need by engaging in projects of identifying models of Asian American student services, an area that saw significant growth in the 2000s. The practice of Asian American student support services - offered through cultural centers, from broader diversity or minority programs, and even through academic programs in Asian American Studies - could benefit from a methodological assessment. At the turn of the century, several colleges and universities began to create professional staff positions to address Asian American student needs. These institutions included the University of Virginia, the University of Pennsylvania, George Mason University, Northwestern University, UC Davis, the University of Michigan, Old Dominion University, Virginia Commonwealth University, Brown University, the University of Arizona, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and at Chicago; just to name a few. However, research literature does not exist to identify their missions, organizational structure, and activities. Research needs to be conducted to help articulate best practices in this field and to generally inform institutional policy and student services practices that affect this growing population.

## Appendix A

### Recruitment Email and Flyer

#### EMAIL

Hello,

You are invited to participate in a study about the perspectives of Asian American undergraduate students on race and racism. This study is being conducted by Oiyan A. Poon (Ph.D. candidate, UCLA Department of Education).

To be eligible to participate, you must meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as Asian American – a person with ethnic/ancestral roots in South Asia (Indian sub-continent), the Philippines, Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, etc.; or ethnically Hmong, Mien, Chaam, etc.), or East Asia (China, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, etc.).
2. Be a 1.5 OR 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Asian American
  - a. 1.5 generation = Identify as an Asian American who immigrated to the U.S. before the age of 12.
  - b. 2<sup>nd</sup> generation = Identify as an Asian American who was born in the U.S. to at least one Asian immigrant parent.
3. Be at least 18 years old.
4. Currently enrolled as a full-time, sophomore or junior undergraduate student at UCLA.

If you do not meet all four of the eligibility requirements listed, please feel free to send this invitation to others who might meet these criteria.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please complete the brief questionnaire at:

[http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=aiVuEB7H6hBVs2LkbaZX\\_2fg\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=aiVuEB7H6hBVs2LkbaZX_2fg_3d_3d). If you have trouble with the web link, try cutting and pasting it into your browser. By completing the questionnaire, which should take you less than 3 minutes, you are communicating your interest in participating in a focus group for this study. You are also providing basic demographic and contact information so that the researcher can send you the details for the time and location of the appropriate focus group.

The focus group interview session should take no more than 100 minutes (1 hour and 40 minutes). Each focus group will have between 6 and 8 participants. The researcher will maintain the confidentiality of every participant to the degree possible. Food and refreshments will be provided.



If you have any questions about the online questionnaire, this dissertation research study, or any further difficulties with the survey web link, please contact Oiyen Poon via email ([oiyan.poon@gmail.com](mailto:oiyan.poon@gmail.com)) or by phone (510.384.6445).

Thank you,  
Oiyen A. Poon, M.Ed.  
Ph.D. Candidate, UCLA

UCLA IRB# G08-01-053-01  
EXPIRATION DATE: January 30, 2009

## FLYER

Asian American UCLA Undergraduates Needed  
for Research Study on Asian American Perspectives on  
Race and Racism

### Eligibility Criteria:

- Identify as Asian American.
- Be a 1.5 OR 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Asian American.
  - 1.5 generation = Immigrated to the U.S. before the age of 12.
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> generation = Born in the U.S. to at least one Asian immigrant parent.
- Be at least 18 years old.
- Currently enrolled as a full-time, sophomore or junior undergraduate student at UCLA.

### Participation Entails:

- Completing a brief online web questionnaire.
- Participating in a 100-minute focus group with 8 or 9 other Asian American students.

***Food will be served during the focus group sessions!***

If interested, contact Oiyen Poon (UCLA Ph.D. Candidate,  
Education) [oiyan.poon@gmail.com](mailto:oiyan.poon@gmail.com)

UCLA IRB# G08-01-053-01  
EXPIRATION DATE: January 30, 2009

## Appendix B

### Characteristics and Pseudonyms of Interview Subjects

Pseudonym	Gender	Generation	Ethnicity	Major
Amber (Transfer)	Female	Second	Chinese	Political Science and Ethnic Studies
Claire	Female	Second	Filipina	Biology
Delores	Female	Second	Chinese	Ethnic Studies
EunJung	Female	Second	Korean	Psychology and Ethnic Studies
Gary	Male	Second	Thai	STEM
Jason	Male	Second	Taiwanese	Psychology and Art
Jestine (Transfer)	Female	Second	Chinese	Film
Jill	Female	Second	Thai	Anthropology
Joe	Male	Second	Taiwanese	Business
Kai	Male	Second	Hmong	Engineering
Ken	Male	Second	Thai	Biology/Pre-Med
Kyle	Male	1.5	Taiwanese	Ethnic Studies and Anthropology
Lee	Female	Second	Vietnamese	Art
Lisa	Female	Second	Thai	A
Mark	Male	Second	Filipino	Biological Sciences/Pre-Med
Matthew (Transfer)	Male	Second	Mixed Race – Chinese	History
Michelle (Transfer)	Female	Second	Filipina	History
Priscilla	Female	1.5	Chinese	Humanities
Raakhi	Female	Second	Indian	Economics
Rita	Female	Second	Indian	International Development
Ruth	Female	Second	Chinese	Micro-cell Biology
Seung	Male	1.5	Korean	Communications
Shirley	Female	Second	Filipina	Humanities
Tasanee	Female	1.5	Thai	Business
Walter	Male	1.5	Chinese	Engineering
Wilson	Male	Second	Thai	Art

## **Appendix C**

### **Consent to Participate in Research**

University of California, Los Angeles

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Oiyan A. Poon, a Ph.D. candidate in Education at UCLA. You were selected as a potential participant in this study because you participated in a focus group previously conducted for the purposes of this same research study.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study examines Asian American experiences with racism in college, especially with subtle acts of discrimination based on race.

#### **PROCEDURES**

For this interview, I will be asking you some questions about your experiences as an Asian American and as an undergraduate student at UCLA. You are free to verbally share as much or as little as you feel comfortable with, and you may end this interview at any time.

Please be informed that after this interview, the researcher will contact you one last time to invite you to participate in a final, follow-up focus group.

#### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

This interview will be audio recorded in an effort to maintain the integrity of the interview in the transcription process. After the interview is transcribed using pseudonym, the recording will be destroyed for your privacy. Only the principal researcher will have access to the video. No one else will be allowed to listen to this recording.

If at anytime you feel uncomfortable in answering any question, please feel free to not answer the question.

Please be aware that all of your answers will remain confidential and will only be reviewed by the researcher. You have the right to end the interview at anytime.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. In all reports of your responses, your confidentiality will be strictly maintained. In order to maintain your confidentiality, I will:

- Destroy the audio recording of the interview after it is transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

- Never use your real name in the reporting of data and analysis.

All participants will be asked to keep what is said during the group discussion between the participants only. However, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

#### POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Your participation in this study will help me complete my dissertation, which aims to help leaders and scholars in higher education to gain a better understanding of Asian American college students.

#### PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

As a token of appreciation for your time and participation you will be given a \$10 gift certificate for iTunes before we begin the interview.

#### IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact:

Oiyan A. Poon, Principal Investigator (Ph.D. candidate, Education)  
(510) 384-6445  
oiyan.poon@gmail.com

#### RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal rights because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Office for Protection of Research Subjects, 11000 Kinross, UCLA, Box 951694, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694, (310) 825-8714.

#### SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

---

Name of Subject (Print)

---

Signature of Subject

---

Date

#### SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

In my judgment the subject is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Oiyan A. Poon

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

UCLA IRB# G08-01-053-01  
EXPIRATION DATE: January 30, 2009

## Appendix D

### Racial Microaggressions Handout

Researchers at Columbia University recently identified eight themes of experiences with subtle racism, specific to Asian Americans. They call these experiences “racial microaggressions.” Racial microaggressions are “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue, et al, 2007, p. 72).

Please read the summary below of each of these racial microaggression themes before arriving at your scheduled focus group.

*Citation:* Sue, D. W., Bucceri, J., Lin, A. I., Nadal, K. L., Torino, G. C. (2007). Racial microaggressions and the

Asian American experience. *Cultural diversity and ethnic minority psychology*, 13, (1), 72 – 81.

#### *Theme 1: Alien in Own Land*

Asian Americans often go through uncomfortable interpersonal experiences, in which there is an assumption that all Asian Americans are foreigners, foreign-born, or international students. For example, some Asian Americans express frustration when they are asked “Where are you born?” and when they respond “California,” they are then asked, “Where are you *really* from?” Some also experience being told by surprised individuals, “You speak really good English!” The message conveyed is that only whites can be American or belong in the U.S.

#### *Theme 2: Ascription of Intelligence*

This is the assumption that “all Asians are math and/or science geniuses” simply based on race. An example on campus might be when someone might say, “I’m not taking that class. Most of the room was full of curve-busting Asian kids.” Experiences under this theme may make Asian Americans feel pressured to conform to the stereotype, or even trapped by it. This stereotype can also cause tension between Asian Americans and other students of color. The message conveyed is that to be Asian American means being a genius who never experience academic challenges or difficulties.

#### *Theme 3: Denial of Racial Reality*

Some Asian Americans have been told that Asian Americans are “the new whites” or “the new Jews,” because as a large collective population Asian Americans have “made it” by educational and socioeconomic measures. This assumption can invalidate and dismiss the very real experiences with discrimination that Asian Americans go through. The message conveyed is that Asian Americans do not experience racism, bias, or discrimination.

#### *Theme 4: Exotification of Asian American Women*

This theme is apparent in the sexual advances toward Asian American women by heterosexual men with an “Asian fetish.” The message conveyed is that Asian women exist only for the exotic pleasure of men, particularly white men. Asian American women are reduced to roles of sexual *objects*.

*Theme 5: Invalidation of Interethnic Differences*

“All Asians look alike. Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese... what’s the difference?”  
“All South Asians look alike. Indian, Punjabi, Gujarati, Bengali, Pakistani... what’s the difference?”

Experiences characterized by this theme essentially lump all Asian Americans together, dismissing any cultural, linguistic, historical, or socio-economic differences between specific Asian American groups. The message conveyed is that all Asian Americans are the same.

*Theme 6: Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles*

This theme is apparent when white cultural and behavioral values are imposed. For example, some say there is an Asian American cultural value that emphasizes silence. Therefore Asian Americans who are less verbal may be perceived as disengaged or inattentive by a professor or TA, and be penalized in their grade based on class participation requirements that require verbal engagement. For other Asian Americans, for example, spending time every weekend with one’s family may be a cultural expectation that is not understood, and possibly derided, by peers or teachers on campus. The message conveyed is that only white American communication styles and cultural values are legitimate.

*Theme 7: Second Class Citizenship*

These are experiences where whites are given preferential treatment over Asian Americans. For example, after overhearing a white passenger ask for a glass of water from a flight attendant, an Asian American asked the flight attendant for a glass of water immediately following the white passenger’s request. In response, the flight attendant told the Asian American passenger to go to the back of the plane to get a glass of water, but the flight attendant proceeded to get a bottle of water for the white passenger. The message conveyed is that Asian Americans are of less value than whites.

*Theme 8: Invisibility*

These incidents involve experiences of being overlooked or left out of discussions involving race and racism. For example, one Asian American student says, “In some of my classes, I feel people invalidate my experiences as an Asian American. It’s as though race is a Black issue, and no one else’s. Sometimes it’s a Latino issue, but it definitely never is an Asian American issue.” The message conveyed is that their experiences with race do not matter and are irrelevant.

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EXPIRATION DATE: January 30, 2009

## Appendix E

### Interview Protocol

#### *Welcome and introduction*

Thank you for your participation in this research study. This interview should not exceed 60 minutes. The purpose of this interview is to learn about your personal experiences and perspectives on race and racism as an Asian American undergraduate student at UCLA. I'll ask you some questions and you can share as much or as little as you feel comfortable with in your responses. Also, if there are any questions that you don't want to answer you have the right to do so. You also have the right to end this interview at any time if you wish. Do you have any questions?

After this interview, I'm hoping you will participate in one last focus group, a co-analysis group, where I'd like you and other students to discuss this topic one last time in a group setting. You are free to choose whether or not to participate in the co-analysis group. There is no obligation for you to participate in the co-analysis group. I'll contact you after this interview to invite you.

#### *Consent process and Statement of Confidentiality*

[Provide consent form.]

I will be audio recording our session today. However, your identity will not be revealed to anyone. After the interview I will be assigning you with a pseudonym, transcribing the interview using that pseudonym for you. After transcribing and analyzing the data I will destroy the audio recording.

[Collect signed consent form.]

#### *Interview Questions*

- Where did you grow up?
- Did you give much thought to race and being Asian American when you were growing up? Why or why not? What did you think about?
- What are your impressions of the Sue, et al's (2007) theory of eight racial microaggression themes?
- Do you believe you have experienced racial microaggressions? Here at UCLA? Can you describe the experience? What did you do in response to the microaggression?
- Have any of you experienced racial microaggressions that you feel are not included in the theory of eight racial microaggression themes?
- Among the eight microaggression themes, are there any that you believe do not resonate with your own experiences or the experiences of other Asian Americans you know? Please explain.



*Debrief/Closure*

Again I would like to thank you for spending your time participating in this research study. Your insights are invaluable. Do you have any questions for me about the research study or any last thoughts you'd like to share with me before we end the interview?

## Appendix F

### Coding Scheme

#### Racial Microaggressions

*Do Asian Americans experience racial marginalization on a campus where there is a critical mass of Asian American students?*

- I. Alien – Lack of Belonging (1)
  - A. North campus/Non-STEM
  - B. American
  - C. Language
  - D. Ethnic Heritage
- II. Ascription of Intelligence (2)
  - A. Institutional ignorance of educational needs
  - B. Anxiety – major/career
  - C. Pro-STEM Disciplinary Forces
    - i. Labor market inequalities
    - ii. Isolation in non-STEM field
    - iii. Peers
    - iv. Family
- III. Gendered Racial Micro-aggressions
  - A. Exotification of Asian Women (4)
    - i. Caricature – Object
    - ii. Desire of White Men - Subject
  - B. Emasculation of Asian Men
- IV. Exclusion
  - A. Ethnic lumping (5)
    - i. Inter-ethnic inequalities overlooked
    - ii. East Asian privilege/centrality
  - B. 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Citizenship (7)
  - C. Denial of Racial Reality (3)
    - i. Exclusion from minority programs
  - D. Invisibility (8)
  - E. Pathologizing values/culture (6)
- V. Spaces for Racial Micro-aggressions
  - A. Academic Settings
  - B. Family Networks
  - C. Social Settings
  - D. Media

## Resistance

*How do they participate in forms of resistance against racial micro-aggressions?*

- I. Internalization (self-defeating)
  - A. Conversion
  - B. Passing/Silence (social death in one's own community)
- II. Conformity
  - A. Covering
- III. Transformative
  - A. Develop strong identity
  - B. Spaces to counter microaggressions
    - 1. Counter microaggressions
      - i. Community leadership and advocacy
      - ii. Empowerment for participation in broader spaces
    - 2. Lack of spaces
    - 3. Entry
      - i. Peer invitation
      - ii. Desire to give back to community
    - 4. Freirean community education space
  - C. Critical Literacy Projects
    - 1. Community pedagogy
    - 2. Ethnic/Women's Studies/Critical Theory classes
    - 3. Media Production
    - 4. Activism
- IV. Academic and career choices
  - A. Motivated to give back to community
  - B. Family pressures context
    - A. Follow/conform
    - B. Frame choice for status
    - C. Self support

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