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The Racialization of the Pan-Ethnic Asian American Identity

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*The Racialization of the Pan-Ethnic Asian
American Identity*

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Asian American Identity

Introduction

It took me a long time to understand what it meant to be Asian American and to cultivate pride in this identity. Growing up in an elementary classroom full of Chinese American students, where the white students were the minority, I had no sense of Asian as the “other.” I never thought much about being Asian. If anything, I felt my race was normal, not something that would or could set me apart from others. This all changed when I got older and transferred to a predominantly white school—suddenly being Asian was how others identified me. Not wanting to be seen as different, for a long time I shunned my Asian identity, pushing it into a corner where I hoped no one would comment on it. I used to see myself as a “banana”—white on the inside, yellow on the outside. Unknowingly, I was already buying into the black-white binary, the idea that race relations in America can be understood through these two constituent groups, to try to understand what it meant for me to be Asian in America. It was not until high school that I first learned of concepts such as white privilege, micro-aggressions, cultural appropriation, and bootstrap theory. I felt like I had finally discovered the tools to understand race and how it played out in the social world. But by then, it felt like I was late to the game of cultural pride. I thought about the many years I had spent wishing that I looked more white and turning my back on my heritage.

It has been a long journey to arrive at where I am now: dedicating my final project in college to exploring my identity—the Asian American identity. At first the only thing I knew was that I wanted to study Asian Americans. But while my personal stake in this topic was a driving force for continually engaging with the material, I wanted to make sure that this project

had significance beyond just me. I thought for a long time about how to approach this topic. Why should anyone care about Asian Americans anyway? Just because I am interested in it, what makes this topic relevant and significant to others, and what conversations does this topic engage in and implicate in the process? As I reflected on my own experience, I remember that being called Asian as a child came with a host of implications and associations—being Asian meant being cute, it meant being small, quiet, hardworking, driven, it meant being good at math. In the past when I distanced myself from being Asian, I was actually distancing myself from the stereotypical associations attached to that label, and the constricting feeling of being unable to define yourself separate from how others perceive and categorize you. I realized that an element of my project had to include a discussion about identity—what is a social identity? What is a racial and ethnic identity? How do these identities impact everyday life? Who gets to decide what identities are taken on? Is it in the power of the individual, or is it imposed upon someone by something beyond them? Thus came the foundation for chapter one.

Thinking about Asian American identity led me to another realization: I had no idea where the identity “Asian American” originated. In school, I had never been taught the history that catalyzed the creation of this identity. Therefore, I knew I wanted to dedicate part of my project to the history of Asians in America, a history that is often obscured or neglected entirely, and how these people came to be not just Asians in America but Asian Americans. This became chapter two of my project. In looking at the history of Asians in America, I realized that many of the contemporary associations and stereotypes about Asian Americans have deep roots in political utility dating back to the first wave of Asian immigration to America. Therefore, not only was history crucial to understanding the creation of Asian American identity, it was essential to understand the significance of the modern racialization of Asian Americans, from the

model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes, to the status of Asian Americans as a minority group. By the time I was writing my third and fourth chapters, this project had become more than just defining Asian American identity—it had become a discussion on the racialization of Asian Americans, and what their unique position in the American racial landscape means for the social realities of Asian Americans and the relationship of Asian Americans to other racial groups.

Before we move forward, I would like to make a few clarifications. This project relies heavily on the concept “racialization” in discussing and understanding Asian Americans. Rather than being a biological or hereditary characteristic, race is socially constructed, and these constructs are attributed with status and meaning and have interactional consequences on both the individual and group level. As a construct, race, and associated racial meaning, is not static but is a “dynamic, fluid, and historically situated *process* of social and political ascription” (Lee 2009 in HoSang and LaBennet 2014, 212). Because race and the connotations it holds are always positioned within particular sociopolitical contexts, race can be generative of diverse ideological frameworks that justify forms of social hierarchy, privilege, and power (HoSang and LaBennet 2014). Racialization can be understood as this very process that produces race and racial meaning. The study of racialization is most often associated with Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who defined the term as signifying “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group. Racialization is an ideological process, an historically specific one” (Omi and Winant 1986, 64). Racialization as a core concept of this project can be understood as a historically situated process in which race functions as a signifier of social identity, power, and meaning within the social hierarchy.

Just as race takes on social meaning, racial categories themselves acquire associations of power and subjugation, the most clearly pronounced examples being black and white racial categories. In order to discuss and understand the racialization of Asian Americans in the American scheme of race relations, this project uses black and white groups as reference points to describe the ambiguous racial position of Asian Americans. Because the black/white color line has historically been so widely enforced, American consciousness more often than not thinks of race dichotomously in black and white terms. Throughout this project, I utilize the words “blackness” and “whiteness,” which does not merely refer to the state of having black or white skin or being counted as part of the black or white racial category. These groups exist in the public imagination and describe the variation of culture, oppression, privilege, power, and history in racial classification. I acknowledge that blackness and whiteness have a huge literature of exploration and a multitude of definitions, but I do not intend to engage in the larger debate on definitively drawing the parameters of blackness and whiteness. This project will utilize Howard Winant’s conceptualization of whiteness, and from that extract a characterization of blackness for the purpose of discussing Asian Americans. In the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, Winant describes the normalization of whiteness as the default racial status and the simultaneous “invisibility” of whiteness allow whites to be “just people” rather than people belonging to a racialized group. However, Winant argues that the uniqueness of whiteness “lies in the contradictions therein: while whiteness partakes of normality and transparency, it is also dominant, insistently so” (Winant 2007, 5249). In the *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations*, sociologist Ellis Cashmore similarly defines whiteness as conferring advantages and prestige, as well as setting normative standards (Cashmore 1996, 380). Rather than being invisible and

inconsequential, whiteness is a prominent fixture of the system of racial domination in the United States, and it is this position of superiority, power, and access that defines whiteness.

On the other hand, finding a definition of blackness was vastly more difficult than finding definitions of whiteness. Often times during my research, “blackness” as a term came up only within descriptions of whiteness. Thus, it is evident that an essential quality of blackness is its relational position to whiteness, which in turn hinges on the social fact of not being black, or “of color” (Winant 2007, 5250). If the salient characteristic of whiteness is its continual involvement with domination, blackness can be understood as defined as the recipient of this domination. In his definition of whiteness, Cashmore writes, “because whiteness signified superiority and privilege, it worked to devalue any skin color that did not qualify and render possessors of that skin Others” (Cashmore 1996, 380). Therefore, a function of whiteness must be the devaluation of blackness. Subsequently, literature that discusses the social alignment of Asian Americans with either whites or blacks is utilizing the pre-established experiences and cultural literacies of blackness and whiteness as signifying domination and subjugation. Therefore, understanding the placement of Asian Americans in the racial classification scheme also involves the boundary-making process in which Asian Americans are allowed into certain boundaries of whiteness while being aligned with blackness as a subjugated position, depending upon context. Invocation of the terms blackness and whiteness in this project serve as reference points of oppression and privilege to accurately conceptualize the American racial structure and relational positions of constituent groups.

Project Overview / Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: Asian Americans and Symbolic Identity

The first chapter of this project explores social, racial, and ethnic identity. The guiding research questions for this chapter are as follows:

- What is symbolic ethnicity? What does it mean for a racial or ethnic identity to be symbolic?
- What is the relationship between a self-defined identity and a socially imposed identity?
- How is racial identity manifested in Asian American experiences? What does it mean to be Asian American and how does it affect daily relations?

Social identities position individuals and groups in relation to one another within the hierarchical social structure. In America, racial and ethnic identity exerts strong influence on how individuals are viewed and treated by society, and how they subsequently develop their self-identity as a response to the perception of their group. Race and ethnicity have profoundly different social consequences for different groups, and this chapter will compare the integration of white European ethnics into the category of whiteness to discern the degree to which this same framework can be used to understand the future of Asian Americans, both in terms of ethnic identification and in relation to assimilation. This chapter will also discuss identity as something imposed from the outside versus something that is generated from within, something self-identified. Finally, this chapter applies these concepts to understanding Asian American racial identity.

Chapter 2: History of Asian Immigration and Racialization

Chapter two will have two main areas of focus: first, it will provide a historical background of Asian immigration to the United States and discuss the ways these early immigrant groups were racialized. Second, this chapter will investigate the sociopolitical

conditions that allowed different Asian ethnic groups to come together under the pan-Asian identity in the Asian American Movement during the civil rights movements of the 1960s. The chapter will also address the beginnings of stereotypes about Asian Americans as rooted in social and political utility unique to that time period.

Chapter 3: Stereotypes of Asian Americans

Chapter three explores the two dominant stereotypes about Asian Americans: the model minority and perpetual foreigner, as these two prevailing stereotypes are fundamental to understanding the positionality of Asian Americans. The model minority lauds Asian Americans' perceived exemplary qualities—smart, hardworking, industrious—that have facilitated their integration into American society. Used as evidence that the American dream is still alive, the model minority also distances Asian Americans from other minority groups of color by making the explicit comparison of successful versus unsuccessful minorities. On the other hand, Asian Americans are simultaneously considered perpetual foreigners, regardless of their generational status. Therefore, while the logic behind these two controlling images contradict each other, together they act to confine Asian Americans to a specific position in the racial scheme, with specific sociopolitical utility. After establishing these two stereotypes, this chapter utilizes Reddit comments to see how Asian Americans' experience of Asian American identity relates to the prevalent societal images.

Chapter 4: Asian Americans and the Color Line

This chapter explicitly addresses the black/white binary, which thus far has been an implied part of the conversation. While the black/white paradigm has been criticized by multiple scholars for a variety of reasons, its prevailing presence in shaping racial discourse necessitates an examination of the significance of this framework and the implications it carries for understanding not just blacks and whites, but other racial groups such as Asians and Latinos.

In this chapter I will explore Asian Americans through the white racial frame and how social proximity to whiteness has called into question Asian Americans' "minority" group status. This chapter will also include a section on Asians and Latino Americans, as discourse on the black and white binary often places these two groups in similar categories. Next, I will address the relationship between Asian Americans and the other side of the dichotomous paradigm: Asians and blacks. Finally, this chapter proposes racial triangulation theory as a more accurate and comprehensive approach to conceptualizing Asian American racial relations.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this project ponders the implications of the argument as well as the other conversations this topic engages with, areas this study did not cover, and areas for further research.

Methodology

The empirical evidence for this paper is drawn from publically available Reddit threads. Online forums afford individuals a degree of anonymity not accessible in interviews or other face-to-face interaction, and therefore the comments on different Reddit discussion threads have a wealth of potential to reveal unfiltered insight into how contemporary Americans are experiencing, conceptualizing, and describing their identity. While Reddit forums are publically available, all usernames have been altered using a random word generator to maintain the anonymity of Reddit users. Reddit posts are organized by subject into user-created boards called “subreddits.” This paper draws primarily from the “Asian American Channel” subreddit and discussion threads generated under this topic. The Asian American Channel’s community details state:

Anything related to Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, as well as other Asians who grew up outside of Asia. This includes news, discussions, pictures, or videos. While members of all races and nationalities are welcome, our purpose is to foster a sense of community among Asian Americans and their respective counterparts in the Asian diaspora. Topics do not necessarily need to be related to race as long as they contribute to the community.

The other Reddit page I drew on for data on Asian American identity was the “Azn Identity” page. This group’s community details state:

The most active Asian diaspora forum on the web. We are a Pan Asian community (East, Southeast, South, Central) against all forms of anti Asian racism. We aim to help Asian-Americans and Asians in the West, more broadly, make sense out of their own life experiences, find a supportive like-minded community, and live the best possible life. We prioritize our identity as Asians, not to be used as political pawns for either left or right in Western ideologies/parties.

Appearing primarily in chapters 3 and 4, the comments from the “Asian American Channel” and the “Azn Identity” subreddits will shed light on how Asian Americans perceive

their own identity, and how they perceive how others view their identity. Utilizing keywords such as “Asian American,” “identity,” “model minority,” and “perpetual foreigner” enabled me to extract the comments that were most pertinent to my research questions. I assessed the comments in relation to the theories introduced in chapter one and what they said about contemporary Asian American identity and racial position.

The other subreddit used in this paper is “AskAnAmerican,” and I will specifically utilize a discussion thread that discusses the experience of white ethnics. The community details for this group state: “Learn about America, straight from the mouth of Americans.” Comments from this page will illustrate how contemporary Americans are conceptualizing and discussing whiteness. For each subreddit I chose to investigate the discussion threads that generated comments that were most pertinent to my project and research questions. Links to the various pages and their threads are listed below:

The Asian American Channel: <https://www.reddit.com/r/asianamerican>

Threads:

- https://www.reddit.com/r/asianamerican/comments/9s9qol/people_that_assume_that_asian_chinese_japanese/
- https://www.reddit.com/r/asianamerican/comments/91omyr/why_do_asian_americans_feel_the_need_to_emphasize/
- https://www.reddit.com/r/asianamerican/comments/alhvpi/am_i_less_filipino_if_i_cant_speak_tagalog/
- https://www.reddit.com/r/asianamerican/comments/9bu4n8/what_does_the_whitening_of_asian_americans_mean/

Azn Identity: <https://www.reddit.com/r/aznidentity/>

Threads:

- https://www.reddit.com/r/aznidentity/comments/bcgwfd/identity_crisis_of_the_west/

- [https://www.reddit.com/r/aznidentity/comments/bbu46d/i wish more black people will speak on asian/](https://www.reddit.com/r/aznidentity/comments/bbu46d/i_wish_more_black_people_will_speak_on_asian/)

AskAnAmerican: <https://www.reddit.com/r/AskAnAmerican/>

Thread:

- [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskAnAmerican/comments/9m5pnp/how much grief do the different white ethnics/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskAnAmerican/comments/9m5pnp/how_much_grief_do_the_different_white_ethnics/)

Chapter 1:

Asian Americans and Symbolic Identity

While different areas of study approach identity in different ways, this paper will draw on how social interactions and hierarchical structures influence racial identity. Focusing on identity as a social product demarcated by group membership, this chapter will begin with an examination of racial and ethnic identity in America as a subcategory of social identity. Next, it will introduce the concept of symbolic identity and its relationship to assimilation theory. The paper will then address visibility in relation to racial identity, and discuss which identities are socially imposed and which identities afford agency to the individual to claim for themselves. Finally, drawing on the concepts and theories introduced earlier, the chapter will apply these ideas to the discussion of Asian American racial identity.

Social Identity

People look to their identities in making choices and positioning themselves in the social world. Identities signal who one is in relation to others; its relative position draws from interactions between the individual and society and can never be extricated from the identity of the individual himself or herself. Individuals create their sense of self based on their understanding of their associations with different social networks and the positions of those networks in relation to larger society—contextualizing identity, therefore, involves understanding and interpreting cultural history as it relates to individual experience.

As American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley posited, society and the individual do not denote separable phenomena but are instead aspects of the same configuration (Cooley

1902). According to Cooley, a person's self grows out of society's interpersonal interactions and the perceptions of others, also known as "the looking-glass self." There are three components of the looking-glass self: firstly, individuals imagine how they appear to others, second, they imagine the judgment of that appearance, and finally, they develop their sense of self through the judgments of others (Cooley 1902). Identity then, is shaped through the perceptions of others, and the "judgments" can be understood as the associations attached to various identities. These associations correspond to the power structures that shape the social world. Possessing certain identities can confer privilege on an individual, or can conversely subjugate an individual into an inferior position.

Social identities, and in particular racial identities, are associated with varying degrees of prestige and resources within society. The degree to which an individual identifies with a particular group is influenced by the evaluation of the prestige of that group (Tajfel and Turner 1986). In describing the social context of intergroup behavior, Tajfel and Turner argue that in relevant social situations, individuals will interact with each other "as members of their groups standing in certain defined relationships to members of other groups" rather than interacting based on personal attributes and interpersonal relationships (Tajfel and Turner 1986, 278). Tajfel and Turner argue that especially if social groups are associated with a stratified and unequal distribution of resources, people are more likely to behave towards each other as a function of their group membership. Taking this idea to the extreme, conflicting group interests arising from differences in social positioning may lead to conflict between groups, especially between privileged and underprivileged groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Even when group interests are not sufficient to generate group conflict, individuals are nevertheless influenced by the status or

privilege conferred on their group and members of their group by society, and internalizing these notions may affect their behavior.

Therefore, identities do not merely indicate social position, but placement within a power structure. Because people want to be perceived in a way that confers access and power in their social movements, they may alter their behavior or public presentation to emphasize an aspect of their identity. They may act in ways that are congruent with dominant conceptions of that identity—in other words, stereotypes—if that dominant conception happens to be positive, and more importantly, places the individual higher in the social hierarchy. In the United States, race exerts one of the most powerful influences over relative group positions. Being perceived as white, for example, may lead to easier social access and opportunities than being perceived as black. Oyserman et al. give an example of how one may be compelled to actively assert a racial identity: Asian Americans who are worried that they will not be viewed as Americans may choose to act in ways that help them fit in. They may exaggerate their American-ness through their way of dressing, speaking, or behavior, in effect performing (to an extent) their identity as a way of asserting a particular aspect of themselves (Oyserman et al. 2012). Thus, social identities serve as guides to action.

Racial and Ethnic Identity

As stated above, structures of race have a profound influence on shaping social outcomes. Society is rife with messages about the presumed superiority and inferiority of different racial and ethnic identities. As such, society's racial attitudes are integral to the development of self-identity.

The messages received by minority groups are starkly different from those received by the majority. As the dominant group in U.S. society, white Americans are not only afforded the privilege to conceptualize themselves first and foremost as individuals, as whiteness is commonly taken as the norm, but they also enjoy a host of social privileges attached to whiteness. The sentiments from most of the Reddit posts show that users clearly view whites as the privileged group. Thus, whiteness is recognized as both the standard and the superior group. In a Reddit board where Americans talk about the meaning of being American, a user posed a discussion question about how much different ethnicities are “valued.” User @BirdFour wrote: “White privilege allows whites to not think about race. They think race is irrelevant precisely because being white is a huge advantage with no disadvantages.” The user speaks to how whiteness as the norm translates into white people not having to consider the social significance of their own race. When another user, who identifies themselves as white, refuted this assertion by saying that “I do not get superpowers from white privilege” and “Race is irrelevant because there are good and bad INDIVIDUALS in every ethnic group,” user @BirdFour replied again, saying

Yes you do. Easier dating, easier employment, easier not being killed by police, easier social acceptance and treatment anywhere you go in your day to day dealings. [...] You have it the easiest out of all the races. It's not that you don't have difficulty, it's just that you have it the easiest relative to every other race of men.

Good and bad individuals has nothing to do with white privilege.

-@BirdFour

Simply put, @BirdFour points out how whiteness makes life easier for white individuals. The comment about “easier social acceptance and treatment anywhere you go in your day to day dealings” speaks directly to how whiteness confers social privilege and more easily accessible opportunities.

On the other hand, minority group members are often defined first by their race, a category that is always outside the bounds of white normalcy (Massey et al. 2003). For minority group members, the process of identity construction involves confronting the often negative stereotypes that pervade society, and “resist internalizing the self-perception that they imply, and to assert confidently a positive ethnic definition of oneself” (Tatum 1997 in Massey et al. 2003, 133). Therefore, the process of racial identification for minority group individuals involves dealing with the negative effects of racism. Furthermore, some scholars assert that minority individuals are disproportionately forced to confront the question of “Who am I?” and subsequently must learn how to convey or express their identities to others. This statement is clearly an oversimplification, as factors such as geographical location, neighborhood, and education are inextricable from the equation. White Americans growing up in very diverse cities such as New York or Los Angeles may in fact engage with questions of racial identity in ways that white Americans in rural areas may not. Despite this consideration, the overwhelming normalization of whiteness in American culture creates the environment in which the process of identity development for minority group individuals inevitably involves dealing with negative racial associations.

The argument that establishing a positive self-definition and distancing oneself from the dominant group’s view of race is a specifically a minority group experience is complicated by the fact that racial categorizations are never fixed and clearly distinguishable. Many Hispanic individuals are white but share common cultural aspects with Hispanics who are not white. People of Middle Eastern and North African descent have historically identified themselves as white on census forms, as the census includes people having origins from Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa as white. Although the Census Bureau announced that it would consider

establishing a new MENA category for populations from the Middle East, North Africa, and the Arab world that is separate from the white category, in January of 2018 the Bureau announced that the 2020 Census would not include MENA as a category (Krogstad 2014, Wang 2018). Regardless of census classifications, what is clear is that racial categorizations are blurry and constantly being renegotiated, and therefore who counts as part of the white majority of part of a minority group varies with time and social context.

Nevertheless, society's attitudes towards racial and ethnic groups are critical components of an individual's understanding of how "people like me" are perceived by others, and what kind of treatment one can then expect to receive as a part of that group (Massey et al. 2003). Taking Oyserman's example of Asian Americans actively asserting their American-ness, individuals may be compelled to emphasize their American side as a way of demonstrating their place in the in-group of American society, rather than their Asian side which is regarded as the "other," the out-group to the white American in-group. Again, it is evident that the pervasive messages about racial and ethnic identities and the corresponding placement in the social hierarchy strongly affect not only an individual's sense of identity, but their social actions as well.

The relationship between race and ethnicity also plays a role in shaping daily life experiences of individuals, which may raise the question of which identity, racial or ethnic, exerts a more powerful influence in shaping social outcomes. Furthermore, social scientists studying race and ethnicity explore the likelihood of ethnic distinctions becoming absorbed into broader racial categorizations. Scholars studying these phenomena, such as Mary Waters and Richard Alba, have developed the idea of "symbolic ethnicity," in which ethnicity can be a part of an individual's identity without being incorporated into their everyday behavior and movement about the social world. Moreover, if ethnicity has or will become integrated into racial

groups, what is significance of this shift on the position of racial groups in relation to one another? One key example that is theoretically relevant for comparative analysis is the extensive research on white ethnicity, where white ethnic groups have become integrated into “whiteness,” achieving full assimilation into society’s dominant group. Scholars argue that because the white category has shifted and expanded in the past, this may indicate that it may shift again in the future to include other groups. The following two sections utilize the example of white ethnics and symbolic ethnicity to explore if the same trajectory can be applied to other racial and ethnic groups.

Symbolic Ethnicity

Social scientists have long argued that manifestations of ethnic and racial identity contribute to and derive from existing social structures. The popular conception of race and ethnicity sees categories and classifications as primordial, something inherited from one’s ancestors. However, ethnic groups and ethnic identification in fact allow for a degree of choice and are socially dynamic in nature. While often reduced to the psychological self-concept or inner orientation of an individual, behavioral and experiential expressions of ethnic identity manifest in concrete patterns of action and relationship in the social world (Alba 1990, 75). However, ethnic identity does not operate in the same way for all ethnic groups.

Certain ethnicities take precedence over others in the social realm. Because the popular view of ethnicity emphasizes common ancestry, it leads to the presumption that members of a particular ethnic group will have a degree of physical similarity. Moreover, specific physical traits are associated with specific ethnic groups, associations that are generally consensual throughout society. These traits are subsequently used to instantaneously judge what ethnic

group an individual belongs to—individuals whose physical appearance resembles the stereotypical associations of their ethnic group are immediately typecast and socially constrained from an alternate form of identification. Therefore, the degree to which physical traits are used to determine one’s ancestry and ethnicity has a powerful influence on the ease with which an individual may move in or out of groups (Waters 1990, 75). White Americans of European descent are constantly given the option of identifying themselves in terms of their ethnic ancestry or to disregard this classification and identify as American, sometimes referred to as “unhyphenated whites” (Waters 1990, 52, 58). White ethnics have the option to choose whether their ethnicity has an influence over their lives and the extent to which it is part of their social identification—ethnic identification becomes invoked at will by the individual, and is a matter of personal choice and a source of pleasure (Waters 1990). For white ethnics, invocation of ethnic identity for the large part takes the form of enjoyable yet mundane activities such as “eating ethnic foods, enacting holiday rituals, peppering English speech with mother-tongue words and phrases, and participating in ethnic social clubs,” which “give meaning to an otherwise abstract assertion of ethnic identity and breathe life into ethnicity as a social form” (Alba 1990, 75). In a discussion thread on Reddit, user @Tablegolf posed the question: “How much grief do the different ‘white ethnics’ still give each other? What about back in the day?” Further elaborating on the question, the user wrote:

I was talking to some guy my dad's age (late 60s) from New Jersey once. He said when he was a kid, the Italian kids would fight the Polish kids who would fight the Hungarian kids who would fight the Irish kids, and so on and so forth. Like, each ethnic clique would fight every other ethnic clique. There was also a separate Catholic church for each group. The Poles would all go to one church, the Italians would all go to another one, and so on.

[...]

Was it actually like that back in the day? And what's it like now? I would guess most younger people are now just 'white folks' who happen to be Catholic...

-@Tablegolf

As this paper does not focus on religion as a variable affecting whiteness, the user's comments on religion will be disregarded. However, the fact that there used to be antagonism based on different European white ethnicities illustrates how different European ethnicities used to be treated before they were absorbed into the white category. Many of the replies to this discussion thread reiterated the trend of how ethnic distinctions among white Americans of European descent has largely come to hold no real social significance. User @LilRoyal wrote: "Hardly anyone identified themselves as "English" or "German" or whatever any more as opposed to 'white.'" Another user, @Immobilebird1, spoke directly from their personal sense of identification, writing, "As for me I'm too mixed with European countries to experience anything. I'm just white." The user does not elaborate on what they mean by not "experiencing anything," yet it is clear that for this individual, ethnicity has little to no influence on their sense of identification, they are "just white." Perhaps this individual feels that they are "too mixed" to feel any sense of affinity for a particular European ethnicity. Because European ethnic groups have become integrated into American whiteness, being Irish-American or Polish-American becomes indistinguishable from being a white American, unless that individual explicitly chooses to bring their ethnicity to the forefront of their social interactions. Within the category of whiteness itself, distinguishing what separates different ethnicities from one another may be difficult and even if accomplished, still produce little to no social consequences. User @Datazone_1 writes, "I think it's sort of weird when American white people claim their ancestry as 'Oh, I'm Irish Scottish' or I'm 'Dutch English.' I have to think Europeans laugh at us for this." When the user writes that they think Europeans laugh at Americans for identifying in this way, this points to the idea that white Americans of European descents do not have a legitimate claim to being Dutch or Scottish because in America as these groups have become

white Americans and taken on a different social meaning. To Europeans, these people may just be American, and to be American means being white. Another user replied:

I cant really say for sure from my knowledge if that's how the past really was, [...] As a young white person I would say that we dont really care about ethnicity between other whites and in my experience it usually only comes up when somebody talks about their family heritage and the other person in the conversation will just respond with "Oh cool, yeah my family is...." and that's typically the extent of it.
- @Strongiusa

For this user, ethnicity only arises as a way to discuss family heritage, but does not exert a powerful force in shaping how they experience the world or how they are perceived and treated by others. The example the user gives of a conversation that discusses ethnic identity has a decidedly casual tone, as seen with the words “oh cool,” and “yeah.” The fact that ethnicity can and only arises in such a casual way reiterates Alba’s assertion that white ethnics enjoy the privilege of invocation of ethnic identity as a mundane but enjoyable part of their life—something that is entirely voluntary and does not demand any social action, where the individual may decide the extent to which they want their ethnicity to be a part of their lives, and when it does, usually only serves to enrich the given context.

If an ethnic identity has no commitment in terms of action, as it is for white ethnics, then it has become a “symbolic ethnicity” (Alba 1990). Symbolic ethnicity allows one to individualize the degree of their ethnic identification without any real social cost. Individuals may confine their ethnic cultural commitments to “a few ethnic symbols that do not intrude on a life that is otherwise nonethnic” (Alba 1990, 77). White Americans of European ancestry have a great deal of choice in terms of their ethnic identities. Two major options for white Americans are firstly, the option of whether or not to claim any specific ancestry at all, or to just be “white” or American (Waters 1990). The second choice involves choosing to include European ancestries in

the description of their own identities. In both cases, the individual is afforded the option of choice, a privilege not extended to people of color. Mary Waters argues that symbolic ethnicity is not an option for black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans as well as American Indians, because their appearance affects the way they move about and are treated in the social world regardless of how much or little they choose to identify themselves in terms of their ethnic ancestry (Waters 1990). Moreover, she asserts that being able not to claim any ethnic identity is possible for white Americans because they are the majority group, and the degree of discrimination and social distance for any specific European ethnicity has for the large part diminished over time (Waters 1990).

The celebration of ethnic background as enjoyed by white Americans implies that all ethnicities are equal and have the same results for all groups. However, “all ethnicities are not equal, are not symbolic, costless, and voluntary” (Waters 1990, 160). For people of color, racial and ethnic identification is not a subjective choice. People of color are socially constrained to have their ancestry defined by physical appearance and are subsequently defined in racial terms. When comparing whites to minority groups of color, it is easy to conflate racial and ethnic identity. However, when white Americans of European descent shed their ethnic markers, they were integrated into the *majority* racial category, marked by its representation as the standard. Therefore, identifying in racial rather than ethnic terms produces no detrimental social consequence for white ethnics and may in fact increase their social privilege. However, when nonwhite ethnic groups move from ethnic to racial identification, they are being integrated into *minority* groups already positioned in the racial structure. For these nonwhite ethnic groups, discarding an ethnic identity in favor of a racial identity signifies assimilation into a major racial category, but one that is often marked by prejudice, ethnic and racial micro-aggressions, and

discrimination. Differences in racial and ethnic identity in the case of Asian Americans will be elaborated on later in this chapter.

Assimilation

The idea of symbolic ethnicity and racial categorization is particularly interesting when examined in relationship to assimilation. In the canonical assimilation framework, assimilation was seen as “rigidly predicting the extinction of ethnic differences through the one-way adjustment of an immigrant group to the receiving society’s mainstream, which hardly changes at all” (Alba and Nee 2014). The scholarship often points to the experience of Irish, Italian, and Jewish Americans, who were initially considered non-white during their initial arrival to the United States (Alba 1990). However, ethnic distinctions based on European ancestry eventually faded into the background and became integrated into the white category. For these groups, shedding their ethnic markers symbolized full assimilation into the racial group with the most power and privilege. The fact that these groups moved from being considered nonwhite to being included into the white racial category shows how whiteness, while usually taken to be the static standard of comparison, can actually be porous. Critiques of assimilation as meaning absorption into white America and the eradication of ethnic culture pointed out the failure of the canonical framework to grasp the ways in which mainstream culture is affected by minority group culture, which becomes especially apparent when considered with the United States’ contemporary immigration landscape. Moreover, the canonical assimilation framework was critiqued for reinforcing normative measures to center whiteness as the nation’s identity (Park 2015).

Despite the contentious nature of assimilation theory, some scholars contend that assimilation remains the primary framework through which to understand and describe the

integration of various immigrant groups into the mainstream (Alba and Nee 1997). Whether or not it should be the case, whiteness remains the standard of comparison and representative of normative American-ness. Other definitions of assimilation do not necessitate the erasure of all signs of ethnic origins, such as Park and Burgess' definition of assimilation as "a process of interpretation and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" (Park and Burgess 1969, 735). This definition perhaps more accurately reflects the ways in which immigrant populations change American culture, yet the idea that assimilation produces a common cultural life that all groups can partake in implies an equality of interpretation, to use Park and Burgess' words, that is not there. American culture as one entity in which all groups can, with changes over time, become incorporated, contradicts structures shaping the social hierarchy. While America is founded on the value of creating one unified body out of a diverse range of people, who are all granted equal access and rights, this notion is in direct contradiction with the social structure that demands that groups are positioned in a hierarchical nature. Therefore, the process of assimilation is not a single trajectory that can be unanimously applied to all groups—assimilation may position one group in a place of privilege and access, while placing another in a position of subjugation and domination.

Comparing the integration of white ethnics into the white racial category with Asian Americans overlooks the unequal treatment of different racial groups in America. When ethnic distinctions become absorbed into racial categories, groups previously separated by social boundaries become consolidated into a group that is politically and socially more powerful. For white ethnics, becoming symbolically ethnic meant embodying the standard definition of an

American. Scholars have argued that because white ethnics achieved incorporation into the majority racial category, this outcome is also possible for Asian Americans. However, the transition of ethnic identification to racial identification for white ethnics is a shift from ethnicity to race. Arguing that Asian Americans could in the future become part of the white category would be a shift not from ethnicity to race, but from one racial category to another. The real issue at hand is not that because white ethnics became white, Asians can too; it is whether or not the white racial category can expand to include a whole other racial category. If we return to the ethnicity to race transformation, comparison between white ethnics and Asians would not be a question of whether or Asians will become white, but whether Asian ethnic identification will lose salience to racial identification in a pan-Asian category. Chapter three of this paper will address the white racial frame in relation to Asian American stereotypes and the notion of Asians “becoming white,” and chapter four will further this discussion by analyzing the contemporary color line and the social proximity of Asian Americans to other major racial categories.

Another factor overlooked in comparing the historical experience of white ethnics to Asian Americans is the fact that Asian Americans phenotypic traits do not mirror those of the majority. The visibility of race makes the experience of Asian (and Latino) ethnic groups vastly different than white ethnicity—even if one makes the comparison to white ethnics blurring the boundaries of ethnic differences to Asian ethnicities adopting “Asian” as the primary mode of identification, still the experience of race surpasses the importance of ethnicity for the social experience of members of these ethnic groups. For example, it is possible for an Asian American to choose to identify themselves as Asian without specifying if they are Chinese, Korean, or Japanese, yet this kind of identification does not affect the treatment of that individual as a racialized body and has vastly different social implications than a white ethnic identifying simply

as white. From this it can be argued that racial identity and its manifestations in producing different social outcomes are more important than ethnic identity. The following two sections will address the influence of visible physical traits on racial identification.

Visibility and Racial Identity

Symbolic ethnicity and the ethnic options afforded to white Americans of European descent illustrate how the ways in which identities that manifest on the body itself have a profound influence on how individuals are perceived and treated in the social world. Different dimensions of identity include race, gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic class, religion, roles in life, or personality traits, yet these dimensions have varying degrees of visibility. The visibility or invisibility of aspects of identity can allow room for personal expression of identities that are not immediately visible. Some scholars argue that among the identities mentioned above, only race and gender are visibly manifested. For example, age can be masked by makeup or surgical procedures, class can be disguised in ways of dress or by cultivating a certain accent or rhetoric, and individuals have agency over whether they wish to make their religion or sexual orientation overtly visible. To a certain degree, gender can also be manipulated to fit an individual's preferences, but people generally believe that the "truth" of someone's gender is determined by their biological traits (Alcoff 2005, 7). However, the overlapping social dimensions that constitute an individual's identity, also known as intersectionality, cannot be overlooked.

Intersectionality theory holds that no one person is just a gender, race, or member of a socioeconomic class, without having these dimensions overlap and interact with each other (Renn in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012). Intersectionality can create situations in which certain combinations of identities and the interplay among them contribute to deeper entrenchment into

social marginalization, for say, a queer, poor, female or non-binary person of color, or can conversely lead to reinforced privilege for say the classic example of a straight, rich, white male. Intersectionality complicates the mono-sided approaches that focus on group homogeneity as it questions the distinctness and singularity of these very categories. While acknowledging intersectionality as an important framework through which to understand how individual and group social experiences as produced, this paper will focus only on the impact of racial and ethnic identity.

Racial identity, an individual's membership with a socially designated racial group, is a socially visible identity that operates with a visual marker on the body. Commonly held beliefs about racial identity include the assumption that racial identity is determined by ancestry, and that racial identity can be determined by carefully observing a person's physical features and mannerisms (Alcoff 2005, 7). However, ancestry and visibility are not always synchronized, and therein lies another contradiction. Mixed-race individuals in particular are frequently subject to overt analysis of their visible or invisible racial identities. When the idea of ancestry as the sole determinant of race fails to match the visible markers used to identify race, people are often faced with comments like "Oh you don't look very..." or conversely "now that you say that, I can see it in your eyes/nose/lips..." (Alcoff 2005). Clearly, the visibility of race affects how individuals are perceived and treated in the social world.

Agency versus Imposition in the Creation of Identities

The notion of visibility or invisibility of particular identities lends itself well to assessing the degree of agency versus imposition afforded to groups or individuals in the creation of racial identities. In his work *Being and Nothingness*, existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre

addresses the conception of the self and argues that unity of identity is achieved through interaction with the world of things. Sartre explains his vision of the world in two key terms: being in-itself and being for-itself. At its core, being for-itself is the mode of existence that is conscious, while being in-itself is unconscious being (Sartre 1956). In line with Cooley's looking-glass self, one of the strains of Sartre's argument is that human beings become aware of themselves through the eyes of another. Humans gain self-reflexivity and self-awareness only when confronted with another's gaze. Moreover, the gaze of another is inherently objectifying, as an outsider can only perceive someone else through their outward characteristics, that is, through their public self. Sartre argues that when humans become aware of the objectifying gaze, they begin to internalize this objectification and start objectifying themselves in the same way. Thus, humans learn to perceive themselves in the same way that others perceive them. Human self-identity is formed through interactions in the social realm—Sartre states, “without the world there is no selfness, no person; without selfness, without the person, there is no world” (Sartre 1956, 104). Humans therefore project themselves into the social world and take meaning from the reactions and interactions that arise there.

Extending this idea to contemporary discussions on social identities, if we take the idea of the self as realized only through the watchful gaze of another, Sartre's argument takes away a degree of individual freedom in the process of self-identification. Categorization imposed from the outside implicates power structures: categorization “characterizes situations in which a more powerful group seeks to dominate another, and, in so doing, imposes upon these people a categorical identity that is defined by reference to their inherent differences from or inferiority to the dominant group” (Jenkins 1986, 177-78 in Wei 1993, 6). Individuals may be thought of as born into a set of characteristics that gives them their social identities, and thus the lack the

agency to self-define. Whether or not this statement is taken to be true, when individuals engage in interpretation of their identities, they must utilize the existing (in this case racial) framework to give their identities context and meaning. Fitting an identity into an existing structure means manipulating whatever is considered the inherent truth of that individual's identity to fit the standards of society. Only in this way is an individual able to have his/her/their identity recognized and understood.

Some scholars argue that identities that are imposed, such as social and racial identities, are brands, not true identities, as they are focused on outward reinforcement rather than inward truth. These scholars argue that social categories *necessarily* mischaracterize the individual. Because people must fit their identities into designated social categories, the public identity that arises from this is likely not to be an adequate representation of the totality of the self that that individual holds to be true of him/her/their self. However, inward "truth" may not necessarily have any bearing on producing or altering social experiences. Whether or not social categories mischaracterize an individual's self perception may be completely beside the point—what is significant is the ways in which these social categories position individuals in relation to others, particularly in terms of positions in the racial scheme. Furthermore, identities deepen and become more comprehensive when connected with group identification and history. Satya Mohanty argues that "identity constructions provide narratives that explain the links between group historical memory and individual contemporary experience, that they create unifying frames for rendering experience intelligible, and that they thus help to map the social world" (Mohanty 1997 in Alcoff 2005, 42). When an individual's identity becomes contextualized with history that occurred before their lifetime and groups that existed prior to their existence, social identity contextualizes an individual's identity in ways that are beyond their control.

Thus far, it seems that in the question of agency versus imposition in constructing social and racial identities, the argument leans towards giving the individual little room to self-define and have this sense of self recognized and reinforced through social interactions. However, some scholars differentiate between *identification* and *identity*, in which identification is the placement of individuals into demographic groups, and identity is the meaning individuals and groups ascribe to membership in racial categories (Renn in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012, 11). Here, an individual's identity is created through interactions between the individual and other groups, as well as through the integration of outside influences, while identification is merely an externally imposed categorization. From this example it is clear that ascertaining the degree of agency or imposition is never a simple matter, as these factors will vary based on the definitions that different scholars work with.

For the sake of entertaining a line of thinking, let us take to be true that a single person does not have much capacity to self-identify in the social world. However, groups of individuals can collectively assert a particular identity. If the shortcoming of the individual in self-defining stems from their inability to have this identity realized in the social world, a group of individuals who have gathered around a similarity can fill that very lack—they provide social reinforcement and recognition, which serves to bolster that identity. Social scholar Mia Tuan argues that shared experience among individuals of the same group, in this case Asian Americans, can develop into a identity and culture. While Tuan does not dispute the imposition of identity on individuals by society, she argues that groups have the capacity to reconstruct their identity. Tuan states that

Forces beyond the control of subsumed groups initially create panethnic categories, and the resulting label, in this case Asian American, must first be externally imposed. Ignoring cultural, linguistic, and oftentimes longstanding animosity between different ethnic groups, members of the dominant society have historically invoked their power to categorize others according to criteria that are convenient for them...only over time do groups who were forcibly lumped

together begin to recognize the commonalities in their experiences and form alliances to protect and promote their collective interests. Eventually, the identity that was originally imposed on them, in this case Asian-American, takes on a life and meaning of its own as a new cultural base reflecting their common experiences in the United States is gradually constructed. Ethnic distinctions matter less and less in the face of an emerging racial consciousness (Tuan 1999, 118-19).

Through collectivity, groups have the power to reinterpret their identities. In fact, Tuan argues that it is the initial lumping together of Asian Americans as foreigners that first imposes this sameness on them, which is then reclaimed by that group in favor of a more authentic conceptualization.

Asian American Racial Identity

Before turning to the discussion of Asian American identity, a clarification must first be made between the difference of racial and ethnic identities. Earlier, this chapter raised the question of symbolic ethnicity versus racial categories. Race and ethnicity are commonly conflated due to their overlapping territories and the fact that both denote ways of categorization based on commonality. The most commonly accepted definition of race is a person's identification with a socially designated racial group, while ethnicity refers to the culture, traditions, beliefs, and customs of a group of people (Kim in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012, 139). Ethnicity is a social categorization that is based on the culture of an individual's ancestors' national or heritage group, including its norms, values, and cultural practices (Chang and Kwan in Tewari and Alvarez 2009, 115). In the case of Asian Americans, ethnic membership helps to distinguish the heterogeneity of different cultures between say, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Korean Americans (Chang and Kwan in Tewari and Alvarez 2009, 115). The following section will explore the literature on Asian American racial identity.

As mentioned previously, race is institutionalized in American society, and race confers societal power and status due to the political, social, and economic resources that are differentially distributed based on race (Chang and Kwan in Tewari and Alvarez, 2009). Racial classifications are at times outside the control of the individual, while ethnicity is much more open to being individualized to people's choice of cultural adoption, such as the choice afforded to white ethnics. In short, racial identity involves much more imposition, and ethnicity affords individuals more agency to self-define. Because of its institutionalization, race is closely related to histories of oppression, and races are stratified and distinguished by groups with power and privilege and those without.

Despite these distinctions, both racial and ethnic identities develop continuously and inform one another. Some scholars, such as such as Chang and Kwan, authors of "Asian American Racial and Ethnic Identity," argue that Asian Americans develop their ethnic (cultural) identity before their racial identity (Chang and Kwan in Tewari and Alvarez 2009). They argue that this is particularly the case for the first generation immigrants, who are primarily concerned with acculturating to the new environment rather than developing a sense of racial identity (Chang and Kwan in Tewari and Alvarez 2009). Taking this to be true, second generation Asian Americans raised by immigrant parents will be first and foremost influenced by their parents' culture(s), especially at a young age. As they grow older they begin to understand their race as it is situated in the larger American racial landscape. Other scholars posit that another factor contributing to racial identity having less primacy among Asian Americans is the fact that racism directed against Asian Americans is less overt and subtler than the racism experienced by other groups of color (Kim in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012, 140). This is partly due to the

stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority, which will be further elaborated on in chapter 3 of this paper.

Asian American identity, like other racial identities, is based on context. The same example of pan-Asian versus ethnic identification is applicable here: someone may broadly identify him or herself as an Asian American, especially when interacting with the dominant racial group, but might say that they are Japanese-American or Chinese American when interacting with fellow Japanese or Chinese Americans. Conversely, if an individual's racial identity is marginalized, discriminated against, or oppressed, they might be inclined to reject their racial identity and choose instead to identify primarily with their ethnic identity (Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012, 140). According to Jean Kim, author of "Asian American Racial Identity Development Theory," cultivating a racial identity involves "how people deal with the effects of racism, eventually disowning the dominant group's views of their own race and developing a positive self-definition and positive attitude toward their own group" (Kim in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012, 139). Kim's model of Asian American racial identity development (AARID; first developed in 1981 and updated in the context of modern social identity theories) includes five progressive stages: ethnic awareness, white identification, awakening to social and political consciousness, redirection to Asian American consciousness, and finally, incorporation (Kim in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012, 144-48).

The first stage, ethnic awareness, represents the period prior to entering the school system, where a young Asian American's identity is formed through family structure. Stage two, white identification, begins when Asian Americans have increased contact with white society, leading to greater acceptance of white norms and values, which subsequently leads to a growing sense that they are different from their peers. In response to this, they actively attempt to identify

as white in order to diminish apparent differences and to avoid criticisms (Kim in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012, 139). Again, we are reminded of Oyserman's example of Asian Americans emphasizing their American traits in order to fit in. In the third stage, awakening to social political consciousness, individuals begin to understand that acts of discrimination are a result of the American racial landscape. Whereas in stage two they were unable to connect their experiences with broader racial concepts, they now have a broader sociopolitical perspective, and shift from white identification to identifying with other oppressed groups. The third stage also involves the impetus to take measures to change what they see is unjust with race in American society, which indeed did occur in the Asian American community during the Asian American Movement, which will be the focus of chapter two. The fourth stage, redirection to Asian American consciousness, sees individuals developing a sense of cultural and racial pride through their family, friends, and social networks. Often times these social networks begin to comprise more Asian Americans than before. The fourth stage also includes increasing anger and resentment towards whites for their treatment of Asian Americans. By the time individuals reach the fifth and final stage, incorporation, they have established a healthy self-concept of their own race. They are able to blend their racial identity with the rest of their social identity, and are able to interact with people outside of their race (Kim in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012). Kim's AAIRD model clearly has a more psychological approach, as it focuses on how an individual self-conceptualizes his/her/their own racial identity. The fact that Kim's model also includes a stage in which white Americans play a crucial role in Asian American racial identity, makes explicit how inextricable Asian American identity is from whiteness. Further exploration of Asian American identity and the white racial frame will be addressed in the third chapter.

In contrast to the step-by-step identity development process of AAIRD, other scholars focus on the relationship of race and ethnicity, also called the “racialized ethnic experience,” in shaping Asian American social reality. In *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*, Mia Tuan argues that race takes precedence over ethnicity in how others identify Asian Americans. Tuan argues that the assimilation process for white ethnics is not the same for racial ethnic minorities, because, unlike the former, over time they do not become part of the mainstream due to their phenotype. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, in the past scholars have attempted to draw parallels between the integration of Europeans into the white mainstream and what they predict will be the eventual incorporation of Asian Americans (and Latinos) into accepted racial categories. However, other scholars dispute this approach by emphasizing that Asian Americans’ physical appearance marks them as outsiders, as “un-American.” The immediate social visibility of race, and the fact that it remains a primary way that identities are judged and categorized, often acts to override any other cultural markers of citizenship, such as cultural assimilation, unaccented English, Americanized behavior, or a legacy of living in America for several generations (Tuan 1999). For Tuan, the Asian ethnic experience is characterized by four key features, drawn from her in depth interviews with middle-class “Asian ethnics” from California. The key features are:

1. Asian ethnics exercise a great deal of flexibility regarding the cultural elements they wish to keep or discard from *their personal lives*. What they have retained by way of cultural traditions is largely symbolic and a novelty.
2. How they choose to identify, however, is not a private affair. They experience pressure to identify in ethnic or racial terms because these remain salient markers to others.
3. Despite their generational longevity in this country, an assumption of foreignness stubbornly clings to them.
4. Asian ethnics are not considered “real” Americans. They have not been incorporated into the collective memory of who qualifies as a “real” American (Tuan 1999, 115).

The ability to decide the degree to which cultural traditions play a role in the personal lives of Asian Americans, contrasted with the lack of ability to identify outside of the predetermined racial categories, and the host of associations they come with, mirrors the distinction outlined earlier in this chapter between identity and identification. Tuan continues the pattern of societal racial categorization overriding individual identification. Tuan's approach also explicitly addresses the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype as an integral component of Asian American identity, which will be discussed in depth in chapter three.

The sense of foreignness or being "othered" is indeed both a prominent facet of Asian American experience and a powerful factor influencing the positioning and racialization of Asian Americans in relation to other groups. However, what Tuan's argument lacks is the broader framework of the American sociopolitical landscape, whereas AAIRD's stage three ("awakening to social political consciousness") emphasizes the development of an awareness of where Asian Americans are situated in the racial landscape and how the relational positions of racial groups produce their lived experiences. As we will see in chapter two, connecting one's individual experience and contextualizing this with racial relations on the group level was a foundational moment for Asian American community development, political visibility, and social action. The Asian American Movement fits perfectly into the third stage of AAIRD where Asians are driven to address the injustices of their community and pursue social change. Furthermore, the Asian American Movement advocated for pride in being Asian American, and aligned themselves with other oppressed groups and against white domination. This reflects AAIRD's fourth stage of cultural and racial pride, as well as resentment towards the majority for their racialized treatment of Asian Americans.

Asian American identity is unique from other racialized identities in the United States due to the fact that it was born out of a “common desire to proclaim one’s identity as valid and valued, different and distinct, from a universalizing normativity that made those who did not confirm to a heterosexual, white, male identity as unequal ‘others’ in U.S. society” (Ho 2015, 125). The idea of the hyphenated citizen speaks to this idea—that anyone other than a white individual can claim the identity “American” without adding a qualifier, such as Chinese-American, Mexican-American, Indian-American. Whether or not the hyphen is actually used as punctuation is beside the point, rather, the importance lies in the need to distinguish themselves as American as well as “other.” Take Chinese Americans, for example: theorists have argued over whether Chinese Americans are culturally Chinese and politically American, or whether they are culturally and politically Chinese American. I argue in favor of the latter, largely due to the notion of culture as emergent. Emergent culture is the idea that everyday interactions between individuals encourages reconsideration of what is taken as given in culture, opening it up for new interpretations. In other words, individuals have the power to change and create new cultures through their interactions, something that I believe is indisputable when considering how the culture of early immigrant communities has been significantly influenced by American mainstream culture.

Culture is always being constructed and renewed, and as older generations pass away, newer interpretations of race and ethnicity become more common. For example, a young Chinese American may not see marriage to a Korean American as crossing any bright social boundaries, instead thinking of themselves as two Asian Americans, while the grandparents of those individuals may see it as an intermarriage between two distinct ethnic groups. In fact, older individuals are more likely hold onto antagonistic notions of other ethnic groups that are largely

considered outdated by younger generations. Increasing numbers of Asian Americans, particularly younger ones, defining themselves panethnically as Asian Americans and identifying along racial lines is evidence of a boundary shift that is currently taking place (Tuan 1999, 118). Tuan suggests that letting go of ethnic differentiations and instead embracing a shared panethnic Asian American identity has led to the formation of a new identity and culture that is a unique blend of country of origin elements and American mainstream elements. Chang and Kwan echo this sentiment and state that “When Asian Americans define for themselves what it means to be members of their group, the term *Asian American* no longer denotes just an externally defined category—a race—but it engenders an internally defined identity as well” (Chang and Kwan in Tewari and Alvarez 2009, 115). The term *Asian American* then changes from an externally imposed classification that was often used to discriminate and exclude, to something that can express solidarity among Asian Americans.

Conclusion

Having surveyed the salient sources on Asian American identity, while some scholars argue that identity is necessarily exclusivist, such as proposed in the section on agency versus imposition of identity, I argue that the Asian American example shows how identity can unify and contextualize lived experiences. While the Asian American identity may draw a boundary between those who are Asian Americans and those who are not, it brings various ethnic groups together by reframing their common histories (Espiritu 1993). The next chapter will analyze the immigration history and social movements that enabled the reconstruction of Asian ethnicities under a collective identity, and this history’s relationship to prevailing stereotypes about Asian Americans.

Chapter 2: History of Asian Immigration and Racialization and the Creation of the Pan-Asian Identity

In order to fully understand how the Asian American identity acquired the associations it holds today, this chapter will investigate the history of Asian identification and racialization, and the political conditions that instigated pan-ethnic Asian collectivity in the United States. This is not a comprehensive account of Asian Americans in the U.S.; rather it is the history of the creation of the Asian American identity and racialization process. Asian identification and racialization has been historically shaped by immigration policy and political motive specific to the time period.

Asians have been immigrating to America for centuries, yet early Asian immigrants were separated by ethnic differences. This chapter will begin with an exploration of pre-1960's Asian identity, during which Asians in America still thought of themselves as closely connected to their country of origin culture and saw strong political and cultural distinctions between the various Asian groups. Next, this chapter will examine the history of the racialization of Asian Americans and how this racialized position capitalized on the civil rights movements of the 1960's, instigating the Asian American Movement and crystalizing Asian American pan-ethnicity.

Pre- 1960's Asians in America: Ethnic Disidentification

Asians have a long history in America dating back to the 1850's, and have been included on the Census since 1870. However, at that time, they all fell under category "C," which stood for Chinese but included *all* East Asians (Piccorossi 2018). The classification of all immigrants

from Asia as “Chinese” demonstrates how the lumping together of various groups under broad and misguided labels has been present since the onset of Asian immigration to America. It was not until the 1890 Census that there was even an option to distinguish between different Asian ethnic groups, although the options were still limited to Chinese and Japanese (Piccorossi 2018). Over time the Census included more options for Asian identification. However, the government continuously conflated various ethnic groups into the same category, which later became an impetus for Asian Americans to fight for “Asian American” as a recognized political and social identity, which will be further elaborated on in the next section.

Not only did the U.S. government classify Asians in broad and general terms, the same dynamics of generalization of different ethnicities as one entity played out in the social world. Early Asian immigrants soon learned that their differences in culture, practices, language, beliefs, ethnic identity, and so on were essentially devoid of any cultural meaning to white America (Espiritu 1993). Their ethnic differences were not seen or recognized by society and broad, sweeping generalizations were ascribed to Asians across the board. For the most part, “outsiders accorded to Asian peoples certain common characteristics and traits that were essentially supranational” (Browne 1985 in Espiritu 1993, 19). Furthermore, not only were cultural distinctions meaningless, white Americans typecast *all* Asian immigrants as being completely inassimilable (Wei 1993). Many of the earlier immigrants from Asia were uneducated (male) laborers, and this contributed to their perceptions by the receiving society as non-citizens as well as non-whites (Espiritu 1993).

As a result, before the 1960’s Asians in America practiced what some scholars refer to as “ethnic disidentification,” which is the “act of distancing one’s group from another group so as not to be mistaken and suffer the blame for the presumed misdeeds of that group” (Hayano 1981,

162 in Espiritu 1993, 20). The most important distinction of pre-1960's Asian identity was that it was born out of perceived necessity, not out of pride (Espiritu 1993). During the early years of Asian immigration to America, Asian immigrants were often confronted with external threats. Rather than intensify solidarity among groups facing racism and discrimination, these early Asian immigrants took the alternate tactic of distancing themselves from the stigmatized groups (Espiritu 1993). Dissociating themselves from the targeted group was a way to take precautions for their own safety and avoid the negative consequences of being mistaken for members of another group (Espiritu 1993, Daniels 1988, 113).

One of the strongest examples of ethnic disidentification followed the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, where anti-Japanese sentiments in America reached a dangerous degree. Chinese immigrants in America actively emphasized their Chinese-ness by wearing signs or buttons on their clothing proclaiming their Chinese heritage, a practice that was also taken up by Korean and Filipino communities (Espiritu 1993). The fact that these earlier Asian immigrants were consciously acting in ways to make their ethnic identity explicit to the white majority demonstrates that they were well aware of the social boundary between Asians and the dominant white group (Espiritu 1993). In order to keep their social images distinct, Asian immigrants “were not above denigrating, or at least approving the denigration of, other Asian groups,” creating a climate with much animosity or at the very least wariness of other Asian ethnic groups (Daniels 1988, 113). The practice of ethnic disidentification itself is evidence that there has always been diversity within Asians in America, but this diversity did not become “internal” to the Asian American community until the formation of the collective in the 1960s.

This is not to say that these pre-1960's Asians in America focused exclusively on ethnic differences as a means to ensure their own safety or societal standing. Within their own

communities, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Japanese worked together to advocate for their rights, and engaged in struggles over labor, employment, and working conditions, initiated lawsuits in U.S. courts, and to the extent that they were allowed, participated in American politics. It was their lack of numbers that prevented these fractured groups from making significant change (Espiritu 1993). While ethnic boundaries remained salient, these groups had in common the history of defending their rights in the face of discrimination. It was precisely the fact that they were seen and treated as the same by the dominant group that provided Asians the basis for reinterpreting their histories under a common framework of discrimination and subjugation (Espiritu 1993, 7).

History of Racialization of Asian Americans

As demonstrated in the previous section, the practice of ethnic identification was a response to being racialized by the white majority, which is the focus of this section. The way that Asian Americans have been racialized has been contingent upon immigration policy. The earliest and largest Asian-origin group in the United States was the Chinese. The discovery of gold in the late 1840's saw the dramatic influx of Chinese immigrants. These early immigrants were uneducated male laborers who intended to travel to America to find work in order to accumulate a fortune and ultimately return home and live in wealth (Zhou 2012). Therefore, these early immigrants held strong ties to China and saw America not as their new home but merely a temporary place of residence. In turn, white Americans demonized the Chinese for taking their jobs, and developed a racist ideology that they were dangerous to the wellbeing of the western world, demonizing them as the "yellow Peril," "the sneaky oriental" or the "Chinese menace" (Zhou 2012). Moreover, white Americans regarded the Chinese as an inferior,

completely inassimilable race. Therefore, the Chinese came to be viewed as threats, while simultaneously providing cheap, available labor as America expanded westward (Lee 2015, 90).

Racial antagonism against the Chinese turned violent around the 1850s. Anti-Chinese harassment and discrimination became common, and anti-Chinese Americans rallied behind the slogan, “The Chinese Must Go!” (Lee 2015, 93). Xenophobic and racist attitudes were not limited to individual opposition, but began to be reflected at the institutional level in a series of federal laws restricting Chinese immigration (Wong in Min 1995, 590). Finally, in 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred entry of Chinese laborers for ten years, allowed entry only to certain exempt professionals, and prohibited all Chinese from obtaining naturalized citizenship (Lee 2015, 94). The act was renewed again in 1892 and 1902, made permanent in 1904, and was extended to all Asian immigrants until World War II (Zhou 2012 and Lee 2015). The federal laws perpetuated the image of Chinese immigrants as inassimilable aliens, which would subsequently develop into the perpetual foreigner stereotype.

World War II brought about a pivotal moment in the racialization of Asian Americans. When China allied with the United States in WWII, the U.S. government repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. With Japan now at war with America, suddenly it was Japanese Americans who were the target of discrimination, while Chinese Americans were held up as an example of the quiet, undisruptive minority. Therefore, the racialization of Chinese Americans as the model minority was rooted in political utility.

Japanese immigrants were the second largest group of Asian immigrants to come to the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Lee 2015, 109). Like the Chinese, the majority of immigrants were male sojourners who hoped to return to Japan. Likewise, although desirable for their labor potential, Japanese immigrants were seen as a

“nonwhite racial group” whose presence was unwanted in American society, and various measures were taken to maintain a “castelike separation” (Wong in Min 1995, 102). Being nonwhite, they were ineligible for citizenship and permanently restricted to an inferior status. Despite this, over time, the Japanese immigrant community began to settle into their lives in America. By the early twentieth century, the Japanese American ethnic community successfully owned and operated businesses, started families, and built up substantial wealth and community.

The central event shaping the history of Japanese American racialization is their evacuation, incarceration, and resettlement on a racial basis during World War II (Wong in Min 1995, 103). WWII brought them under intense scrutiny and suspicion. Not only were Japanese Americans discriminated against on the individual level, the U.S. government accused Japanese Americans of aiding and abetting the enemy. Anti-Japanese movements gained momentum and Japanese were subjected to widespread discrimination on the individual and institutional level, reaching a peak in 1942. That year, under the justification of “military necessity,” President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which mandated the forcible removal and incarceration of all people of Japanese descent on the West Coast (Lee 2015, 222). Japanese Americans were forced to give up their land, leave their homes, abandon their belongings, and were taken to internment sites for an indefinite and unspecified duration. The uprooting and forced relocation of an entire group of people violated the values of the nation and raised questions about what it meant to be an American and claim a right to the American people. After the war was over, Japanese Americans continued to face discrimination as they reintegrated into society and began the slow process of rebuilding their lives. Chinese and other Asians were frequently the victims of misdirected racism—the war between Japan and America positioned Japanese and American identities in opposition to each other, and as a consequence, any Asian face bore the brunt of

anti-Japanese discrimination. Asians of various ethnicities were frequently confronted with their legitimacy as rightful American citizens, evidence of the growing generalization of all people of Asian descent as one and the same.

The end of WWII and the U.S.'s engagement in the Cold War once again shifted how Asians in America were viewed by the white majority. As the United States solidified its position as a superpower on the international stage, post-WWI military involvement in Asia as well as Japanese, South Korean, Taiwanese, Filipino, and South Vietnamese alliances during the Cold War softened American attitudes towards Asians. These groups, whose homelands were actively involved in U.S. wartime objectives, were recast as “good Asians” (Lee 2015, 253). In particular, the success of Chinese families in the United States became used as an example of the superiority of American freedom and democracy compared to communism in the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union (Lee 2015). Again, the changing racialization of Asian Americans was heavily tied to global politics and wartime alliances.

While some stereotypes were initially created as a response to specific Asian ethnic groups, namely Chinese and Japanese Americans, the stereotypes of both groups became attached to Asian phenotypic features. Capitalizing on this generalization, Asian Americans reinterpreted their ethnic differences under a collective identity—therefore, the stereotypes of these groups were broadly applied to the racialization of all Asian Americans. Chapter 3 will further discuss two of the most powerful stereotypes: the perpetual foreigner and model minority stereotypes. The next section will explore how Asian Americans came together under a common identity, re-harnessing what previously kept their communities separated into a tool for advocating for increased visibility and solidarity.

Creating Pan-Asian Solidarity: The Asian American Movement

By the late 1960's Asian immigrants had been in America for over a century. They had endured decades of racism and engaged in various forms of resistance and advocacy. However, it was the political climate at the time that catalyzed a reorganization of Asian American solidarity. Pointing out the inconsistency between the nation's founding value of equality and the repeated racial subordination of minority groups of color, the creation of the Asian American Movement became the primary vehicle through which Asian Americans advocated for their rights (Wei 1993, 8). In this paper, use of the word "panethnicity" will refer to Yen Le Espiritu's definition, which is "the generalization of solidarity among ethnic subgroups" (Espiritu 1993, 12).

During the 1960's a wave of power movements swept across the country, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Free Speech Movement, but more importantly, the Black Power Movement and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement (Maeda 2015). Asian Americans participated in these various movements, which did not directly address Asian American issues but contributed to their racial and political awareness and the growing sense that they too should form a movement to advocate for their recognition and rights. Many Asian Americans participated in protests on college campuses, and the college-aged Asian Americans emerged as a critical group for propelling the coalition impulse further (Wei 1993).

The Black Power Movement inspired Asian Americans' aspirations towards racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment (Wei 1993, 41). Furthermore, the Black Power Movement was critical to the development of the Asian American identity as a subgroup under the broader category of people of color in America, as Asian Americans conceptualized their position as a minority subjugated at the hands of the white dominant group. Asian

Americans were active participants in the Black Power Movement, and in fighting for the legal rights of black Americans, the Asian American community became aware that

[...] the struggle for social justice in America was more than an African American and European American issue; it involved other people of color. In a rude awakening, Asian Americans became acutely aware that they had more in common with African Americans than with European Americans, that racial injustice had been visited on them as well. As individuals, they too had experienced prejudice and discrimination; as a group, they too had been victims of institutionalized racism and had been excluded from mainstream society (Wei 1993, 13).

Asian Americans came to understand that the discrimination they suffered was not a mere accumulation of individual bigotry; it was an intrinsic feature of American society (Wei 1993). Situating themselves in the broader context of civil rights movements, Asian Americans fought back against a country that failed to live up to its promise of equality and justice for all people. Moreover, exposure to and involvement with the ideology of the Black Power Movement, which emphasized racial subjugation of minority groups at the hands of mainstream society, significantly decreased the social distance between Asian Americans, black Americans, and other communities of color (Maeda 2009, 83).

Building on the momentum and racial awareness of other movements, Asian Americans started their own movement, which began with the idea of creating panethnic solidarity through the symbolic reinterpretation of the common history of racial subjugation. Groups that had previously engaged in their own separate forms of political organizing came together in what became known as the Asian American Movement (also referred to in this paper as “the Movement”), which emphasized collectivity among the diverse range of Asian ethnicities. Asian Americans understood that in order to mobilize their collective wants against the dominant white group they had to consolidate their numbers, and so panethnicity was thus formed as a response to white categorization of all Asians as one and the same. The Movement pushed back against

the pan-Asian concept imposed upon them by non-Asians, and reclaimed power for the community by utilizing this form of categorization as a rallying point for the activist movement (Espiritu 1993, 9).

“Asian American” as an identity reflected the claim to the national identity—Asian to emphasize race and American to emphasize non-foreignness—a direct pushback against the image of Asians as perpetual foreigners as well as an act of political power to dispose of the term “Oriental” (Acheta 2006, 130). The Movement coalition also sought to simultaneously embrace the ethnic diversity of Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, and other Asian Americans and affirm their common racial position in America. The concept of being Asian American “implies that there can be a communal consciousness and a unique culture that is neither Asian nor American, but Asian American” (Wei 1993, 1). Therefore, the idea of “Asian American” as a race is a distinctly U.S.-based concept. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese and other groups are unarguably culturally distinct, and the Movement did not make any claims to commonality between Asian culture. Rather, it emphasized the imposed racial classification and subordination within American society that created a shared racial identity for Asian Americans (Junn and Masuoka 2008). Thus, the Movement created a collective out of an ethnically pluralist America.

It is important to note that many of the participants in the Movement were younger, college-aged Asians. Unlike their parent’s generation, who had strong ties to their mother countries and carried with them strong cultural influences, these American-born Asians had looser ties to their cultural heritage and a stronger attachment to the American cultural mainstream, both of which provided a useful basis for creating a collectivist movement (Tuan

1999). The Movement advocated for solidarity among the various Asian ethnic groups due to their common history of racism and discrimination in America (Maeda 2015).

The anti-Vietnam War protests were particularly important in advancing Asian American coalitional politics. Not only did the Asian American Movement embrace all Asian ethnicities in America, it also extended this solidarity to Asians overseas. The Movement opposed the Vietnam War as both unjust and racist, seeing the Vietnamese as fellow Asians and heightening the hyper-inclusivity of the Movement (Maeda 2015, 166). Opposition to the Vietnam War and the solidarity that arose out of it was partly due to the fact that the war utilized the military tactic of “gookism” (Wei 1993, 38). “Gooks” is a racial epithet originally used during the Philippine-American War, but ever since it was used in the Korean War, the term had been used by the U.S. military to denigrate Asian people (Wei 1993, 38). The term emphasized the foreignness and physical dissimilarities of Asians, and taught soldiers to think of them as less than human, supposedly to make them easier to eliminate. During the Vietnam War, “gookism” was used to psychologically prepare soldiers to kill Southeast Asians (Wei 1993, 38). The military training and killings resulted in American soldiers being trained to develop a deadly disdain for all people of Asian ancestry. The fact that deliberate dehumanization of Asians was not only sanctioned but taught by the U.S. military created another strong reason for solidarity among Asian Americans of different ethnicities (Ishizuka 2016, 105).

Therefore, the Asian American Movement adopted a distinct line against the war, not opposing war in general, but opposing the genocide of Vietnamese people. Wei states: “They considered the derogatory designation ‘gook’ a graphic illustration of the connection between racial oppression and the Vietnam War, raising disturbing questions about the nation’s commitment to democratic ideals” (Wei 1993, 39). Demonstrating against the war gave Asians

Americans a renewed sense of multiethnic solidarity and collectivity. It also helped them to situate themselves as a global community of Asians fighting against racism and other forms of oppression (Maeda 2015, 166). The Movement also drew parallels between their experiences as discriminated minorities in America and imperialist colonial history (Wei 1993, 42). They saw modern-day racism and prejudice endured by Asian Americans as reiterations of imperialist power relations. Therefore, the Asian American Movement took the stance that all Asians in America should oppose U.S. imperialism abroad, particularly when it was occurring in Asia (Maeda 2015).

Immigration complicated the momentum of the Movement and contributed to its' ultimate halting, as the pluralisms encompassed within American racial and ethnic diversity grew dramatically after 1964. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished the quota system, enabling Asian nations to immigrate more freely to the United States after decades of exclusion. The proportion of Asian immigrants rose significantly, and immigrants from South Asia were particularly numerous (Keely 1971). The continued arrival of Asian immigrants from different countries continued to diversify the range of Asian ethnicities in America, expanding the restrictive stereotype of Asians in America as coming only from East Asian backgrounds. While in theory increased Asian diversity in America would seem to further bolster the collectivist ideals of the Movement, many of the post-1965 immigrants did not see themselves as "American." Newly arrived immigrants in the U.S. did not have a deep understanding of panethnic Asian identity and therefore did not feel a sense of affinity to the Movement and the causes and conditions that instigated it. Not only was this due to the fact that they did not participate in the Movement itself, but first-generation immigrants were more likely to pay attention to politics in their countries of origin than to American politics. Unlike the native-born

Asians who started the Movement and who identified strongly with American culture, newly arrived Asian immigrants did not feel that they had a stake in panethnicity. Therefore, it was precisely due to influx of Asian immigrants that pan-Asian activism dissipated after the passing of the 1965 Immigration Act. In this way, increased diversity complicated who was “internal” to the Asian American community and who identified with the collective. Immigration’s influence on Asian American identity exemplified its temporality and necessitated adaptation in the face of changing politics.

Conclusion

Understanding how contemporary Asian Americans are placed in the racial landscape requires an examination of the history of Asian American racialization, a history that is positioned within specific sociopolitical conditions such as law, immigration policy, and political utility. Early Asian immigrants to the United States maintained close ties with their countries of origin and saw their residence in America as a temporary sojourn before returning home to live in wealth and abundance. Already classified by the federal government in ethnically non-distinct terms and further compounded by the racism they experienced at the hands of white Americans, early Asian immigrants practiced ethnic disidentification as a means of protecting themselves against misdirected discrimination. While Asians were initially deemed as a menace to the livelihood of white Americans, the political turmoil leading up to World War II and continuing into the Cold War era saw shifting attitudes towards Asians in America. While the view of Asians in America were initially classified by the fear of “yellow peril,” international politics and wartime alliances transformed the associations of Asian Americans into the “model minority,” although persistence of Asian physical traits associated with the “perpetual foreigner” idea continued.

Continued conflation of various Asian identities as one and the same came to a peak during the 1960's civil rights movements. Involvement in the various movements lead to growing understanding of Asian Americans' subjugated racial position as people of color in America. Asian Americans came to position themselves as having less social distance from black Americans and other people of color. Being perceived as one and the same created common experiences among people who previously may not have seen themselves as part of the same social category—which created the basis for solidarity and turned pan-ethnic, racial identification into a tool for increased political power and social visibility among the Asian American community. Putting aside their historic ethnic differences, Asian Americans created a movement that demanded inclusion in civil rights and created the panethnic Asian American identity, one that claimed both Asian-ness and American-ness, and gave new meaning to being Asian American. They reconstructed their identity as a new subjectivity that “rejected assimilation and consolidated multiple Asian ethnicities under the rubric of race” (Maeda 2009, 83). Therefore, the Asian American identity was defined through self-identification and internal organizing rather than outsider racialization (Ancheta 2006, 130).

As mentioned in this chapter, the stereotypes of Asian Americans that persist into present day have their roots in political utility. Historical circumstances of war, law, and policy have shaped the reception and perception of Asians in America. The following chapter will explore the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes and their contemporary implications for Asian American racialization.

Chapter 3:

Stereotype of Asian Americans

The Model Minority and Perpetual Foreigner

The previous chapter analyzed the history of racialization that gave rise to the “Asian American” identity, particularly how the Asian American Movement drew on the civil rights movements and called for panethnic solidarity, and argued that the origins of the Asian American identity are tied to time-specific political motive. This chapter will address the effect of stereotypes about Asian Americans on their identity, paying particular attention to the two dominant stereotypes about Asian Americans that emerged in the post World War II period. As mentioned in the previous chapter, prior to World War II, Asians were viewed as “the sneaky Oriental,” “yellow peril,” and the “indispensable enemy.” However, America’s wartime politics transformed Asians into the quiet, invisible “model minority” and “perpetual foreigners” (Zhou 2012).

Stereotypes matter to the identity and positionality of a racial community because cultural and racial stereotypes represent a part of an individual’s knowledge of the social world and how it is structured. When a stereotype is widespread throughout a society, the consequences of that stereotype are compounded as they affect entire groups in a common way. Thus, this chapter addresses the question of the ways in which the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes are critical to understanding Asian Americans’ racial position. Data from Reddit will serve as examples of how contemporary Asian Americans are speaking of and conceptualizing their identity, as well as how they believe their identity is being perceived by mainstream society. The paper will then move to a discussion about the contradictions between these two

stereotypes and the ways in which Asian American behavior and position in the racial landscape is largely a response to these controlling images.

Stereotypes, Discrimination, and Consequences

Stereotypes are collective associations ascribed to a group, and are pertinent to this discussion as prevailing stereotypes have the power to influence social behavior. This paper will utilize the cultural approach to understanding stereotypes, which, unlike the individual approach that focuses on the acquisition of stereotypes through interpersonal interactions, focuses on how stereotypes are transmitted through common culture (Stangor and Schaller 2000, 68). The cultural approach holds that once a group stereotype exists in a culture, “expected patterns of behavior for those group members follow, and these expectations determine both responses to group members and the behavior of group members themselves” (Stangor and Schaller 2000, 70). To the extent that stereotypes influence behavior of the stereotyped group, they can also be understood as social norms. Furthermore, stereotypes reflect the power relations of the dominant versus minority groups in the social structure, and it is the dominant group that establishes the normative mode of describing, perceiving, and treating recognized groups (Maykovich 1972). For example, stereotypes can influence the opportunities that people pursue or the opportunities they are given. The way that people act in response to or against a given stereotype can strengthen the association of that stereotype with the group. Furthermore, stereotypes confine a group to a specific location in the racial and ethnic makeup of the United States and consequently shape the way in which the group is viewed and treated by society.

Stereotypes by nature confine an idea, group, or thing to an oversimplified image of what it is. Thus, stereotypes are never universally applicable to the group or thing it speaks about, yet

their pervasiveness in the social world makes their influence difficult, if not impossible, to escape. Most of the literature on the impact of stereotyping suggests that benefits are afforded to the social perceiver, while the costs are borne by the stigmatized target (Wheeler et al. 2001, 173). Those who are stereotyped must deal with the consequences of stereotype inaccuracy, stereotype-based discrimination, and stereotype-confirming behavior among members of the stereotyped group (Wheeler et al. 2001, 174). Stereotypes embed themselves into social contexts and behavior, and stereotype-based prejudice can take the form of relatively harmless comments to threats of physical danger against the stereotyped group. In the case of Asian Americans, the threat of physical violence has historically been exacerbated during periods of political tensions between the United States and Asian countries (Wei 1993, 50-51).

Even when the detrimental effects of stereotypes do not reach the degree of physical violence, the stereotype on its own still has the power to influence the behavior of the stereotyped group and society's perception of them. Oftentimes, members of the stereotyped group are highly impacted by the fear of confirming unfavorable stereotypes, and may act in ways to distance themselves from the associations. However, acting against a stereotype still acknowledges the existence and power of the very stereotype one may be trying to avoid, revealing the power stereotypes hold to become self-fulfilling prophecies that confront the individual regardless of how they act.

Stereotypes draw on groups' relative social positions to each other, and power dynamics between groups in the social world contribute to the perceived permanence of each groups' position in relation to one another. Consequently, finding a way to overcome entrenched hierarchies and assert oneself apart from the stereotypes of one's group membership may seem like an impossible task. Bourdieu states that the social world

incline[s] agents to accept the social world as it is, to take it for granted, rather than to rebel against it, to counterpose to it different, even antagonistic, possibilities. The sense of one's place, as a sense of what one can or cannot 'permit oneself,' implies a tacit acceptance of one's place, a sense of limits (Bourdieu 1985, 728).

According to Bourdieu, stereotypes and their corresponding power relations are always present in people's minds, and people default to acting off the basis of categories and perceptions of these relations. Therefore, the insidious nature of stereotypes makes them difficult to challenge. Returning to ideas of assimilation from the first chapter, stereotypes are inextricable from the process of assimilation as groups are socialized by these confining images into certain behaviors that can either signify assimilation or lack thereof.

The next sections will explore the stereotype of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners and model minorities. Understanding these two stereotypes is crucial to understanding the contemporary racialization of Asian Americans because they epitomize the position of Asian Americans as being both on the inside and the outside of the mainstream, assimilated and forever alien. Asian Americans are positioned as occupying a space between blackness and whiteness, and throughout history have operated within paradigms of outsider-insider and minority-majority. Thus, Asian Americans are triangulated within the black-white dichotomy, and both the perpetual foreigner and model minority stereotypes are framed in relation to white and black racial categories. Further discussion on Asian Americans and racial triangulation theory will be elaborated on in the following chapter.

The Perpetual Foreigner

The racial position of Asian Americans is characterized by being kept on the outskirts of the mainstream. Asian Americans are often regarded as "perpetual foreigners" who are unable to be assimilated and will always be an "other" in America regardless of generational status,

citizenship, or duration of residence. As discussed in chapter 2, the idea of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners” occurred as early as 1882 with the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II built upon the fear of “Yellow Peril” and demonized all Asian Americans as a threat to American success (Ng et al. 2007, 97 and Murjani 2014, 83). The government believed that Japanese Americans were a threat to the nation’s security, and the economic success of other Asian countries during the 1980’s was viewed as a threat to U.S. dominance (Murjani 2014 83). Taken together, U.S. political and economic anxieties solidified the image of Asian Americans as foreigners, as not legitimate Americans, and laws were enacted to exclude Asian Americans from enjoying full citizenship, such as barriers to land-owning and anti-miscegenation laws. Even after these laws were redacted and Asian Americans were considered American citizens in the eyes of the law, the association of Asian with foreignness persisted in the social realm and continues into modern day.

Another facet of the perpetual foreigner stereotype is the presumed homogeneity of all Asian ethnicities, not only on a physiological level but also on a cultural level (Kitano 1981, 126). As mentioned in chapter 2, during World War II, Chinese Americans wore buttons or signs to signify their ethnicity in order to not be mistaken as Japanese. However, non-Japanese Asians were still victims of anti-Japanese discrimination, as white society viewed ethnic differences as interchangeable and viewed all members of Asian descent as similarly foreign. Physical appearance plays an integral role in the perpetual foreigner stereotype, as it exploits Asian’s physical features as opposite to the physical features of whites, which are equated with being American. In essence, the perpetual foreigner stereotype holds that “the face of America cannot look Asian” (Lee et al. 2009, 76). Tuan argues that:

The category Asian-American lumps together ethnic groups separated by socioeconomic, historical, and generational differences. However, because most

Americans, white and nonwhite, are unable or unwilling to recognize ethnic much less generational differences between and within Asian groups, all persons perceived to have Asian features are assumed to be newcomers to this country (Tuan 1999, 39).

The above quote demonstrates how the perpetual foreigner stereotype sends the message that the mere phenotypic traits of Asians are enough to set them apart from the majority and be branded as a population who can never achieve full assimilation into the mainstream. Popular culture perpetuates this image by producing caricature-like images of Asian Americans in the media—the supposed foreignness of Asians has often become a joke, normalizing and further embedding the association of Asian-ness with being foreign (Lee et al. 2009, 77).

Furthermore, the perpetual foreigner stereotype presumes that all Asians immigrants hold strong ties to their mother country regardless of generational status. Kitano states: “Asian ancestry and knowledge of the ancestral culture, including familiarity with the language, are treated almost as genetic phenomena, so that even American-born-and-reared third- and fourth-generation Asian Americans are asked about their ancestral homelands, as if an Asian face guaranteed expertness in Asian language and culture” (Kitano 1981, 126). Because the perpetual foreigner stereotype holds that anyone who appears Asian is not American, it follows that it would also be presumed that they have limited familiarity with American culture and deep and innate knowledge of Asian cultures.

As a result of constantly being othered and presumed to be foreign, Asian Americans often find ways to emphasize their American-ness. A discussion thread from Reddit shows how Asian Americans use language to signify their identity. In the original post, user @blueyellow posed the question “Why do Asian Americans feel the need to emphasize they’re born/raised in the US? User @Hadespants responded, saying:

Being part of the diaspora is a life experience that is distinct from being from and in the origin that unfortunately leaves many of us in a limbo where we are excluded from the culture where we are (our Americanness) and excluded from the culture of our heritage (because we are not there, we are not immersed in it like the natives).

Claiming ourselves as Asian American is to claim an identity in our heritage while at the same time claiming an identity in the culture of where we are.

-@Hadespants

Here, user @Hadespants says that claiming “American” as a part of an identity is a way of asserting their rightful place among the American people and contesting assumptions of foreignness or difference. The user also points out the tension of straddling two cultures at once, and never feeling fully grounded or accepted in either—again, supporting the mainstream belief that Asians are inassimilable. Responding to a separate thread about how Asian Americans navigate being seen as an “other” while being within American culture, user @Aznatmos said:

In other words, if you're proud of your heritage, you can be mistaken for the enemy, and if you're proud of being American, you will look like a self-hating white worshipper (as America is most often tied with white people). Somehow you have to find a balance between all this bullshit.

-@ Aznatmos

While being considered “the enemy” may seem too extreme to be applicable to contemporary circumstances, Asian Americans, specifically Japanese Americans, were indeed considered the enemy of white Americans during the Second World War. In the comment, the user is calling attention to the double bind that Asian Americans, and many other bi-cultural individuals, experience. Affinity for one’s Asian cultural heritage may from the outside (that is, from the perspective of the white majority) be mistaken as an affirmation that all Asians are indeed deeply tied to their Asian cultures and therefore not assimilated into American culture, again emphasizing foreignness. Conversely, pride in being American may be looked down upon by other Asians who perceive it as a cultural betrayal.

Returning to the idea of racial visibility discussed in the first chapter, if we consider the role of phenotype in the equation, Asian Americans may feel that in America, their physical appearance marks them as other within the very culture they feel closest to, yet it is their very “American-ness” that sets them apart from their Asian counterparts living in Asia, despite sharing more similar physical characteristics. User @Hadespants’s use of the Asian American identity to claim “an identity in our heritage” and “an identity in the culture of where we are” harkens back to the goals of the activists of the Movement, which was to find a way to honor their Asian heritage and also claim their right as part of the American people. Another user responded bluntly to the same question, saying, “Because people fucking ask where you're from all the fucking time and nobody else from other ethnic backgrounds has to tolerate that shit - @Subdeskat.” Here, the impact of the perpetual foreigner stereotype is evident in the anger behind the user’s comments. Being frequently asked to justify their “American-ness” or questioned about “where they are from” is not a specifically Asian American phenomenon—other minority groups of color are also questioned about their legitimacy to being American—yet the connection between Asian physical traits and presumed foreignness is specific to the perpetual foreigner stereotype, and with that comes the sense of injustice of being denied acceptance and belonging in their own country.

Approaching the same question of belonging from another perspective, user @Orangeinsightca posed the question: “Asian American? Why not American-Asian?” Here, the user is questioning how the syntax of hyphenated identities always emphasizes the “otherness” of the individual and deemphasizes the “American” part of the identity. The user writes:

Why are ethnicities called African-American, Indian-American, Asian-American, why not American-Asian instead? When we are called Asian-American, look at what word comes first: Asian. The ordering implies we are Asian first, American second. On a subconscious level this has to contribute to our perceived

"otherness"; perpetual foreigner status. Imagine if we were instead called American-Asians, we would be considered American first and Asian would be a secondary descriptor. Think of the subconscious impact of that...

-@Orangeinsightca

The notion that merely switching the order of hyphenated identities would facilitate acceptance and assimilation into mainstream American culture by emphasizing belonging rather than otherness may seem like far too simple a solution to a very complex phenomenon. However, the wish underlying the question of syntax is finding a way to assert oneself as American and not be constantly othered by society, not only by the way one looks, but also by the labels one is socialized into using, Asian American versus American Asian. Ultimately what many of these users express is the desire for an unconditional American identity.

The Model Minority

Perhaps the most dominant and pervasive stereotype about Asian Americans is the model minority myth—the conception that Asian Americans as a group have overcome adversity and successfully achieved economic, political, and cultural success (Bascara 2006, 1). The model minority myth is assimilation exemplified. Unlike the perpetual foreigner, the model minority stereotype emphasizes the very ways in which Asian Americans have successfully integrated themselves into mainstream society. As mentioned in the previous chapter, political alliances during WWII spurred the stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority. However, the presumption of “success” in fact masks detrimental social and racial implications. According to Chou and Feagin, the effects of the model minority stereotype can be categorized into four dominant forms. Firstly, the model minority stereotype is used against other people of color as a measuring yardstick to “accent their inferiority for not attaining high education or career

achievements” (Chou and Feagin 2008, 138). Secondly, Chou and Feagin see the stereotype as a mechanism through which whites reinforce racial othering and differentiate themselves from people of color. Third, the stereotype causes stressful and unrealistic expectations, which are both self and externally imposed. Finally, the stereotype creates unrealistic expectations both within and outside the Asian American community that can negatively impact all Asian Americans (Chou and Feagin 2008).

The stereotype of the model minority is not only theoretically confining, but is also so pervasive that it has embedded itself into the subconscious of Asian Americans and society on a whole. A critical point of contention is the struggle to see the issue with being stereotyped as a successful minority, the counterargument being that these associations are desirable especially when compared to the stereotypes facing other racial minorities. However, the harmfulness of the model minority stereotype is in large part derived from its appearance as a flattering and positive association:

Certainly on the surface being characterized as a quiet, ‘model’ minority seems much better than being stereotyped as a lazy or welfare-dependent minority group. The price paid for behaving and being obedient, however, is that you are not taken seriously because those in power expect acquiescence. Thus the model minority is not expected to complain or raise any fuss even when clear abuse is present (Tuan 1999, 71).

The fact that the model minority is marketed as a positive trope masks the oppression experienced by the Asian American community. It reinforces their position as a non-disruptive population, one that is “taken care of” due to their perceived social success. Because Asian Americans have achieved enough success that such a seemingly positive stereotype can even exist, subsequent social claims on the part of the Asian American community are deemed illegitimate. The comparison between the lazy or welfare dependent, frequently associated with black and brown communities, sends the message that because the predominant stereotype about

Asian Americans is not nearly as negative as those of other groups, Asian American issues are less deserving of attention. A Reddit user furthered this notion by pointing out the struggle of black Americans to attain rights:

Well, as a point of reference only, it took America hundreds of years just to realize that black people are in fact human and should be treated as such. Asking America to navigate a far more nuanced form of oppression could take a while... I feel your pain but realistically this will probably take a very, very long time.”
-@bugabancy

Discrimination against black Americans has taken the form of slavery, brutal violence, killings, and overt acts of racial aggression. The intensity and graveness of that discrimination contrasts with the covert, subtler forms of oppression exerted over the Asian American community. American society is never short of social issues in need of reform, and the idea that society has limited bandwidth and can only address the most pressing issues leads to the prioritizing of certain social issues over others. As the so-called model minority, Asian American issues are seen as a low priority. Not only are Asian Americans being told by other groups that their social plight is mild in comparison to others, Asian Americans themselves may internalize this reasoning and feel that they cannot even begin to voice their complaints about the model minority because doing so would undermine the more dire predicament of other minority groups.

The model minority stereotype not only produces a “self-silencing” effect in the game of “which minority group has it worse,” but Asian Americans may be reluctant to address issues that contradict the image of a thriving, quiet, minority (Lee et al. 2009, 74). Part of the model minority stereotype is the idea that Asian Americans achieved success through individual perseverance, without the help of others, and without disrupting the racial hierarchy. Being told that success is possible through sheer individual effort masks institutionalized privilege and reinforces the fallacy of the American meritocracy. Because Asian Americans are held up as the

golden example of success through hard work, they may feel shame when their academic or labor market achievements fall short of the model minority stereotype. Moreover this sense of shame often prevents them from seeking support. Asian Americans may feel that their failure to meet the high standards set for them by the model minority will reflect badly on their family and cause them to “lose face.” A Reddit user commenting on the model minority stereotype stated:

Sigh..i hope this label disappears one day and we're just considered "people." For non-Asians lurking in this subreddit..you might think this label is a positive thing but it isn't. It sounds like a compliment but it's a label that silences the many Asian-am's in need.

Not all Asian's are smart or extremely good at math. I am one of them [...]

It blows when everyone assumes you're a Straight A student but you're not. Your Asian peers who buy into the stereotype judge you and non-Asian's judge you. It's as if you're a defect, a mistake and a complete failure. Society also assumes that you're going to be an accountant, a scientist, IT consultant or programmer. People look at you funny if you consider branching out to other fields, particularly the arts and humanities. Again, judgement from Asians and non-Asians can hinder your career choices as it: a) making you question your own dreams b) should you try to go for your dreams, others may not take you seriously because it's not what Asians normally do.

The stereotype also assumes that all Asians/Asian-Am sub-groups perform well equally. Nope, that model minority myth was originally applied for the Japanese/Chinese/Korean's. While success is higher for those 3. Many other Asians, particularly Southeast Asian communities are struggling. This includes Cambodian's, Thai, Laotians, etc. Many of them are struggling due to a variety of reasons (socio-economic, language barrier, lack of information, education, or even knowing how the education system functions). To say that "all" Asian-am's are doing great completely silences out the needs of others.

It gets annoying. I hate it when everyone comes to me for math or accounting advice. I don't fucking know dude. I majored in History and Urban Studies.

- @rock1928

Here, user @rock1928 explicitly states that the model minority “sounds like a compliment” but is in fact “a label that silences the many Asian-am's in need.” The user explains the pressure to conform to expectation of the model minority, and the frustration about the lack of space in the social world to be an Asian American whose grades and career choices do not fall into the bounds of the model minority. Use of the word “defect” and failure” exposes how a seemingly

positive stereotype is actually a means of control for the dominant group to keep Asian Americans in a confined sociopolitical space. Moreover, @rock1928 calls attention to the fact that the dominant culture applies the model minority stereotype to all Asians, even though the trope originated as a response to East Asian achievement in the United States. This parallels the generalized lumping of all Asian ethnicities that accompanies the perpetual foreigner stereotype. Thus, the model minority stereotype masks the realities of different Asian American ethnicities.

Reddit user @Echozu posted “I hate the model minority myth, mostly because I used to be a part of it. I’m ashamed of my 15 yo white bootlicking self.” What this comment illuminates is the feeling that the model minority stereotype has influenced Asian Americans into valorizing whiteness. The model minority stereotype reinforces the position of white Americans as the most powerful racial group, at the same time casting all Asian Americans into a quiet, obedient group who are able to achieve success without disrupting the racial order or threatening the superiority of whites. A Reddit user, who has since deleted their account, posted:

A white person can be a ignorant uneducated lazy entitled pile of you know what and that is acceptable to society. A minority must be perfect and not a threat to white society to be acceptable to society.

The user calls attention to the fact that in many ways the model minority holds Asian Americans to higher and more confined standards than white Americans. Because whiteness confers acceptability and normality, no further justification is needed for their behavior. Asian Americans, on the other hand, constantly must deal with the consequences of confirming or contradicting the model minority. Some Asian Americans respond to the model minority stereotype by actively distancing themselves from the oversimplified image through emphasizing their qualities that fall beyond the bounds of hardworking, achievement-oriented people, such as being loud, outspoken, and unbound by pressures of achievement.

The effects of the model minority stereotype are also seen in the fact that Asian Americans as a group underutilize mental health services (Sue 1994, 292). As a result, Asian Americans have low official rates of mental illness, which not only perpetuates the image of them as the model minority who has achieved success despite discrimination and other obstacles, but also masks the issues within the community and lowers research interest in Asian American mental health (Sue 1994, 292). According to a study from the National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS), Asian Americans are three times less likely to seek mental health services compared to white Americans (Nishi 2016). Other studies have yielded similar results, with most social scientists identifying the following variables as influencing Asian American mental health: parental pressure to succeed in academics and pressure to fulfill the “model minority stereotype,” frequent dismissal of mental health concerns due to the taboo in many Asian cultures of bringing personal problems to an outside source, the difficulty of balancing two cultures and developing a bicultural sense of self, and traditional Asian cultural values of familism (Nishi 2016). Traditional Asian cultures see individuals as part of the larger family unit, and stress is placed on the individuals to behave in ways that bring honor to the family and maintain a positive public reputation. Therefore, the family system creates pressure to keep issues such as mental health concerns hidden from public view and discourages Asian Americans from seeking mental health support (Sue 1994, 293). Even without familial pressure, the notion of “saving face” and not wanting to “air dirty laundry” is common among more traditional Asian thought, which, paired with the traditional values of self-restraint and individual effort in overcoming obstacles contributes to the unlikelihood that Asian Americans will seek mental health support.

A discussion thread on Reddit's Asian American Channel reiterated how the prevalence of model minority stereotype deters Asian Americans from pursuing mental health treatment. Reddit user @pakattak posted that "It's a little crazy how much my parents balked at the concept of me going to see a therapist. 'You don't need it, you just need to work harder and go to church.'" The idea that individuals should quietly overcome their own struggles without seeking outside help, as seen in @ouchapache's comment, plays directly into the model minority trope. @ouchapache's parents reinforced the idea that success can be achieved through sheer effort, and reliance on outside support is unnecessary and even unacceptable. Therefore, the effect of the quiet, hardworking, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, model minority stereotype clearly affects Asian American behavior in mental health treatment. Other variables such as gender, acculturation, and social-network orientation, also influence attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help, but will not be further explored in this paper.

Despite the fact that the model minority constitutes a significant part of the racialization of Asian Americans, many Asian Americans themselves denounce the stereotype not only for its generalizing and restrictive nature but also for its racist logic. As mentioned previously, one of the most problematic aspects of the model minority myth is its use to drive a wedge between Asian Americans and other minority groups of color. The dominant culture has often invoked Asian Americans as proof that the American dream of upward mobility is still alive and possible, and have used this against other groups of color occupy lower positions on the socioeconomic ladder. In this way, the model minority stereotype can be understood as a crystallized version of American meritocratic values. Success among Asian Americans is implicitly and explicitly compared to the failures of other minority groups, which has the potential to increase racial antagonism between Asian Americans and other people of color (Lee et al. 2009, 73). In a Reddit

thread titled “‘Model Minority’ Myth Again Used As A Racial Wedge Between Asians And Blacks,” a user commented:

Part of the model minority myth is that White people believe the Asian community and Black community have faced the same struggles, so why can't the Black community just overcome adversity like Asians? This completely ignores the circumstances the two communities were brought over to America, and the very different situations they now face.

-@chinesewolf

User @chinesewolf is pointing out that comparing Asian and black success is not a fair comparison given the two communities' vastly different histories in the United States. Moreover, such a comparison increases the perceived social distance between Asian Americans and communities of color. This placement goes directly against the collectivist values of the Asian American Movement of the 1960s, which aligned Asian Americans with other subjugated and oppressed groups. Clearly, changes in time and culture have shifted the placement of Asian Americans in relation to people of color and whites.

Furthermore, the user explicitly names white Americans as the primary perpetrators of the model minority myth. Similarly, another user @starstruck echoed this sentiment when they suggested that the title of the thread be changed to “‘Model Minority’ Myth Again Used *By White Supremacists* As A Racial Wedge Between Asians And Blacks.” White Americans occupy the most privileged and powerful position in the racial scene, and are seen as the gatekeepers of mainstream society. It is this group that benefits from the perpetuation of racial stereotypes, including the model minority, that increase the social distance between whites and minority groups of color, as it reaffirms the exclusive social privileges afforded only to white Americans.

One example of how the model minority stereotype places Asian Americans in opposition to other racial minorities is the case of affirmative action. Opponents of affirmative action argue that affirmative action benefits black Americans and Latinos but harms the chances

of Asian Americans of getting into college. Some even go so far as to charge that affirmative action is an example of “reverse discrimination” against Asian Americans (Lee et al. 2009, 73). In this case, Asian Americans are being aligned with white Americans, who similarly do not benefit from affirmative action, and are pitted against other racial minorities. Therefore, it is clear that the stereotypes about Asian Americans have been leveraged in racial discourse. These confining images are imposed on the group as a whole and used as a bargaining chip for a variety of racial purposes, all of which disadvantage Asian Americans and reinforce their limbo-like position in the racial landscape. Contradictions between the rationale behind the perpetual foreigner and model minority stereotypes will be discussed in the following section.

The Relationship between the Model Minority and Perpetual Foreigner Stereotypes

Rejection of both the perpetual foreigner and model minority stereotypes among Asian Americans is complicated by the contradictions between the two images. On the one hand, despite the fact that Asian immigration to and residence in America is nowhere near a new phenomenon, Asian Americans are seen as foreigners, both physically and culturally, and therefore their issues and concerns stem from an outsider’s perspective. This not only invalidates Asian Americans’ effort to be accepted as fully American, but also keeps Asian Americans and their political and social wants relegated to the outside of the dominant society’s concerns (Wei 1993, 5). At the same time, as discussed earlier in this chapter, Asian Americans are perceived as the nation’s model minority, that is, “the one group to have successfully integrated into American society despite seemingly insurmountable racial barriers. The model minority stereotype suggests that Asian Americans no longer face any barriers to economic, social or

political success, which directly contradicts their status as inherently foreign and therefore not truly “American.” (Lee et al. 2009, 69).

The two stereotypes attack Asian Americans from both sides, on the one hand claiming that Asians will always be foreign and will never be fully assimilated, and on the other hand holding up Asian American achievements as evidence of successful assimilation. While the rationales of the two stereotypes contradict each other, the effect is the compounding of Asian American racialization. These stereotypes confer on Asian Americans a status of secondary citizenship that is reserved for “well-behaved” minority-outsiders, who are citizens in legal terms but foreigners in the social world. In this way, assimilation reinforces the existing racial hierarchy rife with inequalities, and forces all Asian Americans regardless of generational status, including those born in the U.S., to confront the need to constantly prove their worth as real and legitimate American citizens (Park 2015, 17).

As discussed in chapter one, the fact that the white category has historically been expanded to accommodate the inclusion of white ethnics can be used against Asian Americans: white ethnics achieved acceptance into the white category but Asians, despite their success, have not, which serves to rationalize their status as outsiders and foreigners. Taken together the two images can be understood to state that Asian American success will not translate into full acceptance and assimilation into the American mainstream. Furthermore, racial discourse tosses Asian Americans back and forth between blackness and whiteness, leveraging their fluid position for different arguments when convenient. The contradiction between the controlling images leaves Asian Americans without a grounded position in America’s racial makeup.

Conclusion

Stereotypes that crystallized in the 1960s continue to heavily influence the racialization of Asian Americans today as projects of inclusion and exclusion through the use of the model minority and perpetual foreigner tropes. Until a new framework proves stronger salience and applicability, discourse on racial categorization will remain in terms of degree of similarity or difference from the dominant group. Asian Americans currently occupy a limbo-like state of being distanced from minority groups in terms of social access and privilege, but still maintaining aspects of their outsider status in terms of integration into the majority. The following chapter will compare Asians with whites, blacks, and Latinos, and will explore an alternate concept of race structure called racial triangulation theory to better conceptualize the unique position of Asians in the American racial order.

Chapter 4:

Asian Americans and the Color Line

While the previous chapter explored Asian American racialization via the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes, this chapter will place Asian Americans in the bigger debate in sociological literature of the black and white binary. The binary, the most prevalent racial framework, has been critiqued for being reductive of complex racial relationships, yet it continues to dominate public racial discourse. As the blacks and whites are the two groups with the longest and arguably most intertwined history in the United States, subsequent integration of newer immigrant groups requires establishing a relational position to blacks and whites. Asian Americans have historically stood outside the institutionalized black and white framework, leading scholars to search for a framework with which to appropriately describe and situate Asian Americans in American race relations (Wei 1993). One of these approaches is racial triangulation theory, which contributes to the black and white framework by adding an alternate axis of consideration to conceptualize the relationship between blacks, whites, and Asians. This paper will use racial triangulation to interpret Asian Americans' position in the racial color line.

This chapter will begin with a discussion about the origins of the black-white binary, before moving to the relationship between Asians and whiteness, followed by an examination of how Asian Americans deviate from "traditional" ideas of minority group status. In the United States, racial and ethnic minorities are closely associated with low socioeconomic class and educational attainment. Asian Americans defy these associations through their high educational and economic achievements. This has led to the debate on whether Asian Americans' classification as a minority carries the same associations as it does for other groups, a debate

which inevitably engages in discussion of Asian Americans' social proximity to whites. As there are parallels between Asian and Latino American racialization in that scholars have predicted the incorporation of both groups into the white majority, this chapter will incorporate examples of Latino American racialization as a point of comparison. Next, this chapter will explore the relationship between Asians and blacks, with particular focus on the 1960's civil rights movements mentioned in chapter 2. Finally, it will introduce racial triangulation and theorize Asian Americans racial position through this framework.

The Black and White Binary

In the United States, color remains the primary standard by which people organize themselves into racial groups. The black-white binary, the idea that race is primarily of concern only to and in relation to blacks and whites, is the most powerful and pervasive paradigm of race. It shapes people's understanding of race and the nature of discussions about race. Many social scientists argue that this framework marginalizes other groups of color, and when their social issues and positions are addressed, they are described in relation to these two predominant categories (Perea in Delgado and Stefanic, 1998).

Taking the above statement to be true, that the black-white binary sends the message that only these two groups count in debates about race, scholars argue that the binary itself perpetuates the social reproduction of inequality. Certain scholars, such as Nicholas De Genova, argue that the creation of an "American" identity is inextricable from white nationalism. De Genova points to the history of denying immigrants citizenship on the basis of race as illustrative of the relationship between racial formation and state powers. According to this argument, all racialized identities are initially political identities, and U.S. nationalism itself is a form of racial

formation hinged on whiteness and blackness as opposites: “the U.S. social order of white supremacy has always been premised on racial blackness as its own utterly degraded bottom, indeed, its absolute antithesis, but in a manner that was strictly *internal* to the ongoing constitution of an ‘American’ national society” (De Genova 2006, 2). Therefore, association of power and privilege with white Americans is achieved through distance from and subjugation of black Americans. Other scholars further the bounds of the black/white binary by arguing that “white” and “black” do not simply stand for members of white and black racial categories, but encapsulate the concepts, privileges, and discrimination associated with that race (Kim 1999, 2392). In this vein, the “white” side of the binary represents power and privilege, while “black” is defined by the denial of these same privileges.

In addition to marking the polarities of American-ness, blacks and whites as two categories bound together draw the boundaries of the American racial order. Because African Americans were enslaved and denied personhood and rights, they were treated not only as inferior, but also as dehumanized property, something to be owned: “Blackness could be figured as a wholly owned subsidiary, possessed by, subjected to, and fully encompassed *within* an ‘American’ order of white power and prestige” (De Genova 2006, 2). With blacks and whites marking the bounds of the racial structure, the racialization of all other nonwhite groups becomes obscured and configured as outside the structure itself, and outside concepts of “American nationhood” (De Genova 2006). Being neither black nor white, groups such as Asian and Latino Americans became racialized as foreign and inassimilable. Subsequently, these groups that do not fit neatly into either black or white categories have trouble making claims, advocating for themselves, or having these concerns understood in racial claims at all (Delgado in Delgado and Stefanic 1998, 369). The influence of the black-white binary also affects the process of

assimilation, as immigrant groups are socialized into accepting and embracing this dichotomy (Fernandez 2007). As the groups become integrated into American society, they are produced as groups subordinated within the sociopolitical order of whiteness as superior and blackness as its antithesis.

However, other scholars argue that the black/white paradigm's persistence in racial discourse attests to its continuing relevance and ability to expand and encompass growing social complexity. Opposing the simplification of the black/white paradigm as a framework that obscures other groups, these scholars argue in favor of the paradigm's ability to erase history, refine and reconstruct itself, and manipulate racial status (J. Kim 1999). Referring back to the notion that the black and white paradigm represents more than classificatory labels for members of those racial groups, and in fact points to the social privilege, and racial positions of these groups, the paradigm can then be understood as having the power to contain "traces of past struggle over, and present understanding of, social and political relationships" (J. Kim 1999). This project posits that contrary to the argument that the black/white paradigm is unable to address racial groups other than black and white, it plays a central role in the formation and understanding of racial identities and positions of nonwhite and non-black groups. Contemporary Asian American racialization builds upon a history of relational positioning of Asian Americans with black and white racial categories. The following sections will explore Asian Americans through the white racial frame, including the debate on Asian's minority group status as well as the hypothesis that Asians and Latinos will "become white" in the future.

The White Racial Frame

The relationship between Asian Americans and whites is crucial to understanding Asian Americans' position in the black-white paradigm and their status as a minority group. As the previous chapter discussed, understanding the model minority stereotype means also grasping the relationship between the stereotype and social proximity to the white racial category, and the social experiences of being white. The idea of Asian Americans as the successful minority goes hand in hand with associations that their social success is due to their adoption of “white framing and folkways” (Chou and Feagin 2008, 139). Some scholars argue that the model minority stereotype encourages the idea that acceptance into the white majority society is possible, and that it is possible to “live more privileged lives as an ‘exception’ to other racial minorities if they act more ‘White.’” (Kim in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012, 150). Again, “honorary” white status is given to Asian Americans in contexts that benefit the white majority. Posts on Reddit echo these sentiments, such as the following comment where one user writes:

Well, Asians are certainly not the "white people of POC", but the white-controlled media actively portrays us as such. It is done strategically for many reasons beyond simply to set up a comparison in order to denigrate black and latino people. [...] In addition, by portraying Asians in close companies with whites, it also serves to disguise the daily violence whites perform on Asians, both in the West as well as overseas.

-@Asiankinmoon

Even though the user rejects the labeling of Asian Americans as the “white people of POC,” they acknowledge how popular culture and discourse perpetuates this idea. This user also points out that alignment of Asian Americans with whites is not accidental, it has a specific strategic purpose that allows white Americans to draw upon the presumed social closeness between the two groups. For example, belief in the model minority stereotype could lead Asian Americans to

overlook racial discrimination directed against them on the part of white Americans, but it could also lead white Americans to lessen their discrimination against Asian Americans due to the way that the stereotype aligns the two groups (Kim in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012, 150). The user's comment about disguising the discrimination against Asian Americans continues the pattern of usage of the model minority stereotype to associate Asians and whites and to silence the real predicament of the Asian American community.

In August 2018, *The Atlantic* published an article titled "The 'Whitening' of Asian Americans," that generated much discussion in the Asian American community. The article referenced the group of Asian students who were suing Harvard for supposed racial discrimination against them, claiming that Harvard's admissions process significantly disadvantaged Asian American applicants compared to other racial groups. (Kuo 2018). Earlier in June, an organization called Students for Fair Admissions, that opposes race-based affirmative action, released a report that claimed that the percentage of Asian applicants admitted to Harvard would be much higher if only academic performance were considered. However, after factoring in Harvard's admission policies regarding race, the study found that both Asians and whites were negatively affected (Kuo 2018). The case against Harvard is but one example of a push to align Asian Americans and whites into the same position of being negatively impacted by racial policies in employment and education (Kuo 2018). The larger phenomena at hand is the historical instances where the category of "white" expanded to include other groups who were previously considered non-white, such as Italian, Irish, and Jewish people, and the speculation that Asian and Latino Americans may be the next groups to become treated and seen as whites.

The article in *The Atlantic* generated a Reddit thread where users discussed the issues raised in the article, including the model minority and the idea of racial “whitening.” One user commented:

I hated the Model Minority Myth and will always do. It's fucking sad that so many of us think that we're white and try so hard to be like them when we're actually not. Also, I hate this term from the article called "whitening". In the article, it compares the Italians and the Irish immigrants becoming a mainstream part of the American society to the Asians and the LatinX community becoming a main part of the American society in the next couple of decades and I just can't see it happening. Even those of us who try so hard to be accepted into the American society, they're still gonna ask us questions like, "Where are you really from?" "Are you good at math?" "You really don't eat dogs?" If by some chance that we are accepted into the mainstream American society, I just really hope that we don't become white-washed and be proud of our roots and not be afraid to show that when our time comes.
-@tofudoke

When user @tofudoke states that even Asians who “try so hard” to be accepted into the American mainstream are still confronted with questions that cast them into an outsider category, it reflects the way in which phenotypic traits are taken to signal foreignness. The user states that he/she/they do not think that integration of Latin and Asian Americans into the mainstream is plausible. The user does not offer up an explanation of why he/she/they feel this way, but still the comment shows that no matter the scholarly theorizing about the likelihood of the boundaries of the dominant group expanding to include other racial groups, members of the Asian American community themselves do not believe this shift will take place.

Furthermore, the user expresses the disparity between being held up as the model minority, and the persistence of the perpetual foreigner stereotype that keeps Asian Americans from achieving full acceptance into the white mainstream. How can the group that is supposedly successfully integrating themselves into the white category still be outsiders? Furthermore, the concern that @tofudoke expresses regarding decreasing social distance between Asians and

whites illuminates how the two identities are positioned in opposition to each other, and the struggle that Asian Americans experience when they attempt to integrate these two identities. Common among Asian Americans is the feeling that embracing one's Asian identity would in effect distance one from being considered legitimately American. Another user replied on the same discussion thread:

I think this article and a lot of people who talk about Asians becoming “whiter” miss the obvious - Asians look different than whites. Italians and Irish blend more with WASPs and other groups that are more traditionally white. Sure – maybe some irish have freckled and red hair, but not all of them, and it's easier for them to physically blend into whiteness imo [in my opinion]
 -@PrinceJafar

The user @PrinceJafar aptly points of how phenotype plays a critical role into who can be accepted into the category of white. As mentioned in chapter one, the comparison of the historical integration of white ethnics, Italians, Irish, and Jews, into the white category overlooks the physical differences between Asians and whites: the fact that these groups who used to be considered nonwhite have skin tones that aligned with that of the existing white category meant that their ethnicity could become symbolic. Speculation and predictions of the expansion of the white category to include Asians and Latinos overlooks the power of physical characteristics to announce themselves in the social realm, reinforcing existing modes of categorization and behavior.

Another example of the effects of the white racial frame in the stereotyping of Asian Americans is the desire to “become white,” both as a way to avoid the discrimination that accompanies the model minority and perpetual foreigner racial tropes as well as a result of Asian Americans being held up as the minority group closest to whiteness. The term “honorary whites” perfectly describes the precariousness of the Asian American position: in certain contexts Asian Americans are allowed to move about in society with the privileges afforded to white Americans,

yet these privileges are always conditional because Asians will never *fully* be integrated into the white mainstream. As a result of this double bind, internalized discrimination, and the wish for an unconditional American identity, emerges the desire to emulate, or “become” white. A post from Reddit articulates this sentiment:

[...] Growing up, I used to always wish I was a white boy and was in love with all the white girls. I also avoided my fellow Asian American sisters and brothers because I didn't want to seem clique to the white folk - when in reality, they would've provided me solace in what I was unknowingly going through (self-image, identity issues - something I'm sure most of us have gone through). It sucked badly when I found out I wasn't white the hard way lol.
-@Isay

User @Isay states he used to wish he were white. While the user does not further elaborate what this desire meant for him, the desire to “be white” may be a manifestation of the desire to have one’s appearance reflect the sense of cultural American-ness an individual may feel. It could also be a response to wanting to avoid the stigmatization or discrimination that accompanies an Asian physical appearance, or a combination of both. This pattern of experiencing one’s identity through the eyes of another is similar to Cooley’s looking-glass self in which an individual’s identity is produced through a process of interpretation of how others perceive them (Cooley 1902). When @Isay says he “found out [he] wasn’t white the hard way,” he is clearly referring not to the surprise of realizing he was Asian, but may instead be referring to the realization that being Asian meant that he was not seen as a part of the white mainstream.

In their 1996 study of Asian American identity development, researchers Yeh and Huang concluded that Asian American culture conferred pressure on its members to conform to group expectations. They argued that Asian Americans might more readily accept mainstream American standards as a way of avoiding the shame of nonconformity (Renn in Wijeyesinghe and Jackson 2012, 151). In this way, the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes may

be understood as a mechanism through which Asian Americans are kept in a useful position to the white majority as an example of minority success who are conditionally afforded the social privileges of whiteness. The alignment of Asian Americans as close to whites is integral to their position in relation to minority groups and the black-white dichotomy. The following section will build upon the idea that Asian Americans are similar to whites through an examination of Asian Americans' socioeconomic standing in relation to traditional associations of minority groups of color in America.

Asian Americans' "Minority" Group Status

The idea of the "whitening" of Asian Americans as well as the model minority stereotype utilizes Asian American socioeconomic success, educational attainment, and overlap of white and Asian social domains. Asian Americans are able to access some of the privileges that are usually available only to whites. Because whites are synonymous with the majority group, some scholars argue that regardless of Census classification of Asian Americans as minorities, their social reality is closer to the majority.

Such scholars argue that as Asians continue to integrate themselves into the mainstream, their cultural distinctiveness slowly changes to resemble whiteness. Richard Alba states: "precisely because whites remain the dominant group, assimilation usually requires degrees of social integration with them, in effect expanding the white majority" (Alba 2017). Applying Alba's statement, which is focused on the expansion of the white majority rather than on minority status vis-à-vis Asian Americans, it can be argued that Asian-Americans as a group have become so acculturated into white America—in a variety of structural and cultural ways—that they should no longer be classified as a minority group. Where does this leave Asian

Americans? If their lives no longer reflect minority status, does this signify they have fully integrated into the majority? Persistence of racist stereotypes and prejudice against Asian Americans makes it evident that while they may not deal with the systematic blockages to upward mobility that many other groups face, they still have not been fully accepted into the ranks of white America. Thus, Asian Americans occupy a quasi-white status, where they are no longer aligned with the lived experiences of minority groups, but where they are not fully accepted into the majority.

“Whiteness” and “Asian-ness” overlap in a variety of social domains, including marriage, residential settings, education, and socioeconomic achievement. The high rates of intermarriage between Asians and whites is perhaps one of the strongest examples of the social closeness between the two groups, as marriage patterns can act as indicators of how closed a certain group is. Some sociologists argue that marital assimilation is the final stage of absorption of an immigrant group (Hidalgo and Bankston 2009, 281). Intermarriage between groups occurs only when the social distance separating the two groups has largely dissipated and boundary crossing becomes possible (Hidalgo and Bankston 2009, 281). Therefore, rates of intermarriage can be considered evidence that negative attitudes, prejudice, or stereotypes between groups have become significantly less salient (Kalmijn 1998, 396). Patterns of racial composition of families are an important factor that perpetuates recognizable group distinctions, or the blurring of these very boundaries as interracial couples have children (Hidalgo and Bankston 2009, 281). Particularly for intermarriages occurring between a member of a dominant group and a member of a minority group, intermarriage completes the structural assimilation of immigrants by “allowing their entrance into the primary groups and institutions of the host society” (Hidalgo

and Bankston 2009, 282). Thus, intermarriage can be evidence of growing similarity between two groups, and also a cause of the blurring of racial divisions.

Studies have found that native-born Asian Americans have high rates of out-marriage to white Americans. There are a number of variables influencing this phenomenon. Some scholars posit that phenotypic attributes, namely skin tone, play a factor in the high rates of Asian-white intermarriage. Studies have found that “the lighter the skin color, the higher rate of intermarriage with white Americans” (Qian 2005, 35). The idea that light skin color plays a factor in intermarriage with white Americans brings up the notion addressed in the previous section, which is whether or not the white racial boundary will expand in the future to include Asians and Latinos. This implies that white Americans perceive those with lighter skin tones as closer to their own group, and that conditional acceptance into white social domains can be facilitated by physical characteristics.

Intermarriage between Asians and whites is also very sex-selective. 58 percent of Asian-American-white couples involve an Asian American wife and a white husband (Qian 2005, 36). Scholar Zhenchao Qian puts forth the speculation that Asian American women tend to marry white men at higher rates due to the perceived notion that Asian American men are more traditional and rigid in their sex roles, while they view white men are more “nurturing” and “expressive” (Qian 2005, 36). Asian men have also been historically emasculated by white society, and have been painted as weak, asexual, undesirable mates. While overtly racist images emasculating Asian men have greatly decreased in recent decades, the effects of this stereotype still exist. In contrast, white men embody western ideals of masculinity and male beauty. This can account, at least in part, for the lower rates of Asian men-white women intermarriages.

On the other hand, other scholars argue that white men are attracted to Asian American women due to the persistence of racial stereotypes of Asian women being submissive and hyper-feminine. Many scholars suggest that white men are drawn to Asian American women due to the widespread stereotype that Asian women are “submissive” and “hyper-feminine,” drawing on the popular “Madame Butterfly” icon” (Qian 2005, 36). The incidence of Asian-female/white-male marriages is particularly high for Japanese American women (Kalmijn 1998). Thus, the gender differential in intermarriage for native-born Asian Americans is also influenced by white society’s perpetuation of Asian females as subservient and Asian men as sexually undesirable (Min and Kim 2009, 456). This is compounded by the pervasive message sent to men that they should occupy a dominant position in their marriages.

The idea that Asian-white intermarriage is facilitated by gendered stereotypes of Asian men and women complicates explanation that the high rates of intermarriage between Asians and whites is due to Asians being perceived as socially similar to whites. If Asian American women are more drawn to white men due to their cultural *differences*, it may be a reflection of the desire to be enveloped into the white social domain. Furthermore, if white men are—whether unconsciously or not—drawn to Asian American women due to their perceived submissive femininity, this is evidence of the persisting historical effects of the fetishization and hyper-sexualization of Asian women by western culture. Scholars speculate, “Asian American women are more attractive marriage candidates for white men because of their physical appearance and presumed acceptance of more traditional power relationships in marriage” (Kalmijn 1998, 412-13). These assertions uncover the persistent orientalist thinking that influences perceptions of Asian Americans and extends into modern day marriage practices. If this is true, patterns of intermarriage between Asian-women and white men might reflect persisting cultural boundaries

and stereotypes as well as decreasing social closure between the groups. Both the growing sociological similarity between Asians and whites, as well as gendered stereotypes of Asian men and women likely contribute to the rates of intermarriage between Asians and whites. The degree to which these factors play a part, however, is still unclear.

Population size, residential setting, and educational attainment are other spheres in which the Asian-white boundary is moderated. By the mere fact that Asians constitute a small percentage of the population and whites the majority of the population, the demographic reality is that there are far more whites than Asians on the marriage market. However, other minority groups also constitute small percentages of the population, yet not all of them show the same degree of intermarriage with whites. Therefore, the patterns of intermarriage and overlapping social domains between Asian and whites must be due to factors other than numbers. Population size and residential setting facilitate increased structural integration of Asians and whites: Asian Americans are more likely to inhabit neighborhoods that are dominated by a race other than their own, namely, by whites. Studies show that “whites resist having black neighbors much more than they resist having Hispanic or Asian American neighbors” (Qian 2005, 35). The fact that whites are more open to Asian American neighbors than other minority group indicates that whites see less socio-cultural differences separating them from Asians than them from other groups. Therefore, Asian Americans structural integration via residential patterns is enabled and perpetuated by the cultural explanation of the decreasing salience of the white-Asian boundary.

The high educational attainment of Asian Americans contributes to high levels of intermarriage between Asians and whites. Studies show that Asian Americans marry whites with about the same educational level as themselves (Qian 2005, 35). Qian states: “The fact that Asian Americans attend college at unusually high rates helps explain their high level of intermarriage

with whites” (Qian 2005, 35). Indeed, according to the 2004 American Community survey, 50 percent of adult Chinese Americans aged 25 or older have attained four or more years of college education (Zhou 2009, 224). Asian’s high educational attainment not only increases their opportunities to interact with whites but also serves to further the idea of Asians as “honorary whites,” as they are able to access the educational spheres historically associated with privileged white Americans.

Asian’s educational attainment is also central to their labor market achievements (Sakamoto et al. 2009, 262). High rates of college education among the Asian American community are critical to the level of economic attainment that solidified the model minority stereotype. As mention previously, white society leverages Asian Americans’ level of economic success against other disadvantaged minority groups, namely black and Latino communities, as an example that they should aspire towards. However, as mentioned above, the model minority stereotype simultaneously lauds Asian Americans’ education achievement and reinforces their status as outsiders (Zhou 2009). Despite this outsider status, the strong presence of Asian Americans in high-level education both increases their level of interaction with whites and leads to high socioeconomic attainment. This further decreases their social distance from whites, but also perpetuates the model minority stereotype that reinforces Asians position as only conditionally accepted into the mainstream. The perceived lack of social distance between the two groups leads to the associations attached to being Asian to become ever more distant from the traditional conceptualization of minority groups as educationally, socially, and economically disadvantaged.

Furthermore, the spatial assimilation of Asian Americans self-perpetuates the moderation of the perceived racial boundary between white and Asian Americans (Min and Kim 2009, 453).

White acceptance of Asian Americans into their communities is not only evidence of lack of discrimination, but also contributes to more frequent interaction between the two groups and increases the sense of similarity and common ground between them. The fact that Asian Americans are able to buy or rent residences in white neighborhoods already indicates both the lack of social distance from whites and Asian Americans' high socioeconomic status (Min and Kim 2009, 453). In comparison, blacks are systematically prevented from obtaining residence in white neighborhoods by a host of institutional blockages from redlining to unfavorable interest rates from banks seeking to exploit disadvantaged populations. Moreover, living in white neighborhoods gives Asian American access to the societal privileges enjoyed by whites, such as safer neighborhoods, better public schools, and a wealthier community with more social capital and resources. Scholars that argue that Asian Americans are becoming more similar to the majority, and less like other minority groups of color, utilize examples such as these to support their claims. Similarly, in the debate of whether or not Asians are "becoming white" often places Latino Americans in the same predicament, which will be the focus of the next section.

Asians and Latino Americans

In the black and white binary, Latino and Asian Americans are often treated as occupying similar positions. Contemporary immigration and the subsequent shift in national origins transformed America's racial and ethnic scene, intensifying interest in questions of racial formation and transformation. Asians and Latinos constituting the majority of contemporary immigration to the United States in effect necessitated the reexamination of the historical modes of racial classification. Latinos and Asians occupy similar positions in the racial landscape as

neither group fits neatly in the tradition American system of racial classification, which, as this paper has described, has been dominated by a black-white divide.

Social scholars argue that Latinos and Asians have long played crucial roles in the social production of “America” and “American-ness” by marking the outside of this boundary. Considered racially not “American,” “Latinos and Asians have each served as a constitutive outside against which the white supremacy of the U.S. nation-state could imagine its own coherence and wholeness” (De Genova 2006, 11). De Genova furthers this argument by claiming that being rendered nonwhite is not simply to be distinguished as an outsider to the white category, but this process also facilitates the salience of pan-ethnic categories for both Asian and Latino America. De Genova writes:

To be Latino or Asian within the space of the U.S. nation-state or its imperial projects has, therefore, nearly always meant having one’s specific national origins as well as cultural, religious, and linguistic practices—rendered virtually indistinguishable from a conclusively racial condition of nonwhiteness (De Genova 2006, 12).

Speaking from a historical standpoint, these scholars see nonwhiteness as the defining feature of Asian and Latino Americans in the racial scheme.

The scholarly works that argue that Asians are “becoming white” in many regards also invoke Latino Americans as an example of shifting racial boundaries. Particularly because Latinos can be racially white, some scholars use this as evidence that whiteness as a category maintains its historical fluidity and is evolving yet again to incorporate Latinos and Asians as white. In the same Reddit discussion thread about ethnicity mentioned in chapter 1, user @BirdFour states, “Hispanics don’t count... They are honorary whites.” Contrary to the argument that being a minority group immediately places that group in close relation to blackness and other nonwhite groups, user @BirdFour’s comment suggests that Latino

Americans are, like Asians, considered increasingly similar to whites. The “honorary” status indicates conditional acceptance, which shows that outsider racialization is still a prominent feature of Asian and Latino American experience, yet acceptance can nonetheless occur in certain social contexts.

The idea of Latinos and Asians becoming considered as white would in fact mean the reemergence of the historical black/white divide rather than a shifting color line. Other scholars, such as Jennifer Lee and Frank Bean, argue that while Latinos and Asians will never be fully integrated into the white category, the salient distinction is the black/non-black divide in which Asians and Latinos are considered non-black. According to Lee and Bean, Asians and Latinos show much less social distance from whites than from blacks, indicating the “likely emergence of a black nonblack divide that continues to separate blacks from other groups, including nonwhite immigrants (Lee and Bean 2007, 561). Returning to the black-white paradigm through which Asian Americans are racialized, the following section examines Asian Americans’ historical and contemporary relationship with blacks.

Asians and Blacks

In contrast to the contemporary argument that Asian Americans are socially close to whites, the more traditional white-nonwhite conceptualization of race relations views the Asian American experience as more closely resembling blacks than whites in that Asians are similarly excluded from the “white” category. Despite the fact that Asians and Latinos are relegated to a racial terrain outside of the black-white structure, the categorization of these groups as nonwhite places them in substantial relation to blackness as the epitome of non-whiteness (De Genova 2006, 11). As chapter two described, the construction of Asian American-ness during the Asian

American Movement inserted the identity into the existing black-white racial paradigm. Unlike the modern discourse about the “whitening” of Asian Americans, the initial formation of the Asian American identity took a distinctly subjugated position, claiming that their racialization as a group was subject to the same racism that afflicted blacks (Maeda 2009, 75). Through the cross-identification between Asians and blacks that arose at various moments during the twentieth century, the identity “Asian American” was constructed through blackness. Asian Americans and blacks also often inhabited overlapping or adjacent neighborhoods, particularly in cities along the West Coast, such as San Francisco, Oakland, Seattle, and Los Angeles, which facilitated feelings of commonality and solidarity between the two groups as they each struggled for power through their respective social movements (Maeda 2009, 90). Taken together, the Black Power Movement and the Asian American Movement created a hybridized social movement with both Asian and black inflections. Karen Ishizuka writes: “Notwithstanding the standardization of whiteness, if we started out as Oriental, before we became Asian American we were black” (Ishizuka 2016, 41). Historian Gary Okihiro claims that “Yellow is emphatically neither white nor black; but insofar as Asians and Africans share a subordinate position to the master class, yellow is a shade of black, and black, a shade of yellow” (Okihiro in Ishizuka 2016, 46).

Posts on Reddit reaffirm the relationship between the black and Asian identities. Commenting on a post that stated, “I wish more Black People will speak on Asian Activism,” user @Asiankinmoon replied with the following comment:

I sometimes get a sense of arrogance from certain black activists who simultaneously claims that they understand Asian issues, or that Asian issues are not as worthy of attention as compared to black issues, while claiming that Asians do not understand black issues. In contrary to their assertion, often times in the younger generations, Asian are awoken to black issues before their own issues, it is only natural as black issues are taught before Asian issues, if Asian issues are

taught at all. They precede ours, for example, "yellow face" is derived from "black face". Many liberal Asian folks stops entirely at their awareness of black issues, or Jewish issues, or problems facing some other groups, e.g., LGBTQ2. It is not because they do not suffer from the weights of white supremacy in their own lives, it is because they do not have the language of resistance to describe them.

-@Asiankinmoon

Interestingly, the user begins by commenting on the way in which Asian American issues are compared to the issues of the black community, claiming that certain black activists think "Asian issues are not as worthy of attention as compared to black issues." Again, the silencing effect of the model minority stereotype is evident. Whether or not this user has actually been told by a black activist that Asian American issues are not as worthy of attention as black issues, it is clear that culture, society, and popular discourse are sending the message to Asian Americans that their community's racial issues are not as dire as those facing the black community, and are therefore not important. However, the user disagrees with this line of thinking, and the rest of the post emphasizes the historical ties between Asians and blacks. The user reiterates Asians and blacks as sharing the position of a racialized group of color by contextualizing Asian American racial awareness and political activism as something that arose from the foundation and history of black Americans. Black American history in the United States predates Asian immigration, and by the time that Asian Americans started engaging in social and political activism, they drew from black Americans' models of political organizing. As discussed in chapter two, the Asian American identity was a politically catalyzed identity that drew from the Black Power Movement. Therefore, the context of creation of the identity itself reaffirms the social proximity of Asians and blacks as racially subjugated groups. While the relationship between blackness and Asian-ness does not imply equality or shared identity, there is a long and complex sociopolitical connection between the two groups, premised on the racial consistency of being non-white

(Ishizuka 2016). Put briefly, the alignment of blackness and Asian-ness arises from the belief that to be nonwhite is to inhabit the category of the “other,” and that otherness is constructed through blackness, regardless of the country-of-origin of a particular group, or even the physical traits of a group.

To align the Asian American community with blacks has the double utility of pushing back against the model minority stereotype, one that is often considered as aiding the white agenda. Opposing the model minority stereotype is in line with the goals of the Asian American Movement—consciously rejecting assimilation into whiteness by mobilizing around a racial identity (Maeda 2009, 90). Rejection of the model minority stereotype destabilizes the racial relationship between Asians and whites, because the supposed success that the Asian American community enjoyed was achieved through the black/white paradigm. Positioning themselves as a racial group closely tied to the black community shows how even subjugated groups can subvert the racial hierarchy by refusing to adopt the views that contribute to the maintenance of racist polarity, and brings to light social distance and racial positions as something both changeable and socially constructed.

Currently, Asian Americans are defined by their proximity to the economic success of the dominant group, white Americans, as much as they were previously compared to black Americans. Posts on Reddit discussing Asian and black relations show that many people now perceive much more social distance between Asians and blacks, and conversely much less social distance between Asians and whites. In a Reddit thread, user @thatperson42, self-identified as a black male, wrote a post asking for a “general consensus on black and Asian relations, or how they view black people.” He went on to write:

I tend to see Asians rollin with whites alot. I don't often see Asians kicking it with blacks...

I never understood why older asians kiss up and look up to whites and look down on blacks when blacks on a whole, never did anything to asians... despite all of that history that whites did to Asians, I still see a majority of them cliqued up with whites. I see this everyday. I see it at school, I see it at work when I observe the crowd. Always kickin' it whites on a mass scale, no so much blacks. You'll see asians at white events and white family gatherings, but zilch at black events and family gatherings. Not even Latino, or Arab gatherings either. And I know this isn't a coincidence.
-@thatperson42

User @thatperson42 describes the social divide he sees between Asians and blacks in a variety of scenarios, from school, family gatherings, to older Asians “kissing up” to whites and looking down on blacks. Not only does the user note a divide between Asians and blacks that keeps them from socializing with one another, this observation is contrasted with seeing frequent social interaction between Asians and whites. Stating that he knows that this pattern isn’t a coincidence shows how this user is confident that his observations are not restricted to his individual experience and must be reflective of the larger relationship among the groups. Furthermore, the user references the history of racial antagonism, or lack thereof against Asian Americans by whites and blacks. While the comment does not reference a specific time period or historical event, the user is aware that there is history of racial discrimination against Asians by whites, seen in the comment “despite all of that history that whites did to Asians.” The fact that the user cannot call to mind any historical reason for antagonism between Asians and blacks furthers his confusion on why the social divide between Asians and blacks persists while the one separating Asians and whites seems increasingly inconsequential.

While the Reddit thread was initially posed to discuss black and Asian relations, it quickly turned into a discussion of white and Asian relations. The fact that a conversation intended to analyze Asian and black relations turned into a discussion of Asians and whites not only reinforces the use of the black and white dichotomy to conceptualize Asian Americans, but

reflects the contemporary placement of Asians as close to whites. Analyzing Asian Americans in relation to either blacks or whites cannot occur without the binary, and because Asian Americans are perceived to be socially proximate to whites, the focus on Asian and black relations fell to the wayside.

Theorizing on why Asian and blacks may have so much social distance between them, Reddit users brought up the model minority stereotype to explain the nature of the closeness of Asians and whites in racial discourse:

Another fucked up thing about this is that as the fabled "model minority", Asians are the safest PoC for white people to associate with, so they are more open to letting some Asians in...as long as they don't cause any trouble for them. Many young AA grow up and cherish this second rate acceptance, letting themselves believe that they are just as "white" as the white kids.
-@campetri_

Calling Asian Americans the “safest PoC for white people to associate with” again calls to mind the idea of Asians as “honorary whites” who can conditionally access white social contexts as long as “they don’t cause any trouble for them.” In contrast to user @thatperson42, who did not comment on any social barriers between Asians and whites and focused instead on the frequency of their social interactions, the fact that user @campetri_ calls Asians the “safest” minority group implies the existence of a boundary separating Asians and whites, even if this boundary is crossable in certain contexts. Furthermore, user @campetri_ calls the dynamic between Asians and whites a “second rate acceptance,” showing that even if Asians appear in proximity to whiteness, they, like black Americans, still occupy a subjugated position. Another user similarly referenced the model minority when explaining the relationship between Asians and whites. The user writes:

You brought up some modern issues with how Asians are portrayed. Well, in context, you need to consider how someone who lacks a strong identity is going to interact with the dominant group in the country they live in. There is also

something to be said of the "model minority" stereotype. Asians that suck up to whites continue to, probably because it works for them. Especially if as you say, they get invited to white gatherings and events.

-@alwaysuspicious

It is telling that user @alwaysuspicious seems to think that Asian Americans lack a strong identity, perhaps referring to how the Asian American racial position is often obscured or invisible in popular discourse. Because the dominant group holds power and access, this user sees the social closeness of Asians and whites as benefitting Asians, even if it may be only a conditional acceptance. Another user, who has deleted their username, offered up their own theory:

The theory is that asians came to the US to have a better life. The leaders of the country, run the schools, business and society are white. The gatekeeper to the better life, is white. [...] The asians associate these people with poverty and crime, things they dont want their children getting into because their future is going to college and moving to white middle-upper class communities that are safe and clean. Stereotypes and anti-minority sentiments gets propagated and here we are.

-deleted user

This user's postulation that Asian Americans associate "these people," black Americans, with poverty and crime is merely a hypothesis, but the sentiment reflects the reality of black Americans occupying the most oppressed and subjugated position in the racial hierarchy. The user seems to think that Asian Americans actively distance themselves from blacks as a way to facilitate their own success, a success that hinges upon the acceptance of white Americans, the "gatekeeper to the better life."

The fact that Asian Americans have, at different points in history, been racialized as closer to both whites and blacks shows that the process of racialization occurs regardless of whether Asian Americans actually possess white or black traits, whatever these traits are thought to be according to the sociopolitical context (J. Kim 1999). This paper takes to be true the fact

that the black/white paradigm “is also a question of the accumulation and concatenation of social and cultural symbols and meanings about race, at any given moment, recognizing that such symbols and meanings continually change” (J. Kim 1999, 2392). This line of thinking recognizes racial formation as something that is constructed by society.

Racial Triangulation Theory

The alignment of Asian Americans with blacks during the 1960s as well as the more contemporary speculation of Asian’s “becoming white” reiterate the pervasiveness of the black-white dichotomy to frame racial discourse. The underlying question is which side of the color line Asian Americans will ultimately inhabit—closer to blacks, or closer to whites? In the binary, the relationship between whiteness and blackness does not only signal opposition but makes explicit the relationship between racially based domination and subordination (J. Kim 1999). As the powerful majority group, whites are the superior opposite to others, and these “‘others’ have included various non-white races, but the fluidity or ambiguity of their positions within the black/white paradigm has sometimes served to cloud the bases upon which dominance and subordination are conditioned” (J. Kim 1999, 2396). According to this view, any non-white groups can therefore be understood as subordinated beneath white power and privilege.

However, social scholars are increasingly moving towards different conceptualizations of race relations. For example, certain scholars propose that because other minority groups of color are placed closer to blacks in the black/white paradigm, a more appropriate approach is a white/nonwhite divide, in which the boundaries between whites and nonwhite groups are more significant than the boundaries separating nonwhite groups from each other. As seen in chapter two, the relationship between the Asian American Movement and the Black Power Movement

reinforces the idea that all nonwhite groups share a common position of racial subordination. However, the white/nonwhite divide has been critiqued for its failure to distinguish the vastly different social realities of nonwhite groups. They argue that grouping Asians, Latinos, and blacks all under the category “nonwhite” creates the false illusion that these groups are similar in social position and experience (Xu and Lee 2013). Conversely, other scholars propose the emergence of a black/nonblack divide, in which blacks are continually separated not only from whites but also from other nonwhite racial groups such as Asians and Latinos. This approach however, engenders the same critique of not distinguishing between the experience of whites and other nonblack groups.

According to Jennifer Lee and Frank Bean, “multiracial identifications of Asians and Latinos (behaviorally and self-perceptually) show much less social distance from whites than from blacks, signaling the likely emergence of a black-nonblack divide that continues to separate blacks from other groups” (Lee and Bean 2007, 561). In the more traditional white-nonwhite conceptualization of race relations, the Asian-American experience more closely resembles blacks than whites in that Asians are similarly excluded from the “white” category. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, because Asian Americans enjoy many of the privileges that used to be accessible only to white America, some scholars are arguing that while Asians are considered minorities by the census, their social realities more closely mirror whites than blacks.

In the black/non-black divide, race relations remain binary but focus instead on the boundary separating blacks from other nonwhite racial/ethnic groups (Lee and Bean 2007, 566). In this framework, social scientists cite early 20th-century Asian immigrants, such as the Chinese and Japanese, who changed their status from “almost black” to “almost white” (Lee and Bean 2007, 566). Historical research shows Chinese and Japanese immigrants making conscious

efforts to distance themselves from blacks and re-characterize themselves as closer to whites. However, both the white-nonwhite and black/non-black racial divisions speak of Asian Americans only in black and white terms. Furthermore, much of racial-boundary literature tends to speak of Asians and Latinos as occupying a similar position in the color line, referring to their experiences as similar. This lumping together of two distinct racial groups, who have already been consolidated into pan-ethnic identities, detract from the specific position and group social experience of each respective group (Qian 2005, 37).

Other scholars claim that the racialization of Asian Americans occurs not along a “color axis” but along a “foreigner axis.” What this means is that blackness signifies the side of the color line that is subordinated within the racial hierarchy. Black Americans are relegated to a position of second-class citizenship, but a position that is nonetheless along the color axis (J. Kim 1999). Conversely, Asian Americans are seen as outsiders to whom access is outright denied, hence their racialization occurs along a “foreigner axis.” The idea of racialization along a “foreigner axis” shows how race and national origin have been combined for discriminatory purposes. Taken together, because blacks are within the bounds of American citizenship, their social and political demands are legitimate, whereas Asian Americans as immigrants and foreigners do not enjoy this legitimacy (J. Kim 1999, 2405). Claiming that Asian Americans are positioned on a different axes entirely obscures the relationship that Asian Americans have with both whiteness and blackness. One such concept that does not place Asian Americans on the outside is *racial triangulation theory*.

Racial triangulation theory places Asian Americans in relation to both blackness and whiteness, but along two intersecting axes—foreigner/insider, and inferior/superior. In “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” Claire Jean Kim proposes that Asian Americans have

been historically triangulated within the field of race relations in relative position to blacks and whites on two dimensions: racial valorization and civic ostracism. These two dimensions constitute two simultaneous and linked processes:

(1) processes of ‘relative valorization,’ whereby dominant group A (Whites) valorizes subordinate group B (Asian Americans) relative to subordinate group C (Blacks) on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to dominate both groups, but especially the latter, and (2) processes of ‘civic ostracism’ whereby dominant group A (Whites) constructs subordinate group B (Asian Americans) as immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to ostracize them from the body politic and civic membership” (C. Kim 1999, 107).

The fact that Kim describes relative valorization as a process that subordinates Asian Americans to whites and blacks to Asian Americans reflects the model minority as used to drive a wedge between Asian Americans and blacks. In the figure below, taken from Kim’s article, white Americans are “superior insiders,” blacks are “inferior insiders,” and Asian Americans are

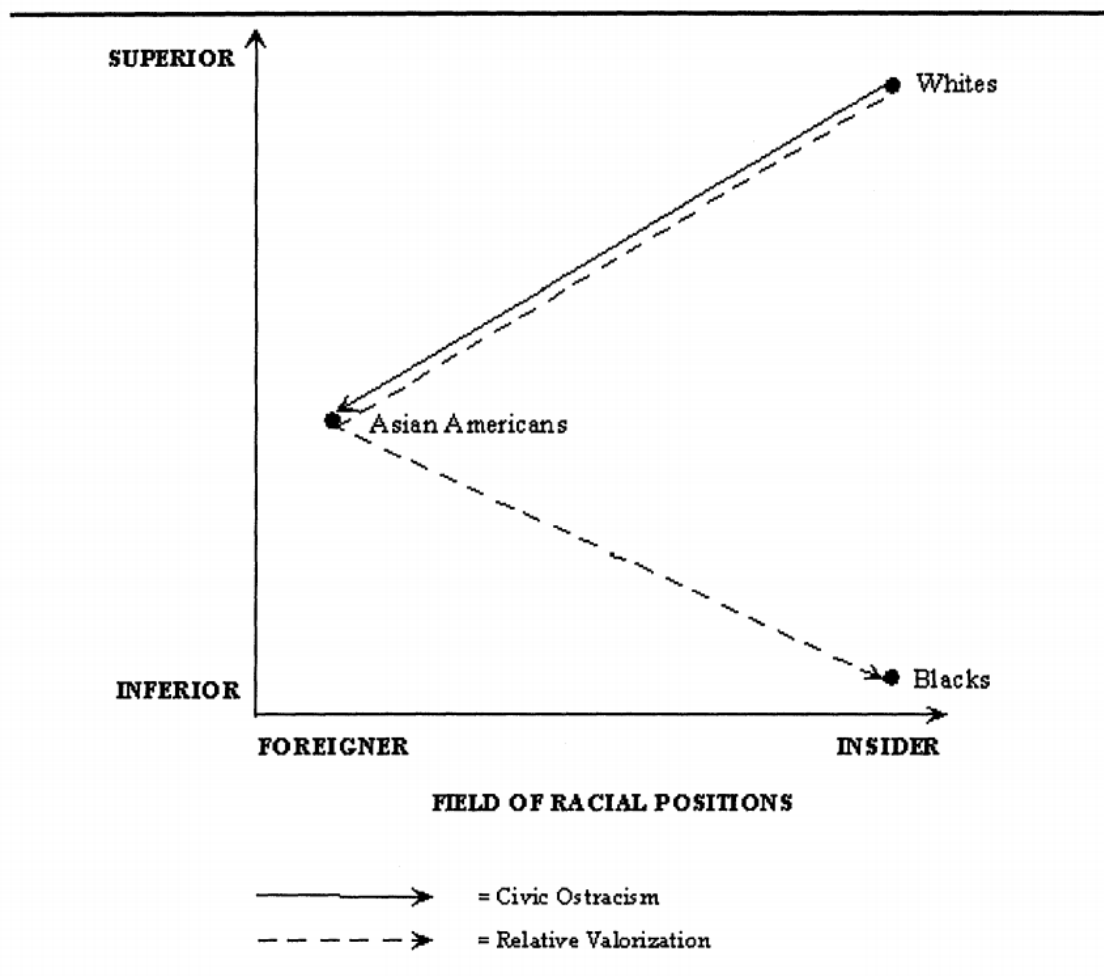


Figure 1. Racial triangulation.

foreigners who are inferior to whites but superior to blacks. However, while blacks are “insiders” in the racial scheme, Asians are marginalized as outsiders, supporting the perpetual foreigner trope (Xu and Lee 2013, 1364). Xu and Lee state: “The lack of discussion about such variation in racial triangulation theory is problematic because although the black-white binary is not powerful enough to fully delineate the mosaic of color lines, race discourse is largely dependent upon black-white binaries” (Xu and Lee 2013, 1368). Racial triangulation theory does not dispose of the black and white binary, precisely due to its power in organizing racial discourse, but adds dimension to better portray the field of racial positioning in America. Kim’s graph makes it clear that despite all the discourse on Asian’s “becoming white,” they remain branded as outsiders.

Comments on the same Reddit thread asking why Asian Americans feel the need to emphasize that are born and raised in the U.S. support the notions of racial triangulation. In response to the comment claiming that Asian Americans are disproportionately asked where they are from, user @Poeticweb commented:

1. White- nothing unless you have an accent
 2. Black-same as white, just with other forms of racism
 3. Latinx-assume that you’re Mexican
 4. Native American-“me too! My grandma is Cherokee”
 5. Asian American- “Where are you from?” “Los Angeles” “No, like where are you reaaaaally from?” “San Fernando Valley then, I guess”
- @Poeticweb

The first two comments about blacks and whites reinforces the relationship of blacks and whites as outlined in racial triangulation—namely, that blacks and whites are both insiders, but the distinction between the two groups in terms of being asked where they are from is only distinguished by blacks experiencing other forms of racism. The comment about Asian Americans similarly highlights the persistent foreignness of the group.

Use of two axes in racial triangulation theory transforms the polarity of blacks and whites and creates a field of racial position in which relative group positions are not constricted to hierarchical racial arrangement in which groups are ordered on a single scale of status and privilege with whites at the top, blacks at the bottom, and all other groups somewhere in between (C. Kim 1999). The racial triangulation of Asian Americans locates them in relative position to blacks and whites. Therefore, the racialization trajectories of all three of these groups are interrelated, with the processes of valorization and civic ostracism maintaining Asian Americans' placement in an equilibrated position.

Conclusion

While the black and white binary has long been critiqued for inadequately representing the racial position of groups other than blacks and whites, its' persistent domination in contemporary racial discourse influences the racialization of nonwhite and non-black groups. As such, the binary plays an inextricable role in the placement of Asian Americans in the racial landscape. Marking whites as privileged and superior, and blacks as subjugated and discriminated against, Asian Americans' social proximity to these groups oscillates with time period, context, and political utility. Similarly, the position of Latino Americans is negotiated in black and white terminology. However, any comparison of Asians and Latinos with blacks raises the issue of the history of black Americans in the U.S. versus the immigration history of Asians and Latinos. As one Reddit user aptly states:

How asian americans view cultural identity is definitely much more different than how blacks view their cultural identity because unlike blacks, we know where we come from, where as blacks usually don't because of the slave trade

-@dandelionz

The placement and association of black Americans as inferior insiders, to use the terms of racial triangulation, has its origins in the history of being brought to the United States and forced into a subjugated position in the social structure against their will. Contrarily, both Asian Americans and Latinos immigrated voluntarily, and while they faced both social and political discrimination, barriers to upward mobility and establishing a life in America were incomparable to the conditions to which black Americans were subjected for hundreds of years. As immigrants, the racialization of Asians and Latinos includes an “othering” quality of both their physical traits and culture, which is leveraged to render the issues in these communities illegitimate to American sociopolitical concerns.

Despite the fact that the black and white binary dominates popular racial discourse, racial triangulation theory contributes to the binary by offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding Asian Americans in the racial order. If one thinks of the inferior/superior axis of racial triangulation theory as representing the black and white binary, the addition of the insider/outsider axis restructures racial conceptualization to include an added dimension for relationality between groups. In racial triangulation theory, the effects of the model minority and perpetual foreigner are graphically illustrated in the placement of Asian Americans as outsiders to both blacks and whites, but in the middle of blacks and whites in terms of superiority/inferiority.

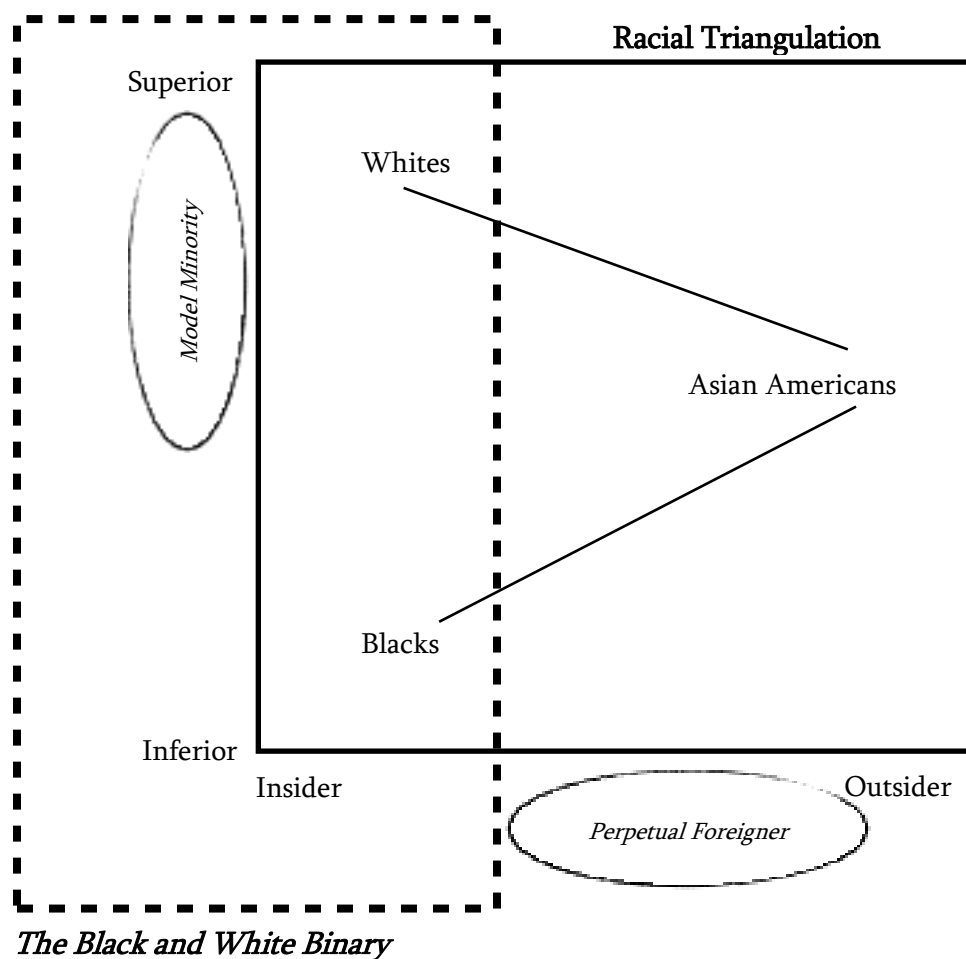
Conclusion

This project has addressed merely a small piece of the very complicated reality of Asian Americans in the racial landscape. Asian Americans have not been racialized in isolation from other groups; they have been racialized relation to and through interaction with whites and blacks. Understanding who Asian Americans are requires an understanding of the black and white paradigm as the primary force shaping public racial discourse. In this project, Asian American racialization is characterized by its relationship to blackness and whiteness as reference points of conference and denial of access and power. Furthermore, the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes moderate the social distance of Asian Americans from black and white groups.

Racial triangulation offers a framework that gives dimension to the black and white binary and allows for deeper understanding of Asian Americans' racial position, one that operates not only on an axis of inferiority and superiority, but also one that accounts for the "othering" and imposed foreignness of Asian Americans, seen in the insider-outsider axis. The model minority stereotype is evident in the placement of Asian Americans above blacks but below whites on the superiority-inferiority axis, and the perpetual foreigner trope is reflected in the placement of Asian Americans as more foreign than both blacks and whites. Racial triangulation is useful not only in its ability to go beyond dichotomous black and white thinking, but it also creates a space in which other groups may participate and place themselves in the field of race relations. Because the focus of my project was Asian Americans, I did not explore how other groups may fit into the racial triangulation framework. Exploration of how Hispanic and

Latino, Middle Eastern, and multiracial individuals fit into racial triangulation is an area of interest and further study.

An alternate approach to this project would have been using racial triangulation to frame the entire project rather than offering it as a framework at the end of the final chapter. However, in defense of my approach, I sought to demonstrate how the racial triangulation framework encapsulates each of the phenomena discussed in my chapters, from the visibility of racial identity, agency over social identity, immigration history and historic racialization, the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes, and the black and white binary. I created the following graphic as an illustration of how racial triangulation theory contains the black and white binary and stereotypes about Asian Americans.



Because the black and white paradigm binds and organizes racial discourse, its presence is reflected in racial triangulation. However, this commonly held binary understanding of race is, on its own, an impediment to learning about and understanding Asian Americans and their history. Because I wanted to give attention to Asian American history and stereotypes, discussing the phenomena addressed in my chapters through the lens of racial triangulation would have undermined the importance of each in contributing to Asian American racialization. In using racial triangulation as the final answer to my project, I hope to advocate for its use and prevalence not only in conceptualizing Asian American racialization but also to potentially be a space in which to address the racial position of other groups as well.

In referring to Asian Americans in relation to blacks and whites, I did not mean to imply that the Asian Americans cannot stand alone as a robust and unique community. The Asian American community continues to engage in and evolve with changing sociopolitical contexts, building upon a rich history of political and racial awareness. There are countless ways to approach Asian American racialization, and my argument that Asian American racialization is inextricably related to blacks and whites represents but one approach. Furthermore, as mentioned in the fourth chapter, comparing blacks with Asian and Latino Americans overlooks the experience of blacks as colonized minorities versus Asians and Latinos as immigrants. However, in the interest of utilizing the black and white binary to contextualize Asian Americans, I did not address the conflation of forced versus voluntary migration.

In writing this project I had to make conscious decisions on where to direct my focus and efforts, and, as a result was unable to give weight to a variety of related and interesting phenomena. My project uses the phrase “the Asian American identity,” rather than just “Asian American identity.” I recognize that there is no single Asian American identity, and ascribing

fundamental characteristics to Asian Americans may be interpreted as essentializing a vast and diverse collection of experience. However, in the context of this project, “the Asian American identity” refers to the representations of Asian Americans as reflected from my Reddit data, and how these users are thinking about who Asian Americans are in the U.S. Likewise, my project used the term “minority” when referring to groups other than white Americans. In scholarly discourse there is debate around dispensing the use of the word “minority,” as the term connotes discrimination. However, because a large part of my project was exploring the power dynamics that contribute to Asian Americans’ unique racial position, the association of minority groups with subordination and the majority with domination suited my argument.

Moreover, much of the phenomena described in this project pertain primarily (but not exclusively) to East Asians, not to every single ethnicity encompassed in the pan-ethnic Asian American category. For example, the high socioeconomic attainment referenced in the fourth chapter is not applicable across all Asian American ethnicities, and it is not my intention to mask the range of socioeconomic standing and make it seem as if all Asian Americans enjoy financial comfort and stability. However, the persistence of the model minority stereotype creates the illusion that all ethnicities encompassed under the pan-Asian category enjoy high socioeconomic standing, and my project utilizes this assumption when discussing the placement of Asian Americans in the racial scene. Similarly, the history covered in this project, from the immigration history of various Asian groups to the activist movements of the 1960’s, is merely a brief account of deep and complex history that my project did not have the space to fully address.

In addition, I did not address the distinctions of first, second, or third generation Asian Americans, and how these generational differences often produce different social realities. For the sake of not diverging too far from the intended focus of this project, I have also not discussed

in depth the ways in which intersectionality can compound situations for individual and group social experiences. This project referred to Asians, blacks, whites, and Latinos as demarcated racial groups that, while overlapping in certain social contexts, are separated by social boundaries. However, I did not address the ways in which multiracial individuals complicate these assertions by being members of two or more racial categories. I felt that bringing up multiracial individuals would have detracted from my focus on Asian Americans, but certainly research on how the racialization of multiracial individuals and how they fit into the racial landscape would contribute to the discourse on the black and white paradigm. Noticeably absent from my analysis of Asian American racialization is the impact of gender. Omission of such variables on my part has been a matter of economy rather than principle, and given more time I would have wanted to incorporate these as well.

This project has been with me for a long time, before my senior year and maybe before I was even aware of it. Many of the topics in this project are things I wish I had known growing up. Therefore, studying sociology at Bard has been meaningful to me in both an academic and personal sense by giving me the concepts, frameworks, and language to understand what I see in the world through a sociological lens. Writing this project has helped me to ground my own experiences as an Asian American in macro-level social phenomena. There is a sense of security to be found in being able to understand, contextualize, and verbalize who you are in the world, beyond individual experience and observation. But most importantly, I am grateful for the chance to give focus and attention to a group that is often underrepresented and rendered invisible, or flattened in popular discourse, whether it be in the media, art, academia, or politics. I hope I did it justice.

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