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## It Wasn't That I Was Ugly, It's That I Wasn't White: Casted shadows, lifted veils, and mediated intimacies through the lens of mixed Asian American subjectivities

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It Wasn't That I Was Ugly, It's That I Wasn't White  
Casted shadows, lifted veils, and mediated intimacies through the lens of mixed Asian American  
subjectivities

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

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2021



## Dedication

I dedicate this project to Dad, Grandma, Mama Vi, Auntie Chaddy, Auntie Cherwynne, Auntie Cly, Imani, Jaeda, and the eldest cousin, in my eyes, Aveni Rose Hayes.

I dedicate this to mum.

I dedicate this to the younger me who felt and hurt so much before I was ready to understand any of it.



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Thank you Dad for getting me here and believing in me more than I ever did. Thank you for all of the nights full of my tears over math worksheets and crumpled scratch paper. Thank you Mom for having the biggest heart out of everyone I know. Thank you for all of the late nights making solar systems and tri-fold poster boards with me. I thank both of you for the Kumon summer homework packets and the Khan Academy I had to do, even though I resented you guys for it at the time.

Thank you Wolfgang Fourier Weatherspoon for being the smartest person in my life. Thank you for reminding me of the beauty of thinking in outlandish ways. Thank you for believing in me and for allowing me to talk through my ideas with you. By the time you will be able to read this, you most likely will not remember this, but you said, "life is something to be proud of. You know, *live!* You have to live for something." Thank you for sharing your inspiring words and sharing your imagination with me. I hope that I can one day find that "magical tree in the middle of a glowing forest with floating particles" that sprouted from your mind. Finally, thank you for reminding me how wise and intuitive eight year olds can be.



## Abstract

This ethnography provides vignettes of the navigation of one's mixed Asian American subjectivity relayed to me by the interlocutors. In working with the ethnographic material I gathered from conversations with the interlocutors, I consider Du Boisian concepts of double consciousness in early adolescence and Warner's concept of publics which I apply to the interlocutors' negotiation of their desirability. In working with Michael Warner's publics in this way, I generate a new theoretical framework of public circumscription which follows an investigation of the dialectical relationship between the social landscape and the intimate landscape.





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## Introduction

For my senior project, I plan on interviewing second generation mixed Asian Americans and hearing the retelling of their parent's immigration stories to the United States. I plan to research the ways in which intergenerational memory collection materializes itself in the everyday lives of the interlocutors at every generational level. I also would like to explore if and how gender roles in the familial structure changed pre and post immigration to the United States. The 1965 Immigration Act was a watershed moment for the Asian community which enabled huge waves of Asian Immigration. The historical context of this time period was extremely important because it initiated the formation of the Asian American identity. In a time period where the dominant narrative of race relations were previously thought of as either American or African American, the integration of the Asian American identity seriously complicated and disrupted this binary. I decided to say American instead of white because white Americans have the privilege of never having their race hyphenated to their nationality and of never having their allegiance to the country questioned; whereas every other racial minority has the burden of the hyphen. To even say white American sounds redundant and that is because the historically dominant and exclusionary narrative of being American is synonymous with being white. Toni Morrison has a great quotation where she says, "In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate." I think this really gets at one of the main focuses of my senior project, which is the hegemony of knowledge production and its power to inform the collective understanding of place and identity politics. Overall, I would like to detect the discourse that emerges at the level of the lived experience. These interviews will be what makes my project ethnographic because the lived experience is the point of intersection between the academic

discourses of theory, historical narratives, race relations, gender roles, and identity politics overall.

The text from above was an excerpt from my thesis proposal that I submitted on October 15, 2020, and I was completely unaware of how much my thesis would change. When I was drafting the proposal, I thought that the topic was generally what I felt passionate about, but I felt if the topic were more historically grounded, my feelings would be legitimized. After the first round of interviews, the interlocutors reminded me of what I truly was interested in, what I truly wanted to explore, what I truly felt, *why* I wanted to do this project, and *who* I wanted to make proud.

Growing up, I was never that familiar with my Dad's side of the family. My house consisted of me, my mom, my dad, and, eventually, my grandma on my dad's side. However, my mom's side of the family is huge, and the majority of the holidays and family gatherings were spent with them. My Mama Vi, my grandma on my mom's side, has six children. This is the order from oldest to youngest: Auntie Chaddy, Auntie Cherwynne, Auntie Cly, my mom, Uncle Klein, and Uncle Ed. Out of the younger generation of people in my family, I am referred to as the eldest, and not only will I be the first of this younger generation to attend and graduate from a private, four year institution, but I will be the first out of my mom and her siblings as well. For these reasons, I have found it imperative to approach this project through the lens of reflexivity and readability. This project is deeply personal to me and I wanted to produce a work that was accessible to my family. I have struggled throughout this project to balance a colloquial style of writing while also trying to approach theory. In areas where I dive deep into theoretical language,

I rely on the rich ethnographic material to ground my thinking and writing and also, to remind the reader of how real and personal these navigations of the self are.

While I love the discipline of anthropology for its embeddedness in the subjectivities of life and people, I have watched my friends, peers, and myself go through the cycles of doubting our ideas and doubting our ways of writing. I am thankful for the ability to deliberately write in a way that felt true to me and this project.

I grew up in different parts of San Diego, California and spent the entirety of my educational life in predominantly white institutions. While I am thankful for the grueling hardwork my parents did to grant me this educational privilege and opportunity, this experience was deeply troubling and painful for me. I went to public school in a small beach town until the end of fifth grade, and while I can not remember most of my time there, the majority of the memories that I *do* have are ones regarding my experience of being made to feel different and ugly because I was black. I remember the feeling of being sad during this time, but still having the naive hope that *I* could change. I remember not being able to articulate what it was exactly that I was feeling and what it was about me that was so wrong and bad. I would go to school everyday and be the entertainer. I was the funny one, but never the pretty one. And when the bell rang signalling that school was out for the day, I would return home, and the happiness would turn to confusion and rage.

From an early age, there was a deep rage inside of me and the more time that passed being unable to articulate it, the stronger it grew. I was constantly lashing out and arguing with my parents which made me feel all the more desperate and alienated that my parents could not see or tell me what the hell was going on inside of my mind. I felt trapped without knowing it at

the time. I had no idea the extent to which this sadness, rage, and alienation would transform into a deeply layered and complicated ongoing process of understanding myself and why I have never felt free.

The most painful time was when I made the switch to an even smaller pwi, and this time, it was a private school education that my family struggled to afford. This school was a K-12, and I joined in the sixth grade, already aware of just how connected my peers were to each other, and just how new and different I was. Including me, there were four other black students in my class, and I became friends with all of them. I was soothed for the time being, until class presented itself. The school called the students who had been attending since kindergarten “lififers”. I was immediately envious of this because I knew there was nothing I could do to change my status as a nonlifer. There was no name for kids who joined in the sixth grade. After about a week, I realized that I was the only black student that was not a lififer, and I realized that I was still different from the black friends I had made.

Being a new kid meant being hypervisible since we were so rare. Many were curious about who I was, but I mistook this hypervisibility as good attention. One kid asked me, “so are you a part of the inner city program?” I asked him what that meant, and he responded, asking me, “do your parents pay full tuition or not?” I genuinely had no sense of money or how much money my family had, but I could tell from his tone that I should answer yes. So I did.

After a few months, I was beginning to settle in, and I quickly became popular. I was so happy to have made so many friends, but so many friends meant so many hangouts, hangouts I realized I could not afford and everyone else could. When I went to public school, hanging out over the weekend meant doing things for free like going to the beach or playing outside and

maybe pizza or ice cream as a treat. In the beginning, my mom would give me money she did not even have so that I could fit in and have fun with my friends. My dad never felt bad for not giving me his money that I did not earn, but my mom did, and I knew this. I had no idea of the strain it was putting on her, and the more I got, the more I wanted. I started lashing out at her for not giving me what I needed to fit in. My friends began to expect that I would always be able to hang out, and I never showed any sign that money was a problem. It was a life I had never seen, I was completely seduced by it, and I wanted in. After a while, the initial seduction of spending so much money started to wear off, and I began to feel guilty. I started lying about how busy I was to get out of this financial demand. My mom suggested a chore/allowance chart so that I could earn money to do the things I wanted. I was surrounded by friends who had trust funds, a savings account, and a checking account with shiny and metallic blue Chase Bank debit cards. I had none of these things, so when I saw the ten dollar bill thumbtacked to the Friday square on the cork board, it became the first humiliating reminder that I had to work twice as hard for a fraction of what seemingly everyone around me was getting with ease.

Despite how I felt inside and what was going on at home, I was beginning to settle in and learn how to navigate this landscape. I had learned that no matter how different I still felt from everyone, for reasons that were still somewhat unclear, there was always a way to remind everyone that I was not that different. This was navigated through the way I dressed, spoke, and especially, my success in the classroom. I learned that people at this school really respected intelligence. That was the one thing that for a moment, actively combatted the respect people attributed to being wealthy. I was excelling in middle school, and after my peers heard me speak



in class, even the ones that asked me if I was a part of the inner city program, began to look at me with respect and as if we were finally similar.

Then high school started. I constantly was operating under the naive impression that things couldn't possibly get worse. I figured I had gotten to know my peers and that continuing high school with this same class could not possibly have any other obstacles that would make me feel out of place or different. I was obviously so wrong. There were suddenly so many events and dances that positioned those who were asked to these dances as hot. At first, I didn't really notice because I was just having so much fun getting ready with my friends and going with them to the dance. As each dance passed, I participated in the excitement with my friends wondering who was going to ask them and coaching them through text message conversations, about what to say to their crushes, an experience I knew nothing about. One by one, I watched my friends get asked and continue to get asked to these dances, realizing I was running out of friends to go with to the dance. I did not notice it at first, but going with friends was not really considered cool anymore.

The way it worked at my school was that if you were asked to a dance it made you look hot, and it made the guy who took you look attractive. Getting asked turned into signalling who should continue being asked, and it started to distinguish those who were not asking or getting asked as either being losers or being ugly. At this point, I still did notice that I was not getting asked and it had not really bothered me. But I was starting to notice and realize that there were far more obstacles to navigate than there were in middle school.

There were suddenly so many parties, but because drugs and alcohol were present, the students' parents only felt comfortable with a small number of people who were actually allowed to come. It was usually around forty people and in a class size that has a little over 100 students,

forty is just close enough to being half where it really feels like you are missing out on something if you don't go. This feeling is even greater if you were not invited. In my head, this was just another version of the school dances. These parties *for some* really became the place for a lot of sexual firsts as people in my class started hooking up with each other. I remember feeling relieved that I was invited to these parties, but I realized that I was again, the entertainer and not the pretty one. Everyone wanted me to come to the parties because I was a respectful guest who had fun dancing and laughing all night long, but it almost became established that I was not a person that would be asked to the dance or someone that had an exciting sexual first story to share when the weekend was over. I never was truly aware of this at the time, and it was most likely something I was trying not to address. I was just happy to be included in something that felt exclusive in the first place.

As sophomore year was coming to a close and as my class grew older, our tastes became more expensive and with that, everything else was more expensive. It really started to matter not just who was wealthy, but who could afford designer clothes that *showed* who was wealthy. I could not keep up with this at all. It felt like all of my friends and everyone in my class were getting into relationships and having so many first time experiences. I started to wonder what was wrong with me. Everyone in my family always told me how beautiful I was and yet, if I was never looked at in this way at school, were they just saying that because they are my family? At this point, I realized something must be wrong. I scrutinized and fixated over my every flaw trying to figure out what I could do to make myself look hot and be wanted. Operating from a place of denial, I started to map out in my mind what the girls who were getting attention had that I did not. I listed everything from how much money they had, their travels, the clothes they

wore, the cars they drove, their voices, the way they spoke, even their height, and their body types, but I never allowed myself to address the one thing that they always had that I could never get which was their whiteness. It was such a particular feeling of actively ignoring this twinge of pain I have always felt and that I continued to feel, especially as the girls around me tanned so much that they were 'almost as black as me' while I simultaneously was being told by the boys in my class that 'I was fun to talk to and everything, but maybe if I stayed inside more over the summer, guys would actually find me attractive'. The sad part was this guy was not even trying to be mean, it was the sincerity in his voice that hurt and disturbed me in a way I could not describe.

I am not sure if it was a subconscious decision, or if it was a coincidence that I just happened to be in a weird mental place, but I actually did spend the majority of my time indoors that summer going into my junior year. I spent a lot of my time that summer working on what I thought would make me beautiful. I became vegan, I exercised a lot, and I figured how to wear my hair in a bunch of different styles that was not just a bun. I watched my mom get ready for work a lot too, and I was always envious of the ways she complained about her hair as she was doing it. I watched her stress while the brush easily glided through her long black hair, and I listened to her worry about her frizz while the straightener quickly smoothed over her already straight hair. But I loved when she came to school events or when my friends would meet her because I was hoping that when they saw just how beautiful she is they would begin to think that I am just as beautiful as her too. I began to have hope for junior year. I had realized that no matter where my mom went she was always complimented for her beauty. My friends always talked about it, the other moms would tell me how beautiful she is, and even some of the guys in

my class mentioned it. The more she came around, the more interested people seemed in asking me questions in relation to her. They all wanted to know how she was Filipino and British at the same time. For some reason, this really confused them, but they would ask questions like, “if your mom is Filipino and British, does that make you, like, a quarter Asian?” Questions like this would excite me because I had not really talked or thought that much about being Asian at school, ever since I joined in the sixth grade and was known as “the new black girl”. I would always correct them and explain that because my mom is full Filipino it actually makes me half Filipino. My response always resulted in the same reaction. They would look slightly surprised and then either say something about how cool that is or say something about how they definitely saw that I was mixed with something else that they could not figure out. I had come to the realization that I would never have the type of beauty that I was surrounded by, the beauty and comfort of whiteness that allowed for these girls to always have their pick of dates to bring to these dances. But I *could* have the type of beauty that my mom has that everyone in my class seemed to recognize and maybe that would be enough to get people to change their minds about me. I had no idea what kind of turmoil this mentality would put me in.

When junior year came around, I really tried to throw myself into claiming my Asianess. The problem was that I didn't know how. I tried to learn how to speak Tagalog, and I encouraged my mom to cook more Filipino food even though my dad doesn't really like it. I really started hanging out more with my best friend Marisa, who was a “lifer” and was half Japanese and white. She was the only half Asian friend I had and I felt relieved to be able to talk to someone mixed about how I was feeling at school. I tried to figure out how she navigated her feelings about this, but I quickly realized that her journey was completely different than mine. We were

both internalizing different struggles. While I was struggling to be seen as Asian when I was usually perceived as black, she was struggling to be seen as white when she was usually perceived as full Japanese. At the time, I was completely envious of her and I found myself growing resentful. I spent my whole upbringing surrounded by whiteness and while I never wanted to be white, I hated the markedness about my blackness that followed me everywhere. At this point in high school, people suddenly thought being Asian was cool and attractive. It highlighted an option for me that I never saw before and I looked to Asianess as a way to balance this marked feeling. Here, Marisa was telling me that what I was struggling to be seen as, she was ashamed of, and what made me feel so insecure and pushed me to Asianness in the first place, was what she wanted to be fully. As I saw it, she just didn't know how good she had it, but I realize now, that neither of us knew the extent to which our minds and ways of perceiving ourselves were far beyond our control. We were unable to see the historical roots and power of whiteness that was coursing through the minds of our peers and ourselves. **It wasn't that I was ugly, it's that I wasn't white.**

For this project, I allowed for my ethnographic material to completely guide the direction and the flow of this paper. Through the lens of mixed Asian subjectivity, I explore the interlocutors process of identity making in the first chapter, their understanding of desirability and their own desirability in the second chapter, and the navigation of their sense of desirability through the intimate landscape. This project does not serve to make a claim about all mixed Asian subjectivity, but rather it serves to focus on the exploration of five mixed Asian interlocutors as they guide us through their ongoing process of negotiating their ways of perceiving themselves with the ways they are perceived.

## **Chapter One**

## **The shadow casted in middle school**

In total, I have interviewed five interlocutors all of whom are mixed Asian Americans and have distinctly different lived experiences within the spectrum of Asianess. While the differences amongst all of them are what makes their experiences unique and individual, it is the process of exploring the similarities and bridging the gap of difference that I am interested in. There are three chapter concepts that emerged from the first set of interviews that I will follow up with three points of analysis respectively. The first being the moment of realizing that one is Asian or othered in the eyes of their peers, and I will be analyzing the role of W. E. B. Du Bois's shadow moment and double consciousness. The second concept will be the splitting off of experience for the women interlocutors with their Asianess through the analysis of gender, beauty, and physical appearance. The third concept continues with the women interlocutors and explores the effects of their intimate encounters on their sense of desirability.

“How would you describe yourself and how have others described you?”

I asked all of my interlocutors this question because it gets them to describe their personality, but it can also turn into questions about how they self-identify, which ultimately led to more insight on their past experiences. I received a range of responses, but ethnographic material from four interlocutors were all strung together through similar responses regarding experiences in middle school amongst their peers. The answers from the interlocutors are in the respective order in which I asked them, so first “how would you describe yourself?”, and then “how have others described you?” I find it important to note that all of the interlocutors' long

responses to the question “how have others described you?” are all one answer. I did not piece together additional quotations from other parts of their respective interviews.

*Liam is 21 years old, and he was born in Harlem, New York but grew up in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. He is half Taiwanese on his father's side and half Japanese on his mother's side. He is an only child, and spends most of his time skateboarding and hanging out with his friends. Liam is one of my closest friends and he is also a fellow anthropology major. He is extremely patient and respectful which makes for an excellent teacher. Liam often wears Nike AF1 or Nike SB Blazers Zoom in black. He wears a thick silver band on the middle finger of his right hand and he can never be seen without his black Element skateboard backpack.*

“I feel like I'm a pretty mellow person. I don't know, I've always identified as Asian American. That was a thing I had to understand at a young age. Although there are definitely some parts of me that wish that I had a closer connection, I guess, to my Japanese side. Because like I said, it definitely is really weird that even though both of my parents are Asian and they can both speak Japanese and stuff, it's like I don't. In my house they mainly spoke English to me, even my Mom. So I grew up in a very Americanized environment I'd say.” [00:28:16]

“It depends on when I guess. In general, people have said I am very easy going or I don't get angry a lot. As far as, like, race or whatever, it's weird like, I guess I am going to have to go into this, but like I told you I went to Poly Prep. which is a predominantly white middle school. During that period, it was one of the most pervasive experiences of racism that I experienced. Kids were like fuckin' assholes. So, I would get called names. And in sixth grade, they would hit me with all the jokes. Especially at the time when casual racism was just so blatantly accepted in popular culture and YouTube. I heard a lot of that when I was in middle school, especially being one of the only Asian kids in my school, not even just in my grade, but in the *school*. Even all of the other kids in that school who were Asian, they were all half Asian and half white, and they made that distinction. Well I guess it depends, it was really complicated. From the *white* kids, they didn't make a distinction. Sometimes, it depended on if the kid [half Asian and half white] was more popular or whatever. But from the half Asian kids, I feel like *they* would make their own distinction, I noticed. I was kind of friends with this kid who was half white, half Korean, but I could tell he had some sort of internalized self-hatred that he projected onto *me*, and that in



turn kind of fucked up *my* identity growing up in middle school. He would go out of his way to call me out on Asian things or say shit like ‘you’re so Asian’, and I would be like ‘what the fuck? You’re Asian too’, but technically he was *less* Asian than me, even by virtue of appearance. I can’t help but think, we were in middle school, and middle school is a weird time, figuring yourself out, but growing up in a toxic environment where you are one of the few students of color and not to mention there is racism from white kids and you’re that minority, that definitely makes you feel a type of way. Eventually, I left Poly Prep., and I was really glad that I did. That environment, there were just so many elements of classism and racism, and it was cool going back to a public school which was Brooklyn Tech. I would say at the time, I don’t really wanna say culture shock, but all of a sudden I went from being one of the only Asian kids in my school to being like the majority of Asian kids in my school. Brooklyn Tech along with all of the specialized high schools in New York are majority Asian for the most part. I think Brooklyn tech is about 60 percent. The two student bodies are very different and I made very different friends, but that helped me a lot with my own identity, to sort of cope with being Asian in a white society. It’s really weird, you’re one of the first people I’ve really talked to about this shit which is cool, but I definitely felt better as far as being more comfortable with myself. I didn’t feel this weird distance or wanting to assimilate or whatever. That pressure just wasn’t there and I made a lot more friends at Tech. I’m really glad because that’s one of the best things I could have done for myself. I feel like if I had stayed at Poly Prep, I would have just had such a narrow world view. I don’t think anybody ever truly resolves their own identity at any point, but I think I was moving in a better direction since I went to Tech. It’s weird, I didn’t really talk to my parents about the racism thing. It’s not a big deal *now*, but I think I was scared? Or in some weird state of denial or something? Because I remember once in the sixth grade, my dad saw a facebook message sent to me from one of the first kids I met at Poly and we were actually friends. He just became like a total dickhead when he was around other people. He was white, like Russian or something. He would casually call me ‘chinky’ and stuff like that. It was fucked and my dad saw a message from him that said ‘hey chinky’ and my dad asked me ‘Liam, what is this?’ I forgot how I responded because I *just* remembered this, it’s really weird talking about it. But my dad was pretty upset to see that and I tried to play it off and say, ‘he’s just joking, he’s my friend’. I think

a part of me wasn't ready at the time to accept that this was happening to me. Again, I played it off like it wasn't a big deal, when deep down emotionally, I was definitely going through a lot."

[00:33:24]

-

*Jackson is 22 years old, and he was born somewhere in Manhattan, but split his time growing up on the Upper East Side as well as the Financial District. He is half Japanese on his mother's side and half German on his father's side. Jackson is the youngest of his siblings with one older brother who is 25 years old and one older sister who is 28 years old. Jackson is very independent and often keeps to himself unless he has close friends around who he is comfortable with. He spends most of his time watching films, skateboarding, and creating sculptures or paintings. He often wears his Tommy Hilfiger puffer jacket, one of his many Dime hoodies, a quartersnacks shirt, a dime beanie, and either Nike Dunks or Nike Air Max 97's. Jackson has long, shoulder-length black hair that is usually hiding under his hoodie or his beanie or both. Jackson and I are good friends, but I was surprised that he agreed to be a part of my Senior Project.*

"How would I describe myself? I guess I am kind and shy. I keep to myself. I help others. I help my friends, I'd do anything for my friends. I'm *sometimes* smart and I'm funny. I only identify with my Japanese side because I only have family in Japan. My dad was an only child so he had no family in Germany. So the only culture that I was exposed to when I was little was my Japanese side. I say Japanese American, but I also will say I am half German." [00:10:40}

"People would say I'm mysterious and a sick skater. I haven't thought about it much. In terms of just thinking about me in the past, in elementary school [PS6] I kinda realized I was one of the only Asian kids in my school, and I wasn't really friends with any of the other Asian kids because they weren't in my class. It was a public school on the Upper East Side. Of course I would always get, 'oh, you're probably really good at math' or 'were you born knowing how to use chopsticks?' Shit like that. But then in middle school [Wagner Middle School], shit got crazy. I just became friends with and was really cool with all of the Asian kids at my middle school. They were mostly full Chinese kids, and there was one Japanese kid I was friends with who was full, but not any half Asians. I didn't really know any half Asian people until high school. It's funny because in middle school I kinda realized all of the white people saw me as Asian and all of the Asian people saw me as white. They were all nice to me, but yeah, my

middle school had a huge fuckin' Asian population, probably like a third Asian. When I went from PS6 to Wagner, I wouldn't say I was any more or less comfortable, but it was interesting to me to meet other Asian kids. It was cool to see how different their life was from even my life. But it still was weird sometimes. They would be like to me 'oh okay white kid' and I'd be like 'uh, I guess', but it was all jokes. It wasn't like they were bullying me or anything. Stuff like that [racial bullying] never really affected me because I was just like 'yeah, whatever.' Like I've been called 'oriental' in the street and shit, but like I literally do not really care that much. I know myself. Like, being made fun of because I'm Japanese is not something I'm offended by. Anyway, I went to a pretty white high school, called LAB High School. I think in my high school there were only like three or four mixed Asian kids, but then there were a bunch of full Chinese kids. But I've always been chill with all the Asian kids at whatever school I went to and even the Chinese kids I went to school with. Even though we have a dark past, with Japan and China. Oh! This one time, I met this Asian kid at a basketball court, probably the first week of high school, and he started beefing with me because I was like, 'yeah I'm half Japanese' and he was like, 'I'm half *Chinese*' and he was like, 'I know what you're people did' and I was like 'woah, I'm just tryna play basketball bro.' He was kinda joking, but I just remember thinking that was so funny. ” [00:12:44]

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*Willow is 22 years old, and she was born in Cabin John, Maryland, but split her time growing up in Cabin John as well as Bethesda, Maryland. She is half Chinese on her father's side and she switches between saying half Jewish or half white on her mother's side. Willow has one older sister who is almost 25 years old. Willow is a very considerate and reflexive person. She is a very hardworking student and a very socially active and exuberant person. I admire her style a lot as it has evolved because within the last two years her style really demonstrates a full embrace and merge of her Chinese identity. At parties she often will wear a more modern version of a Chinese qipao or wear makeup that enhances her Asian features rather than subdue them. Lastly, I love being in class with her because we both like to take courses where we can potentially learn about ourselves.*

“Okay, this is the most difficult question for me because I never know how to describe myself. I think that my personality has both a bubblyness, but also can be more subdued, depending on my mood. Dude, this literally is like the hardest question because that's the things, I feel very split.

Like, I can be bubbly sometimes, but other times I can be really just like I don't wanna fucking do anything. I think I'm pretty social, up until I reach my point and then I need to be alone. When it comes down to how I see the world, and maybe this has to do with growing up with this mixed identity, nothing is stagnant to me. Nothing is definite. Like, there is always another side. Right now, I would identify as mixed. Half Chinese and half white, also Jewish, except that's kinda come and gone in waves. I definitely go back and forth between saying I'm Chinese and I'm mixed, but when I was younger I would say i'm half Chinese, but that always sounded weird to me because it felt very much like only half of me is something and the other half was...I don't know. I would kinda fight against it and be like, 'there's no two halves of me', like, 'I am a mix of bleh bleh bleh.' Definitely, there was a major switch between high school and when I got to Bard. I went to a super white school. All of the differences that were pointed out to me because of my Chineseness were painted in a negative light, and so I would really suppress it. I wore a shit ton of eyeliner. I never went like, full basic bitch because I *always* had something that was different. In high school even if I pulled up in something that was the norm, people pointed that shit out *so* much. They'd be like, 'oh, is that like a new top or something?' Stupid things like that. It was always a statement, if I did something out of the norm, out of the ordinary, and that *ordinary* was like, white. So, through the years at Bard, I definitely came into myself a little bit more. I reclaimed the Chinese side, but when I say come into myself, I really mean I stopped trying to be someone who I *thought* I was supposed to be. Instead of seeing those little differences in a negative light, I was like actually, these are kinda sick. I mean, when I was in high school, even the things that I loved to do, I remember being upset because I loved playing piano, but there came a certain time like, starting in middle school where people would be like, 'oh of course you play piano' and then I would not wanna do it because I was like, 'okay is this like some stupid stereotypical Chinese thing?' *Now*, it's gotten to a point where I'm like, I'm gonna get dragon tattoo even if it's fucking basic and like classic Asian girl with the dragon tattoo, but I don't give a shit because I want it. It's badass." [00:24:37]

"I feel like I ask all the time. Like, if I have to do an interview or something I always ask what are three words that you would use to describe me, but I have a perception of the way other

people see me. I don't know if it's true or not, but I feel like, oftentimes I'm seen as social, but both in the foreground and the background. I'm kind of just there, a little bit, and while I'm there I think I make myself known, but in a 'not the main character way'. The thing is, I'm always curious to know who sees the Asianess in me, but I don't think that people usually say anything. Either they know and it's obvious, or people will say 'I had no idea' like, 'I had no idea you were Chinese', but most people who said that were white. Actually, some Asian people have said that to me, but that to me, makes more sense. It was really surprising when I went to China because I was kinda expecting no one to realize that I was Chinese, but more people there recognized it. You know the stupidass question of like where are you from, like here [in the U.S.]? I would get the same question [in China], but it was so intentional. 'Where are you from?' and then I would say, 'America', and then they'd be like, 'are your parents from somewhere else?' or something, because then they would say, 'yeah, I can tell that you're Chinese', like they could tell that I had *something* going on. The funny thing is, when I was little going to sleepaway camp up until I was nine, I thought that I was white and that I was seen as white. I actually wrote this in my college application in my personal essay, I thought that it was a secret. So at camp when we would do those ice breakers like two truths and a lie or tell us something we don't know about you, I'd be like, 'I'm half Chinese!' And I really thought I was fooling people and people were like, 'no, like we know'. Yeah, so I didn't realize it until middle school when people started making jokes. It was about piano, and when I got placed in the regular math group instead of the advanced math group. Definitely, when I started driving, people were like, 'I'm not getting in the car with you'. That was both the Asian stereotype and the fact that I'm a girl. I remember being really frustrated in middle school and early high school because there was a switch later in high school when I was like, 'fuck all these people, I'm done with this and all these jokes'. Starting in middle school people *really* started making these jokes and going in on me. One kid call me a 'chink' on Instagram. I was defending someone in this whole fight over Instagram and he said to me, 'shut up, chink' over Instagram. Also, middle school was a shitty time because it was when people started cliquing up. Even though, I had a solid best friend group, and I wasn't a weirdo, I wasn't on the outside, but there was this weird switch to these five girls who cliqued up and then the people who were excluded were the other three girls who were just really shy and then me and

then the only black girl in our class. And that's when I started thinking am I different? Is there something different about me? Because I know I'm not a weirdo. I know I'm not awkward or something. It was pretty much always in the form of teasing or jokes, but in the eleventh grade when I really got to the point of being sick of these jokes, I sat my whole class down and was like, 'hey guys, this is really getting to me. I don't think you realize how much damage your words are causing. It really is hurtful, and I'm sick of it. Y'all have known me since I was six and somehow made the switch to act like I was so different, but also similar enough to you to make you feel comfortable enough to say these things to me.' I remember realizing at that moment that either they didn't care or they just didn't understand because I found out that my friends had a group chat, that I wasn't in where they all had nicknames for each other, that they would reference in the chat. For example, one of my friend's last name was Hackman so her nickname was Hacker, and everyone else's nickname has to do with their last name, but mine was China. Like they just called me China. It's that kind of thing where I wasn't able to articulate myself well enough to be like, 'yo, that was fucked up', so I kinda just laughed it off." [00:32:45]

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*Nicki is 21 years old, and she was born in Burbank, California but grew up in both Los Angeles, California as well as Pratto, Italy. She is a quarter Chinese and a quarter Swedish on her mother's side and half Italian on her father's side. She is fluent in Italian, and Italian films and pop culture were a huge part of her upbringing. She is the eldest of her four other siblings which consists of two younger brothers and two younger sisters. She has a very unique and eccentric style which often features bright, bold colors, and she wears a lot of fun accessories like rings, bracelets, necklaces, and brightly colored hair clips.*

“So my personality, I would say I am a pretty shy person. When I was younger and when I lived in Italy, I was really shy. When I came back to the states, I told myself that I wouldn't be shy anymore because there was no reason for me to be shy because English was my first language, and also, I had had enough of it, of not speaking and not making my presence known. In a school setting, I'm still pretty shy. Socially, with other people, I can be pretty outspoken and confident, but I'm pretty polite. I don't try to speak over people, and I make a conscious effort not to. Also, a work ethic is always in mind. Also, an idea that I'm not in a group. I am myself and independent, so like my actions must reflect who I am, and even though I have a friend group,

I'm not connected to them in that way. Like, I would move through the space as I normally would because not everyone moves through space in the same way, and I have that in mind. This is funny because I was actually filling out a form yesterday where I had to fill out what I am, and I was like, 'how do you even do it?' So, I guess I would say I am Chinese-Italian American? There's that whole thing where white bitches be like, 'I'm a quarter Swedish, I'm an eighth German, I'm a quarter duhduhduh, I'm part Russian, ya know?' And when I was younger, I would always be like, 'I'm Swedish Italian Chinese', I wouldn't even put American in there, which is so funny because I thought it was just implied, and also that wasn't what people were asking for? Now, I guess I should put Swedish in, but I haven't done it in so long. It is almost like my name. My name is Nicki [H-K]. I have my mom's last name as my middle name, and that's always how I've seen it. I'm Nicki, I'm American. [H], I'm Chinese. And [K], I'm Italian. Like those are my main parts, like those are the only things that people are really looking at. The dominant ones that I have struggled to come to terms with and struggled to understand more are Chinese and Italian and American is just there because we're here and it's so connected to how I've understood myself, so those would be the three that I identify with the most. These are the ones that I carry with me heavy." [1:06:42]

"Seeing me, I feel like people would be like, 'she might be white and some type of Asian ethnicity' I've had people ask me if I was Mexican before. I've also had people ask me if I was Native American, like random people, like taxi or Uber drivers. It depends on who's looking at me, but to generalize, most Asian people can tell. I actually met a girl in the summer, and this was the first time I ever met someone else who was a quarter Chinese and she looked a lot like how [O and U] looked [Nicki's siblings], in the way she had more white features, but I could tell that there was *something* there. But anyway, she asked me, 'are you part Asian? Or Chinese or anything?' and I was like, 'yeah, I'm a quarter Chinese' and she was like, 'oh, I'm a quarter Chinese too! I have *never* met anyone else that's a quarter Chinese' and I was like, 'me either, that's so crazy.' Especially during Covid, to randomly meet someone by chance and have a *masked* conversation because it was purely eye contact that this girl figured it out. Most other people though, and not just white people, I mean in general, can *not* tell. If you're mixed,

especially people or kids my age that I have met who are like, a quarter this, a quarter that, they will inquire in a different way because they already know. Like, when I'm at work, I have random men and adults be like, 'what are you?' Ya know, *that* question, which is so annoying at a certain point. I've heard people say that to my mom my entire life and I would always wonder, 'why do people say it like that?' But, anyway I know what they're pointing at so I'll but be like, 'Chinese.' Like, you know what part they're asking for, when they say that. But like I said before, there will also be the people that just assume by asking, 'are you Mexican? Are you Hispanic? Are you Native American? Are you Filipino?', and I'll just be like, 'haha, no.' But it's funny how when people ask that so targeted, it's like, they know that you're mixed, but it's more like, 'what is that mixed part in you? *That's* what I'm looking for.' But overall, the way I see myself has changed in the sense that *now* I have more of an understanding of myself and also the language to express how I feel or how I see myself. I feel like it's definitely taken years for me to understand how to articulate it and I'm *still* learning how to articulate it because it is a very complicated mix of so many things that need to be addressed. I think it's just a different attitude that our generation, specifically, carries which is understanding and being able to put into words what it is to be in the position that you are in and the circumstances in *your* culture and *your* family and what it is like in the world for *you*, particularly. There is a new language going on right now that we have, that our parents don't necessarily have because it is a new meaning given to new words or the same old words being re-understood. I'm lucky because languages in general have been a big part of my life, and my parents put a lot of emphasis on that whether it was Italian or learning Cantonese or just the value of understanding other languages, this was emplaced in me at a very young age. Also, from living in Los Angeles and wanting to learn Spanish, things like that, it has definitely motivated me in many ways to understand like, 'what do I need to know? What do I need to know about myself and other people? Where do I not have a say? Where do other people not have a say?' And I think that takes time. I don't even think my siblings, who are in Chinese school right now, are there yet. They have so many years ahead of them to figure it out, especially with the way my family raises kids." [1:11:15]

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Middle school has always appeared to me as an awkward, uncomfortable period of time which inevitably leads to feelings of isolation. I also think the uncomfortability of the experience of middle school is often taken for granted as simply just the inherent result of navigating one's pubescent stage of life; however, given the fact that all of my interlocutors mentioned middle school in their interviews, I would like to rethink middle school and locate it as a site of psycho-cultural American development. There is this moment, which Du Bois references as the shadow moment, and in *his* argument, it is a specific moment in which one realizes that they are black, that they are different, and that this difference is a problem.

I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing...in a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards...and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, — refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil (2).

This veil he speaks of is ever present and is what separates and prevents African Americans from being a part of the majority, white America, thus creating the shadow. In *this* ethnography, some interlocutors recalled moments in elementary school where they realized they were Asian, but the *shadow* moment, the interlocutors realizing that them being Asian is what made them different, was located by all of the interlocutors in *middle school*. The realization of the shadow and the ability to see through the veil is what leads to another Du Boisian concept known as double consciousness, and this is what my ethnographic material highlights. This double consciousness manifested itself in the material when the interlocutors all described themselves through the perceptions of others. It also emerged in their understanding of the formations and organizations of social groups that they were suddenly not a part of. Two ethnographic examples

that mirror each other in this manifestation of double consciousness in middle school are two specific quotations from Jackson and Liam's interviews.

I heard a lot of that [casual racism] when I was in middle school, especially being one of the only Asian kids in my school, not even just in my grade, but in the *school*. Even all of the other kids in that school who were Asian, they were all half Asian and half white, and they made that distinction. Well I guess it depends, it was really complicated. From the *white* kids, they didn't make a distinction. Sometimes, it depended on if the kid [half Asian and half white] was more popular or whatever. But from the half Asian kids, I feel like *they* would make their own distinction, I noticed (Liam).

What Liam describes here is a moment in Poly, his middle school, where the casual racism toward Asians infiltrated the way his white peers perceived and treated other Asian students at the school. This infiltration created a distinction between the white students and the Asian students as well as a distinction between those who were Asian and those who were half Asian. However, Liam recalls that oftentimes, the white students would *not* make a distinction between the Asian and the half Asian kids unless the half Asian kids were also half white *and* popular or already socially accepted. Right after this statement, Liam goes on to explain that one of the popular, socially accepted half white and half Korean students had internalized this racism toward Asians and projected it onto Liam. Liam remembers being confused about being bullied for being Asian by a fellow Asian peer, but wondered if it had anything to do with the fact that Liam was technically more Asian and also visibly appeared to be more Asian. He points to this ongoing interaction as the experience that hurt and confused his process of navigating his Asian identity and the way it was perceived the most. Liam seemed to have empathy not only for himself, but also for the Hapa [mixed Asian] who was bullying him. He seems to slightly forgive or at least understand his bullier by attributing it to the fact that middle school is a weird time because one is starting to figure out who they are in addition to the added pressure of enduring

racism from your white peers as one of the few Asian students at the school. He refers to his experience in middle school at Poly Prep as a 'toxic environment'. After this part in the interview, Liam explained the relief he felt when he transferred to a high school called Brooklyn Tech, where the majority of the student body was Asian. He compared the two student bodies, saying that they were very different and he was able to make many friends which helped him to understand his own identity as well as "...cope with being Asian in a white society."

Moving on to a specific quotation from Jackson's interview, that mirrors Liam's quotation, Jackson said, "it's funny because in middle school I kinda realized all of the white people saw me as Asian and all of the Asian people saw me as white." The similarities that I am connecting from both Jackson and Liam's statements are the distinctions, they became aware of, between themselves and other social groups. In Liam's example, it was his middle school self realizing that there was a distinction between the half Asian kids, the Asian kids, and the white kids. For Jackson, it was realizing that there was a group called 'the white kids', a group called the 'Asian kids', and realizing that he was not perceived as a part of either group. This nature of middle school being a time where distinct social groups are formed and reconfigured in addition to embodying, understanding, and subscribing to the parameters of what allows entry into *which* groups is a natural process of encountering a shadow moment in middle school. The difference between understanding *what* the parameters are for entry versus understanding *why* the parameters exist and *why* one does not fall within these parameters is the difference between experiencing a shadow moment and gaining the ability to see through the veil, i.e., double consciousness.

Like I pointed out from Liam's interview, because these differences became very visible during the restructuring process in middle school, racial teasing and bullying also became a consistent problem amongst the other interlocutors, and through this racial bullying, the emphasis was drilled into the interlocutors that they were different from their white peers because they were Asian, and this difference was pointed out as bad. Much like Liam, Willow explained to me that she also attended a PWI [predominantly white institution] that was a K-12, and while she was there "...all of the differences that were pointed out to [her] because of [her] Chineseness were painted in a negative light..." which, as she explained to me, caused her to suppress her Asianess, and stalled her acceptance and reclamation of her Chinese identity until late high school, but more so, until Bard. She explained the hypervisibility of her actions and her appearance saying, "it was always a statement, if I did something out of the norm, out of the ordinary, and that *ordinary* was like, white". Similar to Jackson and Liam, she cited middle school as a big and confusing time for her, struggling to understand why she was suddenly being treated differently and bullied for being Asian, by her peers that she grew up with. She explains not liking middle school because of the new cliques that started to form. She remembered that the only girls that were excluded from these dominant cliques were the three girls who did not speak to anyone, herself, and the only black girl in her class. At this moment in her interview she said, "...and that's when I started thinking am I different? Is there something different about me?"

In conversation with my earlier point about social parameters, at this point in middle school, she was able to understand and ascribe to the parameters, but unlike Jackson and Liam, she was *not* able to understand why the parameters existed and why she did not fall within the parameters that allowed for her entry into these dominant cliques. Because of this and because

her ability to accept and navigate her Chinese identity was stalled until her later high school years, middle school, like Jackson and Liam,, was a time where she experienced the realization of the shadow, but *unlike* Jackson and Liam,, it was *not* the moment when she gained the ability to see through the veil and really understand *why* she was not accepted or allowed into these dominant social groups. Throughout middle school, she continued to endure the racial teasing and bullying, getting made fun of because she was not in the advanced math group, being called racial slurs over Instagram, and then it turned into trying to suppress what was pointed out as Asian and bad. She did many things as an attempt to hide her Chineseness, fit in, and put as much distance between her and Asian stereotypes as much as possible. She quit playing the piano because she was teased for it, she started wearing a lot of eyeliner to obscure the shape of her eyes, and tried to dress like the other girls at her school, but there was always something that she missed that was pointed out to her. Willow explained that even when she started driving, the Asian stereotypes followed her. People made spectacles out of her driving, and refused to get in the car with her. She knew that this was both the stereotype of being Asian and a woman. Eventually in her junior year, at the start of her ability to see through the veil, she sat down her entire class and explained that she was fed up with the racial bullying she had endured over the past twelve years. She said, “y’all have known me since I was six and somehow made the switch to act like I was so different, but also similar enough to you to make you feel comfortable enough to say these things to me. I remember realizing at that moment that either they didn’t care or they just didn’t understand”. She explained that at this point she realized it was not anything she did, and it was not something that was wrong with her. Her peers bullying her out of the blue, starting in middle school, was something that she realized was entirely out of her control in terms of

trying to change their perceptions of her. She noted that this was the point in time where she started to stick up for herself and this was the start of her journey toward reclaiming and accepting her Chinese identity. This moment is also a description of her ability to finally see through the veil; however, she told me the majority of the work toward accepting herself was done at Bard.

Through the years at Bard, I definitely came into myself a little bit more. I reclaimed the Chinese side, but when I say come into myself, I really mean I stopped trying to be someone who I *thought* I was supposed to be. Instead of seeing those little differences in a negative light, I was like actually, these are kinda sick.

While this quotation can be easily overlooked, I find it very important to hone in on the part where she says, "...I stopped trying to be who I *thought* I was supposed to be . . . ." Who Willow thought she was supposed to be was the many white girls she grew up with, who dominated the social groups and decided who was too different to be allowed in their spaces. Who she thought she was supposed to be was the world that existed on the other side of the veil. After the many years of racial bullying, which made her only able to see herself through the veil, Willow was finally able to balance this view of herself from outside the veil while still accepting and embracing the side of the veil she was on. Of course it is important to note that if one chooses to grapple with navigating one's mixed racial identity, it does not end in middle school or even high school. I must stress that it is an ongoing process of learning and unlearning while constantly resituating oneself as time moves forward and as more hegemonic strategies of control continue to dominate cultural and multicultural productions.

## **Chapter Two: Mixed Up Desirability**

## **Holding my mother as the blueprint for the beauty I hoped I would grow into**

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, my points of analysis for the rest of this project all emerged from the interlocutors in their initial interviews. I picked up on a pattern to trace for my second chapter that all three of the women interlocutors repeatedly addressed, and that is the concept of navigating one's desirability through a mixed Asian lens. Due to the subject matter of this second chapter, I decided to try a different approach in gathering my ethnographic material. Rather than conducting a structured interview with a set of predetermined questions, I took a chance on the rapport I had either built with the interlocutors and took the risk of recording a free form conversation. For this chapter, I aim to explore two points of analysis under the umbrella of mixed Asian desirability in this order: how the interlocutors' relationship with their mom informs their idea of beauty and how the interlocutors then searched for these established ideas of beauty in pop culture for further representation. These topics did not emerge from the interviews in chronological order, I chose to arrange them in the chronological order of their life as they each described it to me. For this chapter, I continued to gather ethnographic material from Nicki and Willow and I am introducing to you the fifth interlocutor that did not appear in the first chapter. Her name is Olive.

*Olive is 20 years old and she was born and raised in Sacramento, California. She moved a few times within Sacramento, changing schools each time where she experienced very different groups of friends and students. She is half black on her father's side and half Laotian on her mother's side. She has one younger brother who is 12 years old. Her maternal grandmother was very present in her life and helped her learn how to speak and read Lao fluently. While she feels very connected to both her African American and Laotian culture, she often feels globally disconnected from Laos because she has never met other Laotian people besides her family.*

*Me:* One thing I'd want to know in terms of growing up and perceiving yourself, what sort of things, if any, informed your sense of what was beautiful? [00:08:32]

This is a question I asked Olive following up on the heels of a conversation regarding her more current experiences in high school and at Bard navigating her desirability. I wanted to get a better sense of any past experiences that may have informed the present.

**Olive:** Yeah, I would say that I had, like, a mix between what was taught being beautiful in my house versus when I'm in public or like in school, you know, because obviously when you're little, you spend all your time in school. So I would say at home like, my Dad is pretty good, was pretty good, especially at teaching me, you know, that black is beautiful. Teaching me about important black female figures in our history and, you know, constantly embedded the idea that being a black is amazing. It's powerful. It's beautiful all the time. He had me reading things, you know what I mean? So I had that positive reinforcement from my Dad on a daily basis, yet I was still kind of almost like conflicted because the negative reinforcement I get from school and sometimes the negative reinforcement I get from my Mom's side of the family. Because like with my Mom she obviously, you know, she wasn't the one to be about that stuff, about black history. So she just let my dad do it. You know, she's my mom. You know, she took care of me in other ways. But sometimes it would still be this kind of this thing where my Grandma or my Mom would take care of my hair sometimes and they just would wish it was straight, like, they can't deal with it and stuff. Whereas my Dad, on the other hand, was very patient with me about it. Like, he never let me straighten my hair. He'd be like, 'don't straighten that girl's hair'. Like, he got so mad when my Aunt did it. ” [00:09:09]

**Olive:** So I guess like from my Mom it's not that she would never try to put me down, but there's that kind of inherent idea in her head that you know, it's almost like she would prefer that if my hair was straight or something sometimes or she would always say things like stay thin, if that makes sense? She would you know kind of point out things about my body that are maybe like thicker, fatter. And she would just be like, make sure you're working out or something like don't be eatin' too much or something. You know what I mean? It kind of all goes with the idea of being white and pretty because I mean, a lot of white girls that I grew up in that I've seen are skinny and have long straight hair. So, it's like my mom kind of reinforced that in some ways,



like she wouldn't directly do it. But like it's literally by some of her actions, by some of the things she would say that kind of put that idea in my head and then going to the schools that I did, didn't help at all. So I was always kind of conflicted like it took me, you know. Yeah. I don't know.

Yeah, I would say I would say I kind of had that kind of weird balance between what people are telling me that is beautiful. And I'm glad to have my dad help me with that. But sometimes that's not enough. That's not enough. When you get more negative reinforcement then you do positive. [00:12:30]

**Olive:** When I was younger, every time I'd be like, 'you know, my mom's like actually Asian', everyone would be super surprised and I usually didn't think anything of it. I'm just like, 'yeah, I look a little bit different from my mom, but, you know, when you're little, I'm like, I don't care that's my mommy'. But I feel like as I've gotten older, there would be times where I'd be like, 'I do wish I had some of my mom's features', like my mom's hair is like straighter and longer. And she has more fair skin, which are all like attributes of a lot of the white people I was surrounded by. So there would be times where I'm like, 'I think my mom is just super pretty and I wish...', you know, like, '...I wish I had looked more like her sometimes'. It took me time and more growing up to realize, no, I was fine the way I am. I have features of my mom. Maybe not all of them are physical, but a lot of them are also things like good personality, emotionally. But definitely it's interesting to see how when I'm younger, like super little between, like two to five, two to six, I didn't think anything of it and like the kids around me didn't really think anything of it like that. You know, that's your mom. But when you get a little bit older, people are like, you know, 'oh, you look nothing like your mom and you look more like your dad'. I'm like, 'ok, I know'. But then I get told that all the time and I'm almost like, 'ok, so is that a bad thing?' If I don't look more like my mom, but I know My mom's pretty. I'm like, 'so does that mean I'm not pretty'. [00:24:29]

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This next conversation is very long and very free form. To give a little bit more context.

Nicki is an interlocutor in this project, but she is also a good friend of mine. Throughout our

friendship we have always had very deep and personal conversations about our family, growing up, and ourselves in general. Ever since the first interview with her that I conducted for Chapter One, we have had even more conversations regarding this material that I had not thought to record in my field notebook at the time. The material that I have gathered from her for this chapter was a spontaneous decision on both of our parts to talk as we normally would but to record it just in case anything we spoke about could be usable material. We had both just spent the last three weeks at our respective homes with our families, and this conversation took place in my house, our first night back in Tivoli.

**Nicki:** I was thinking about how we were talking about moms, but anyway, one of the parts of it was when I was younger with the whole facial recognition and beauty standard vibes was my mom. People had always told me my mom was so beautiful and like whatever, like all the words for it and like she was, she *is*. I don't know what triggered it but there came a point where I had this thought and I was like, oh, there's another thing about why I am having all these issues with my facial recognition. It is because I also have ingrained in me this idea that being half and half is, like, more beautiful. Like, it was, like, a weird thing, where I was like, 'oh, but this is, like, kind of a thing'. This is like something that happens. Like I feel like people have this. Complex? I don't know what it is. It's just something that you wouldn't even know that I I had a standard like that. It was like blocking me. I feel like I've kind of like worked through it at this point, but when it happened to me, I was like, 'oh shit, that's really crazy'. Like in high school, I guess this happened, but like I didn't have any other, I guess, like Asian friends, I didn't really have that many in my immediate friend group. So the people I hung out with, I just didn't have anyone to really talk about it with. So it was just something I was like figuring out on my own. I think it was because a big discussion in my house, because I have so many siblings, was always like who got what parts from which parents and like how we're all like very different mixes of our parents. There's like [O] and [U] are the only ones that are like blond haired, blue eyed. But like me and [M] and like [P], you can really pick apart the pieces of like, oh, you have your dad's legs and

like mama's, like, skin color and texture or like the head shape kind of, for some of us. But, you know, there's like so many things. But yeah, that was a weird one. It's like one of the tiny bumps that come along where you're like, 'woah, woah, woah, step back. What was that?' Or like what is this all about? And it's crazy, too, because I just feel like I still haven't met enough people in my life to have multiple conversations with about this. [00:28:22]

*Me:* I guess I have a question. So I guess I'm wondering, like, if your standard of beauty measured up against how you viewed yourself when you were younger has changed looking at yourself now. If there were any changes from then to now, what does it look like now?  
[00:41:25]

**Nicki:** So like changes in my ideal of like what would be beautiful on me? Being like I would be most beautiful if I had this or if I looked like this? Ok, yeah. It definitely changed. I mean, kind of. Things with body dysmorphia are different. It takes a lot longer, I think that's like more general probably. But mine was like always very targeted to specific parts because I think it was how it was explained to me. Again, my mom would say, 'like well it's very much like your Asian genes you know, look at me. It's from from Morpha [grandpa]. We have like bigger calves. We have more curve in our leg.' And that is true. But it was so frustrating when I was younger and it was something that was always harder for me to grow out of because it was about how clothes would look on me and that's still what I see all the time. So that's like a different thing. But it does feel connected to what we're talking about. Like that never changed because those are just parts of me that are like clearly from my mom and not from anyone else in my family. But anyway back to the question. My ideal of beauty definitely changed, like when I was younger, I really just wanted to look white, but I didn't know that that's what it was. And I also didn't even recognize myself to be like, 'these are the things that are different'. But then, like later on, it changed again because it was like, 'ok, then I'm just going to copy the same styles as these girls'. And because you're in middle school, you start, like, going shopping for yourself and things like that. And I try to copy the styles, but then you realize they don't look right on you. You can't do the same hairstyles. And you can't do these haircuts and like the clothes are not going to fit on your body and they're going to fall off or like whatever. And then it changes again where it's like,

no, now it's just like very sexualized and like to be hot, like anyone can be hot if you do the blah, blah, blah. I mean, when I was younger, I had the big conflict but it shifted. What changed was me wanting to look white but not realizing it to realizing that like, no, I just wanted these white features because I had siblings that had those because once [U] was born, I remember I was so confused. I was like, 'what do you mean you're having a girl that has the big blue eyes but like the round Asian head with the cute blond long hair?' I was just so confused because I saw how everyone reacted to each of them being born. There was a very particular reaction from everyone when [U] was born. And I didn't understand at the time, but I was so confused and frustrated by it. Like I cried. I was crying about it once and my mom was like, 'what's wrong?' and I was like, 'it's just why, why don't I look like [U]? Why didn't I get blue eyes?' Haha. But anyway I was nine. No, ten because we're nine years apart or something like that. [00:45:49]

**Nicki:** Wait what were we talking about again? [00:45:58]

*Me:* Oh, um what your relationship to your ideal version of yourself was and how you were measuring up against it versus now. [00:47:37]

**Nicki:** Ok, so then it switched again to wanting, like, certain features. It was like, 'Ok, so I'm mixed fairly. Like something is a mesh.' But again, being so frustrated by it, because I realized or maybe it was an excuse I came up with, but I was like, it's because my siblings are all younger than me. I'm the oldest. I don't even know what I'm going to look like. I was like, 'what am I working towards?' And I was like, 'I don't look just like mama. Like I give up.' Like I can't think about it like that. And so I was always like, I just don't even know, like they get to look at me, I have no one to look at. [00:48:36]

**Nicki:** When I lived in Italy, it got to a point where I would really reject things. My parents and my friends would be like, 'you have your dad's walk', that was what I got a lot, which is like not even a really visible thing but anyway, like oh you got papa's jaw or something. And I'd be like, 'no like I got Mama's' like, no 'I got Mama's'. Like, 'no really, that's not true because she told me'. I don't know, I would just make it up. I would just be like, 'nope', denial. Because at that point it had already switched. At that point, when I moved to Italy, it like almost accelerated the whole

thing with like, rejecting the whiteness while still resenting it because I couldn't be there, but being like, 'well, the only way to be beautiful is if I look more Asian then', because I need to look more half and half. Knowing I don't even know what I would look like full Chinese. But my mom was someone visible who I was like genetically, biologically connected to so I can do that. So I was like, 'I want to do just that'. Don't tell me otherwise. Like, obviously I don't look like you. So I must look like her! [00:57:55]

*Me:* Yeah, it's definitely weird. I just can't stop tracing it back to what is the standard for who. You know, it's just weird that no one can ever see what they actually have and be satisfied from the start. It's like everyone is always looking at something else. [01:21:48]

**Nicki:** Well, going off of that and going back to what we were originally talking about of like beauty standards and stuff, and this works in so many different ways and it's not just this, but it's like so connected, but anyway, it's interesting that like we are a product of our moms. Like my mom more than my dad. I mean, like it's both of them in a different way. I mean for me it's like again the visual vibe. It's like we visually look more similar. Like we both have a curvy body, boobs, whatever. And we are being perceived in a similar way, I guess. But my dad did have a part of it being like, 'you have this of your mom', and like, 'you're so beautiful', or like, 'you're face'. Or something. I don't know, like, 'your toes', 'feet'. I have no idea honestly. What do they comment on? 'Your ears'. But with my mom it was like so much more of her ideas of beauty being communicated to me. And like not even targeted at me, but maybe like indirectly we are discussing it. And also like the way that she has chosen to like, you know, like eat a certain amount, dress a certain way, or whatever. Like, in my memory, once she had me, my mom never dressed the way any of the other ladies dressed. My mom wore long skirts and like tiny shirts. Tank tops. I don't know. And then she was like breastfeeding. So it was like always a skirt. Like my mom never wore pants. I remember moms in their suits or like little sundresses. Just ridiculous stuff like high heels. High heels was a big one. I was like, 'Mom, why don't you wear high heels?', she's like, 'why would I wear those? I can't even walk in those. Like, I'm going to wear my converse.' But another big thing with this definitely was that my mom used to be a model. So the comments that people would give to my mom was also a big one. Like people

would be like, 'oh, you're so exotic'. And then my parents would say that to me. Because for them that is what the compliment is. It's changed since then, but like, parents at my school, when I would be waiting for my mom to pick me up would be like, 'oh your mom is so beautiful, she's so exotic. Such a beautiful mix'. I'd be like, 'ok, so those are the things that make her beautiful'.  
[01:24:40]

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The past two conversations explored the relationship between the interlocutors and their Asian mothers. Unlike Nicki and Olive, Willow's mother is white and the relationship to her Asianess stems from her father's side of the family. While there were still aspects of beauty and desirability that were informed by Willow's relationship with her mother, it was certainly a different process of identification and disidentification that Willow had to and continues to navigate. The word disidentification has been used in many contexts, mainly in queer theory and in psychology. Where queer theorists Judith Butler and José Esteban Muñoz define disidentification as the process of exploring your identity by locating and defining yourself within and against public discourses of identity politics, I aim to use disidentification in a slightly different way. In the context of this section, disidentification is used to explain the parts of the interlocutor's identity that split off from their moms in struggling to understand that there is an aspect of their moms that they can not identify with. In the case of understanding physical beauty, an aspect that they can not identify with would be a physical feature that they had to realize their moms have and they do not. Disidentification is also meant to explore the tension between what is learned and internalized from their mothers and what is left behind.

*Me*: Yeah. I mean, one thing that I've been thinking and talking about, that I would imagine is so different for you, is growing up and navigating visual appearance and desirability through our

Asian moms. It's like, I wonder how that played into you when obviously the Asian aspect is not coming from your mom. It's coming from your dad. [00:28:33]

**Willow:** Yeah, well, I mean, I think the thing with my dad is honestly like for a minute, especially when I was like really coming into and like celebrating the fact that I was Chinese, I felt more in touch with it than I thought that my dad did. And that was obviously a mistake because we didn't talk about it very much until I started like celebrating it, but mostly because the way that my dad was raised was to be white and to like assimilate and be truly, quote on quote, American in terms of like American white standards. I think that is also the generational difference with my dad growing up especially when I guess society now is more like, 'Ok, it's ok to not be white', you know, kind of like what we're talking about, of like the beauty standards changing and it being less so on assimilation and more so on, like cultural celebration, that my family started talking about it more, but I definitely felt more alone in that I was kind of, I was more so mimicking the things that I saw online and in movies than I was with my dad. And I would look to him for learning how to cook. And he would bring me over when he was cooking dinner and be like, hey, I learned the way I learned how to cook Chinese food as I just stood and watched my mom. So you're going to come and stand here and watch me. And so stuff like that. But. [00:30:31]

*Me:* Totally. So when you were coming into beauty and trying to figure out what that meant, did you look to your mom at all then? Do you remember having any experience of being like, 'oh, like I like these things from my mom that I either see or don't see or want to play up or don't want to play up or like whatever'. [00:31:09]

**Willow:** Yeah, no, definitely. I mean, ok, well the other thing is I don't look a lot like my mom. So it definitely was like trying to, not necessarily look like her, but I mean, I would always like steal her shoes and stuff. I definitely catered my style more towards what she was wearing. Especially considering what was around me and especially during the time when my friends and I dressed more like, granola. And like my mom has super curly hair. I remember that one of the first big presents I asked for my birthday was a hair curler. But also I think stylistically, I don't know if it was ever like an intentional 'I'm trying to look like my mom', but definitely it was an

intentional 'I'm trying to look like who I thought were the cool girls at the time', which were like the super basic white girls shopping at like American Apparel and Abercrombie and Fitch and stuff. So I think my model stylistically was like the white girls around me. Like honestly, I hate to say it, but it still is, you know? Like I still have that kind of moment where I look at the white girls online, who are dressing like the Y2K, like that aesthetic. But I'm like, why? Like, I can't. I can't. I just don't have the facilities, you know? Like, I can't do that. And that's been, well, that's *always* been frustrating to me. But also I think the other part is my mom always had a really weird style that I didn't think was mainstream enough. And so I was like, 'ok, my mom be dressing weird'. I love her shoes because they're kind of funky, but she has the weird style thing going on. She was more of an outcast, and I wanted to be like an 'IT girl'. And that did include being Asian because I also remember looking at Asian girls who dress super white. And I was like, 'that's wrong'. Like you're trying to be someone who you're not, but I also was trying to do that. [00:33:58]

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Just like the previous chapter, I had an idea for the chapter and asked questions pointing to my goal; however, the ethnographic material led me to explore what may be the origin of what I was inquiring about. Initially, this chapter was just going to be about the women interlocutors navigating their mixed Asian identity and their sense of desirability presumably in sexual contexts or hookups. During the process of transcribing all three interviews, I detected a pattern in the ethnographic material that I had overlooked which was the relationship between the interlocutors and their mothers. I think back to my own process of navigating my sense of desirability along with my racial identity and I realize now, I overlooked the negative feelings and experiences I had as merely the result of whiteness and its pervasiveness in pop culture. While both of those aspects definitely played a huge role in the navigation of myself, I seemed to have forgotten the role that my relationship with my mother played. While I looked to whiteness,



I also remember growing up and holding my mother as the blueprint for the beauty I hoped I would grow into, and that was what the ethnographic material reminded me.

Before pointing to the material, it is important to address disidentification which involves both identification and counter-identification: respectively, it is the process of identifying what you are and what you are not; whereas, disidentification is the dialectical tension between the two. Judith Butler asks, “What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?” (219) José Muñoz expands on this by explaining that, “...disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (31). Where both of these definitions of disidentification point to the internalized tensions of identifying and counter-identifying within the hegemonic structures of cultural productions, I argue that there are multiple tiers to apply this relationship of identification. I locate and contextualize the process of disidentification in many more spaces than just the broader context of dominant control over unstable conceptions of cultural groups. Through my own navigation of mixedness and the material I have gathered through the relationships I have developed with the interlocutors, it is important to address that a huge psychological obstacle to grapple with is the constant striving to embody certain features or cultural practices of an ethnic group, but realizing that these markers of identity are constantly shifting because the construct of what a ‘proper’ Asian or Filipino, in my case, is unstable and ever changing. Much like Judith Butler’s and José Esteban Muñoz’s contextualizations of performing gender and performing queerness, especially in the case of mixed Asians, Asianess is

something to be lived, expressed, performed, navigated internally and externally, and communicated to others. When I say dominant control, I am addressing the added layer of complexity at work when productions of Asian culture are created by the west in pop culture through various forms: corporate media, fashion magazines, famous movies, instagram posts, TikTok, etc. This also accounts for the added culture that is produced through the network of interactions and bombardments between people. While locating the process of disidentification in relationship to the hegemonic control over cultural production is important, I chose to focus on and locate the process in the family unit, but more specifically in the unit that pertains to the interlocutor and her mother. There is a quotation from Nicki's recorded conversation that perfectly establishes the foundation for this site and argument.

In my family it's just so interesting. I just went home. I spend most of my time with my mom and in that context, my relationship with my mom is almost like its own little culture. I say this because we interact very differently with each other than we do with the rest of the house and it might be because I'm the oldest? I don't know. A daughter? Who knows? But it is different than the rest of the culture that is shared in the house and that is what I'm connected to.

Rather than using culture to refer to her mixed Italian and Asian heritage, Nicki uses and locates culture in her family unit, but notes that there is a split with her and her mother. It is also important to note that her use of culture in this context is based on shared interactions between her and her mother and her and her family rather than a fixed, stable set of beliefs, norms and practices in the way that most people would define culture like saying Chinese culture. This is really important because when you think of mixedness as having a subtractive quality, in Nicki's case, the very notion of balancing Swedish, Italian, and Chinese 'culture' inherently destabilizes

the fixed facade of any one of those three ‘cultures’. In this context, I consider tiers and culture as levels of analysis that I will use interchangeably.

To continue using Nicki’s definition of culture, I have gathered from the ethnographic material that through growing up, the interlocutors have had to go through a multi-step process of first recognizing the different layers of cultures within their own family to later identify, disidentify, and counter-identify with. The first process is learning the markedness and mixed parts of your ethnic identity, this was addressed in Chapter One. In my case, growing up meant learning that I am not white and then learning that I am half black because my dad is full black and I am also half filipina because my mom is full filipina. What I will focus on later in this section are the internalizations that occurred after this first process. For me, the focus that I had on the concept of being full versus being half grew into a framework that would later inform my notions of beauty.

The next process is the formation of separate relationships or ‘cultures’ with your parents. For both myself and Olive, we began to form a culture with our fathers that were separate from the culture we were forming with our mothers. In the home, our roots to black culture were being reinforced by our dads while our roots to our respective Asian cultures were being reinforced by our moms. It is important to note that this notion of culture forming through our parents within the home is a subjectivity that is particular to mixedness. This is not about children who spend more quality time with one parent over another nor is it merely about parents who choose to teach their children different things. With mixed children, what is culturally being taught by one parent often conflicts with what is culturally being taught by another and this can often cause

internal confusion or conflict. In Olive's case, she explained that her dad raised her to be proud of her black heritage and natural hair, and disapproved of her straightening it. Whereas in the case of Olive's mom, she enjoyed straightening Olive's hair because it made her hair longer and resemble more of what is appreciated in Laotian culture.

The process that comes next is honing in on the culture that is formed and shared between the interlocutor and their mothers. I will be looking at the ways that the focus on *this* shared culture directly informs the process of identity making for the interlocutors specifically within the context of beauty and desirability. The next process for the interlocutors is recognizing, in relation to their mothers, which parts of themselves they identify with, counter-identify with, and/or disidentify with.

In order to contextualize and apply disidentification, I will point to specific sites where Nicki, Olive, and Willow went through the process of disidentification and what it meant to them in their process of individuating from their mothers and in their process of identity making. At the beginning of Nicki's material for this chapter, she begins by explaining that from an early age her 'issues with facial recognition and beauty standards' were always wrapped up in her perception of her own mom. When she says issues with facial recognition she is referring to her struggle with understanding which physical features on her face differed from her mother's, where those features came from, and growing into finding the beauty and comfortability in and with those features to eventually accept them. In addition to watching her mom get complimented for her beauty, she attributes the origin of these issues to a complex that she had developed about ideal forms of beauty. Because her mom is half Chinese and half Swedish, she

explains that her complex around beauty developed because, 'it was ingrained in her that being half and half is more beautiful' rather than her being a quarter Chinese.

In this material, Nicki also walks me through the different shifts of beauty standards that she experienced that led her to focus on her mother as a unit of measurement to define herself by. She explains that when she was a child she went through a period where she thought she wanted to look white but did not yet recognize which facial features of hers were different or non-white. Then she came to the realization that it was not that she wanted to look white, it was that she wanted white features because she has siblings that have white features like big, blue eyes, fair complexions, and blonde hair. She explained the frustration that she felt when she realized her four younger siblings would have access to looking at her as a frame of reference to understand what they could possibly look like when they get older, but that she 'had no one to look at'. Then it shifted again in middle school where she tried to copy the styles of the white girls she was surrounded by, but she later realized that the clothes and the styles she was trying to emulate never fit quite right.

Nicki describes a realization she came to when her family moved to Italy and the ways that her mom started to really inform her sense of beauty.

When I moved to Italy, it like almost accelerated the whole thing with like, rejecting the whiteness while still resenting it because I couldn't be there, but being like, 'well, the only way to be beautiful is if I look more Asian then', because I need to look more half and half. Knowing I don't even know what I would look like full Chinese. But my mom was someone visible who I was like genetically, biologically connected to so I can do that. So I was like, 'I want to do just that'. Don't tell me otherwise. Like, obviously I don't look like you. So I must look like her!

At this point in the conversation Nicki explained to me that she views herself as more of a product of her mom rather than of her dad because she is perceived in the same way that she grew up watching her mom be perceived. In Italy, she recalls that she would actively reject any comments or compliments that had anything to do with her features that were associated with her dad.

In addition to getting positive reinforcement from strangers, family, and friends that she looks like her mom, she also speaks about how her mom's ideas of beauty for herself were internalized by Nicki and indirectly communicated to her as well. She grew up thinking about how her mom always stood out from the other moms in the way that she looked, dressed, and how often she was complimented. Nicki recalled all of the moments of waiting to be picked up by her mom from school and hearing all of the compliments like 'how exotic her mom is', or 'what a beautiful mix she was', and she realized what these compliments meant to her. 'Ok, so those are the things that make her beautiful' (Nicki). Through this material, Nicki went through the process of ultimately, only wanting to identify her beauty with her mom's. She identified which parts of her came from her mom and was even satisfied with the parts of herself that she did not like, so long as her mom had those same parts. She also went through the process of disidentification from her mom's beauty when she wanted the more visible Asian features that her mom had from being half, but instead, had to contend with the fact that she doesn't have those features because she is a quarter Chinese. This is not to be confused with counter-identification which would be a rejection of certain features from her mom that Nicki has or even being aware of specific features her mom has that Nicki would not want.

Olive's material also revealed processes of identification and disidentification with her mother's beauty. She begins the conversation by explaining that her dad raised her with the intent to positively reinforce the ideas of seeing unquestionable beauty in her blackness, but that 'the negative reinforcement that she received from school, her mom, and her mom's side of the family made her feel conflicted'. Where her dad was very patient with her hair, she felt the negative reinforcement from her mom when her mom 'would do her hair and sometimes wish it were straight because she couldn't deal with it'. Olive emphasized that her mom never tried to put her down but that she felt her mom had ideas about Olive's beauty that were communicated through certain comments. Her mom's opinions about the thickness of Olive's hair or opinions about being thin were communicated through remarks like, 'your hair is so difficult' or 'make sure you're working out' or pointing out parts of Olive's body that were thicker. Although Olive loves her thick, curly hair it was the process of having to recognize, learn, and accept that her mom had a completely different hair texture than her that she often wanted Olive to have too that makes this a process of disidentification. It was also in the process of being made to realize by other people that she does not look like her mom in certain ways.

When I was younger, every time I'd be like, 'you know, my mom's like actually Asian', everyone would be super surprised and I usually didn't think anything of it. I'm just like, 'yeah, I look a little bit different from my mom, but, you know, when you're little, I'm like, I don't care that's my mommy'. But I feel like as I've gotten older, there would be times where I'd be like, 'I do wish I had some of my mom's features', like my mom's hair is like straighter and longer. And she has more fair skin, which are all like attributes of a lot of the white people I was surrounded by. So there would be times where I'm like, 'I think my mom is just super pretty and I wish...', you know, like, '...I wish I had looked more like her sometimes'. It took me time and more growing up to realize, no, I was fine the way I am. I have features of my mom.

Olive also disidentified from her mom's fair skin and her mom's overall appearance in 'sometimes wishing she looked more like her mom'. It took some growing up for Olive to accept

and be ok with only having some features from her mom. She explains that she identifies with other features both external and internal that her and her mom share like personality traits or their eyes. Similar to Nicki, there was no process of counter-identification present in Olive's material.

Willow's material was the only one that went through the process of counter-identification. This is present when Willow explains that she doesn't look that much like her mom and for those reasons was never really trying to either. Despite her saying this, she tells me that 'her mom has super curly hair' and then Willow shares that 'one of the first big presents she asked for when she was younger was a hair curler'. Especially because Willow was younger, this a moment where I wonder just how coincidental those two statements were. Is it possible that this could be an emergent process of disidentification in Willow attempting to make her hair curly and bouncy like her mom's despite her having long straight hair? She explains that there was a time when 'she definitely catered her style more towards what her mom was wearing', but she makes the clarification that she was more so intentionally trying to emulate the styles of the cool girls around. She explains that the style at that time was very 'granola' which happened to fit the category of how her mom dresses, but when the style of what was cool changed to brands like American Apparel and Abercrombie & Fitch, she explains that her, "...model stylistically was like the white girls around [her]. . . ." Although Willow's shift from her mom being the stylistic model to the cool white girls around her is enough to be looked at as a process of counter-identification, she explains it more clearly in what she says next.

But also I think the other part is my mom always had a really weird style that I didn't think was mainstream enough. And so I was like, 'ok, my mom be dressing weird'. I love her shoes because they're kind of funky, but she has the weird style thing going on. She was more of an outcast, and I wanted to be like an 'IT girl'. And that did include being Asian because I also remember



looking at Asian girls who dress super white. And I was like, 'that's wrong'. Like you're trying to be someone who you're not, but I also was trying to do that.

This is a moment where Willow clearly demonstrated a rejection of identifying with her mom's style and looking elsewhere as the new model for the desirability and style she wished to have.

### **Everyone is always looking at something else**

After examining the processes of identification between the interlocutors and their mothers and exploring how these processes informed their own senses of beauty and desirability, this section is meant to build on these experiences and locate a new site of examination. When I first introduced disidentification, I stated that it has often been used in the broader context of disidentifying with an ethnic nation, a nation state, the queer community, etc. I argue that there are different tiers to employ disidentification. The first tier that I located was within the family unit, but more specifically, within the tier that contains the interlocutor and her mother. The tier that I will be exploring in *this* section is the interlocutor's interaction with various forms of pop culture such as movies, anime, fashion, social media platforms, and the ways that these interactions inform the interlocutor's navigation of their mixed Asianess, their sense of self, and the tension that occurs when struggling to locate oneself in the everchanging standards that constitute Asian beauty in the western American gaze.

To better address this section as well as set up the foundation for understanding Chapter Three, I employ Michael Warner's use of the word publics. Before I apply his use of these words, it is important to develop a general understanding of what exactly a public is. It is a tool

to help organize and locate groups within the vast social landscape. Warner firsts creates a distinction between *the* public and *a* public. When I was explaining disidentification in a broad sense as in disidentifying from a country, a city, or a town, Warner would call these broad spaces *the* publics. Warner explains that the public can be as general as Judaism, The United States, or humanity, so long as the public addresses the people that are circumscribed in its category. He recognizes that when speaking about the public, there will of course be othered people that are not included in the public, but he stresses that, “...there must be as many publics as polities...” meaning those othered peoples are circumscribed and included in their *own* publics (49). He then establishes *a* public as a more specific group that is bounded by an event, a shared experience, or a shared visible and physical space. He offers a concert and a theatrical performance as examples of this. Finally, he introduces the main focus of his essay which is about the, “...third sense of public: the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation—like the public of this essay” (50). Warner argues that this third sense of public is one of the main agents in the development of modern culture. He argues that *all* of the publics were essential in the formation of modernity as well as essential actors in the social landscape and yet, they remain so obscure and difficult to explain. It is important to read the following ethnographic material through the lens of Warner’s definition of *a* public and the third sense of public, since the interlocutors engage with both of these publics in their conversations with me.

***Olive shares her opinions about how the media and social media has contributed to the hypersexualization of Asian women, and the ways that it has encouraged the appropriation and commodification of Asianess and Asian features. She explains how the depiction of only one type of Asian beauty has contributed to the obstacles in her navigation of her own beauty. Even in the increase of Blasian representation Olive talks about how even those depictions have continued to uphold a very specific and exclusive kind of beauty.***

*Me:* Thank you for sharing. Yeah, I know it's kind of fucked up and difficult trying to navigate so many different things. One thing I'm interested in, most of the interlocutor's I've interviewed for this subject have actually been Wasian. So I was really looking forward to interviewing you just to hear your take on this basically and just kind of an extension of what you just shared. So I was wondering, like, how the media has informed your ways of perceiving your beauty or yourself or the ways that other people perceive your beauty, if that factored in. [00:11:35]

**Olive:** I would say like I agree with this. I think definitely like in the media and stuff, they've like sexualized Asian women, a lot more or in a very different way, in terms of like the cat eye, fox eye thing. There was like that whole thing going around where like models we're doing that thing with their eyes, like spreading their edges of their eyes out to make it look more Asian, which is like crazy and not ok, honestly. So I think I would say sometimes I compare myself to other Asian women when it comes to what is in the media, but not like with my family because I would say the Lao women, the women in my family are not all like this type, the typical Asian type of body, which a lot of people would say is like super skinny, thin, you know, I don't think I'm like that. I'm a pretty small person, but like I have curvature. And I guess that's something I can get insecure about, because when I'm looking at other Asian women that are portrayed and like fantasized in the media, like, that's not what I look like. But then when I think about it, I always try to tell myself when I'm thinking in those situations, that that's not always like that. Just like I come from a family where our Asian features are not thin and skinny, like we have certain butts. We have thickness in different areas. And that's ok and literally, that just means not all Asian women are the same. They're fully not. Like when people are sometimes thinking of like, oh, the typical Asian women sometimes like Chinese or Vietnamese is coming to their mind. And they're thinking a lot of those women are pretty petite, like one of my best friends is Chinese and she's super duper small, super duper skinny. So, yeah, but I'm sure that's not how all Asian women look, but I guess. Yeah. [00:13:50]

*Me:* Yeah, I'm looking back at some notes from what other people have said and one of my interlocutors was saying that, like, she often looks at anime for more relatable representation, and I don't know what your experience is, but I know for me, I have not seen that much Blasian

representation in the media, let alone in anime, so I am wondering how you feel about this.

[00:15:03]

**Olive:** Yeah, I agree. I don't really watch anime either because I don't really look to that to see representation. I feel that way because there's just not that many Blasian people around. I never know where to go where it's that if I'm looking on Instagram or Snapchat or something to see like girls who are like me, especially ones that are mixed with, you know, with my ethnicity. So. Yeah. I agree, that there's just not that much representation like in the media. [00:16:55]

*Me:* And that's weird because it's like when there is [Blasian representation], like, it is such a specific type of Asian. Like we were talking about this last time, but my 'for you' page on Tik Tok has a lot of specific Blasians that seem to be getting boosted because they have a very specific look. At least on my page, they are always the type of Blasians that appear more visibly Asian. [00:17:03]

**Olive:** No, I think I literally agree with that. Because if I see a Blasian girl on tik Tok, she always looks like this. She's always usually, like, taller and skinnier. I know her hair is like loose. It's loose and it's longer. But it still kind of has that, like, volume and bounce, if you know what I mean. And it's always like you just super fluffy and everything. And then their eyes usually look more Asian. I mean, *I have seen some darker tones*, but yeah, a lot of the times they are usually much more light skinned, like, I don't know. I've seen the same type always too. Yeah. And they're all so gorgeous and so beautiful. But yeah, those are the ones I always see trending. [00:00:13]

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***Willow explores her ambivalence around cuteness versus hotness. She talks about the methods she uses to either accept or reject these terms, and explains the role that her Asianess plays in relation to these terms. She then walks us through how she navigates the ever changing beauty standards in relation to her physical body, and explains how Instagram is a part of the conversation.***

*Me*: Ok, this whole chapter also started because in the last interview, you were talking about this whole idea of cuteness and something about how that used to be a good thing. That's something I wanted to talk about, because there's something to be said about what these things mean growing up. [00:40:35]

**Willow**: Yeah. So I mean, the cuteness thing has like always been this thing where I'm either playing it up or trying so hard to run away from it. I mean I literally have an appointment this Friday to get a dragon tattoo on my shoulder. And I want it to be super menacing. But the other thing is like I want to kind of balance this feeling of like being super cute and like being perceived as being cute, which I do play into, but at the same time, I need to feel like there's that other part. Like, ok, I'm not so cute, you know, I'm like also trying to kind of harness the badassery of the dragon. Yeah. I don't know, Ok, can you say the question again in terms of like talking about us? Actually I think I got it. I mean, well, I think there's two sides. There's like the personality side of being cute and then the visual side of being cute. And for the visual side, I think it's something that's like intertwined with the stereotype of Asians being cute and submissive and petite, like, [00:43:01]

*Me*: Oh, you know what? I found it. I don't mean to cut you off, but really quick, I just wanna throw something in there. You at one point were like 'I became super aware of it'. 'Now, in my relationships with men I became super aware of Asian fetishization and how to actually embody it, reject it or play it up, I became really sensitive to being called cute'. My mom has always said stuff like, 'You've always been very cute, you're cute'. And I used to have a good reaction because I thought it was a good thing. But now, as I've heard it, I'm wondering if that's racial. It's frustrating. I want to be more than cute. Is my desirability coming from the cuteness of Asianess or something else. [00:43:49]

**Willow**: Yeah, yeah. I mean, *that*, I don't have an answer for. So that's the whole thing of being like, 'am I cute because I'm Asian or am I cute because I *do* have like a cute disposition'. There definitely are moments where I choose to be cute, you know, or not even choose, but it's just like what I do, especially if I'm interacting with a partner or like a hookup. I do like those gross little like kind of little kid type cute. And that's something that I think I really don't know where it

comes from. I don't know if it comes from me being actually kind of like a kid at heart or if the response that I've gotten to being cute is so positive that, like, that's how I know how to be desirable. That's how I know how to get on someone's good side almost or get people to like me. I don't know, because that's like half of it. That's like half of what I feel. But then the other half is like I want to be womanly type of beautiful, you know, or hot, you know, like I don't feel like I'm the hot girl. I feel like I'm the cute, pretty one, you know, or like that's like the response that I've gotten. And even if I take a nude or something and I'm like, 'this is hot girl. This is a baddie.', it still comes back to me asking, 'is this hot cute?' Just in the way that my body looks and being Asian, is this cute and hot or just straight up hot? Like the Megan Fox type hot. Because I also do think I sometimes have a resting bitch face and I'm like, this isn't even cute, you know? But then I open my mouth and I'm cute again. I also think I'm at this weird point in my life where I'm in my body dysmorphia hell right now where I am just like, 'there's no way that I can be cute *or* hot.' And so I look to like anime and these online representations of what I think is hot or sexy and try and recreate those things. It's almost being like, 'what are the ways that I can make myself look better?' And it usually is like, 'what are the anime characters looking like?'

[00:47:27]

*Me*: Yeah, this is a huge thing. When I was drafting the broad idea of the vibes of Chapter Two I was thinking about the splitting up of experience between the men and women interlocutors. And I've been looking at all the quotes about body-dismo because we have all been thinking and talking about growing up and how that works in terms of fitting into beauty standards and ideas of beauty and cuteness and physical appearance. Yeah, I mean, the body is definitely a huge part in this. Like which parts of me are contributing to some kind of like Frankensteinian ideal body because like some parts are working and some aren't. [00:48:55]

**Willow**: Yeah. Well that's the thing. It's very much like some parts are fine. Other parts, I mean especially when I gain weight and my waist isn't snatched. I'm like, 'I look like a rectangle' and my Chinese Aunt looks like a rectangle. You know, it's that shitty thing where it's like, 'ok, I look more Asian in that rectangleness, for some reason, or like being flat', but I don't even know. Like, I hate it. But that's also like I don't know if that's like an Asianness thing or like a body

dysmorphia thing. But that's a big thing that I put on myself, you know. Because I also have the time to do this. No one can tell that I've gained weight. But it's like the fixating on that one part of your body that I'm like, 'when I'm at my skinniest, my waist is snatched and like, I have the curves'. You can see my proportions more. And I don't know if you do this, but like I search high and low for a body that looks like mine. Like, Niko can tell you. I literally have asked so many times, like, 'is this what my body looks like?' 'What about this one?' Every time they're like, 'no', but sometimes I think it does. And I stare at it longer. I stare at my body longer and I'm like 'literally, what the fuck do I look like? And the thing is that I go between the two different types of Asian bodies and there's one that I don't want for myself. It's like I don't want to be a rectangle even though that is like one type of Asian body and it's still very petite. And on the other side, like what we were just talking about, there's the really tiny waist, big, broader hips, and then, like, titties. And that's where being mixed comes in for me because I am not going to fit either one. When I'm my skinniest, maybe I'll fit the lanky or tall one, but also, I'm 5'3. And I have my mom's hips because that's the thing, in my family, the body shape is like, 'ok take my Aunt for instance'. My aunt is tiny, tiny but has no curves. And so I don't want to be tiny, tiny with no curves, I want to be tiny, tiny with curves, you know, that kind of thing. And my mom has really big hips and has a big butt. And so like I've gotten sort of like half of that, like, my hips aren't huge, but they're not like straight down and it's that inbetween where if I put on even three pounds then I go more towards like the rectangle look and if I, you know, lose five pounds, then

*Me:* No, I totally get what you're saying. It's exhausting because like how long will I and can I keep this up? And also for me, the question has always been like once I get what I want, what will be the next thing that I will start fixating on and trying to play up? [00:54:57]

**Willow:** Yeah. No exactly. It's also then like once you get that type, it's like ok, well is this too Asian now? Do I look too Asian? Because at that point in my life, I'm like ok well I can only go after guys who like that body type, who like that look. Who have the Asian fetish. Who is going to like me for this. It also is in taking pictures. I never take pictures full front or full face now because I mean, like, I don't know, my face is like wider from the front. But once I turn the camera, I look slimmer. Because that's the Asian face that I want. But I actually do have the

round button nose, the like rounder face but kind of more square that I see on other Asians and I'm like that looks beautiful. And you see it on yourself and you're like hold up. That's really clicking. But this is one of the reasons why I feel like I'm all over the place and it's because my thoughts on it are all over the place, all the time. I go back and forth so much and I think that's just a part of both being Asian-American and being mixed Asian-American. That's the whole thing about your identity. It's not in one category. [00:57:22]

*Me:* Sorry! My wifi literally sucks! But, yeah. I definitely relate to that. It is so relieving to go on IG and think someone is beautiful because of these certain features and then realize that I have some of those features too, but at the same time, IG will always be darksided. [00:01:32]

**Willow:** No same. But, yeah, yeah, yeah. Like it does help with my confidence a little bit, but yeah, at the same time it's frustrating because I'm like, 'ok, well sometimes I look at these girls', but then I'm like, 'why the fuck is this girl doing Asian better than I am?' Right? Like, how is she doing it better than me? Like, I know that it isn't exactly something that you can do better than someone, but when whiteness comes into this conversation it's so annoying. A lot of the aesthetic now, is being white with this weird, racial ambiguity that white girls can kind of choose to turn on and off. That pisses me off. The last few years I have gotten a lot more, kind of like you said, growing up and not being ashamed or anything. But now Asianess has become kind of more in trend. I don't want to say trend because it's weird and like, commodified, but also, that is what is happening. Either way this switch of beauty standards makes me excited, but also kind of question it because I also get the feeling that someone is with you because they are being woke. Like, 'oh, I'm not going to be with a white girl because that's so old school, and it doesn't show anyone that I'm not racist.' And that's what I thought a lot about with the person who said that they were happy that I wasn't white. [00:04:32]

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**Nicki grew up splitting her time between Los Angeles, California and a small province bordering Pratto, Italy. While in Italy, she struggled with going through puberty, and making friends while also trying to become fluent in Italian and catch up to her peers. She built up a lot of anxiety around returning to the United States, and in this material, she**



**walks us through the ways she had to catch up to her peers when she returned. She explains how she tried to mimic what was considered fashionable, desirable, and sexy, but she quickly realized that her friends were also starting to hook up with people: an experience she couldn't quite figure out why she hadn't had yet.**

Nicki: In high school, I remember my mentality coming back to the states was so weird because I used to be really introverted and I still am in certain ways. In a classroom setting I'm really introverted, I would say. But when I came back to the States, I was like, there's no reason for me to be shy. Like my English is fine, like I've lived here before. Like I was just so traumatized from moving that I was like, 'you are going to live your best life', like, 'get it together'. And so I went into it and really tried to figure out what was going on. Like what's happening in L.A? Like I'm so out of it. And I immediately fell into this group of just these dudes and these like older girls for a little bit. And so, like, I just wanted to emulate them. So I was wearing stuff that was like all about the body. It was not my face again. It was like, I'm going to wear a really tiny crop, top tank top that is all cleavage and tight black skinny jeans. Like it was such a weird vibe. And I just like would wear that and like hope for some kind of validation, I guess, or like acknowledgment. We were talking about this like my friends were all guys. Like I didn't really hook up with anyone for a long time in high school until like my junior year with someone that was not even from my school, like just by chance. So I just, like, didn't have that kind of confidence of, like, thinking I was desirable. But then my guy friends would come to me and tell me, 'no, like they all think you're so hot, like they all think you're so hot. And I'd be like, 'but you're telling me this and we're friends so are you just saying this because nobody is showing up?' Like I don't feel that at all. Like I'm not stupid. Like I'm not seeing any of that. Like what are you talking about? So honestly I don't know, but like multiple of them would do this. And it was always like, weird. But then they would start hooking up with my friends, like my girlfriends that I had eventually made, like I had like a girl squad and a guy squad and then we became one squad. And like, even coming to a Bard, it was still an insecurity. But at the time, I was like, 'no, high school is just stupid and it's not going to go on like this forever'. Like, something's going to change. Either I'm going to get really hot all of a sudden or like I don't know what's going to happen but it always happens so I'll just wait. [00:34:59]

**Nicki:** Wait, I feel like I went on a tangent. Oh, we're talking about desirability. What I was saying in the last time we spoke about it from last semester was that like a big question was the fetish question. Because like some of the guys that were more flirty with me in my friend group, but like, again, nothing ever happened, they would always like feed into things that I was into, but also that, like are a fetish. So it was always the anime question and then comments like, 'you act just like an anime character' or like, 'you're literally an anime character'. 'That's so something an anime character would say'. 'The way you just did that was just like an anime character'. And in the beginning, I would take it as a compliment because I was like, 'oh, you know, we watch anime together'. Like, it's so fun that I get to talk to someone about it because I never had because it just wasn't as popular among girls. Like straight girls especially in high school or like when you're younger in an American context. But it is amongst guys, so like that was like something or whatever. So that's why I started taking it as a compliment at first, but then after a while, I think I might have even mentioned it to one of my friends. Like Samantha or something. And she was like, 'do you think that's like kind of weird?' And I was like, 'I don't know'! Like, 'wait what?' And then I was like, 'oh, my God, this sucks'! [00:37:05]

*Me:* Ugh. That's always the worst. Like, having these realizations. Were there any other shifts in your opinion about beauty and stuff? Or like thinking about specific features? [00:45:58]

**Nicki:** I'm trying to think I mean. Yeah, I mean, after the whole realization about my younger siblings getting to look at me and not knowing what I was going to look like as I grow up, it just kind of stays like that because, I mean, that's just also like where everything kind of moved. Even if you look at, like, Instagram filters and things like that, it's like a collage of all these different features and that's just what I continue to see. So like I guess more awareness and like learning to just accept what you look like inside, as you grow? I think it also depends on your relationships and like the state of being that you're in because it really just goes all over the place, all the time. It's not stable in any way, but I think like it remains, to a certain extent, that kind of thing where it's like, 'oh, if I could just change my nose.' Not even, like, maybe it becomes more of something like, 'I would want someone else's something'. Like identifying with certain features of I don't know what you want to call it, just like stereotypical facial

features maybe. Being like, ‘I would just change this and I would change that.’ Not to say like I know exactly what I would want, or what would make it better, just like I would change this to look better because I guess like plastic surgery is more popular now than ever, and it’s everywhere. [00:49:59]

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Out of this material, there are many publics that were presented by the interlocutors, but one of the main throughlines amongst the material was an engagement with a public of social media and the third sense of public created by the circulation, absorption, and internalization of internet and social media culture. I will now go through each interlocutor and locate which publics they were engaging with as well as its effects on the interlocutors. Through this material, I argue that the interlocutor’s sense of beauty is mediated through these two publics of the internet.

At the beginning of Olive’s material, she explains that representation of Asian beauty and its hypersexualization has affected the way she measures her own beauty. This hypersexualization and commodification of specific Asian beauty standards has opened up avenues for non-Asians to appropriate certain features. This is what Olive is talking about when she mentions the “cat-eye, fox-eye thing”. Olive explains that this ‘trend’ is very popular especially amongst models where they try to spread their eyes and make them look as slanted as possible. She explains that this increase in non-Asians commodifying and appropriating Asian features as well as the west’s hyperfocus on one type of Asian beauty has often led her to be insecure about her own Asian beauty. Olive describes this mass circulated type of Asian beauty as tall, petite, skinny, fair-skinned, and long, straight hair. When she finds herself trying to

measure her own beauty against what is circulated in the media, she tries to ground herself by thinking about the Lao women in her family and reminding herself that Asianess is not a monolith. This is apparent when she says, "... I come from a family where our Asian features are not thin and skinny....And that's ok and literally, that just means not all Asian women are the same." Because my other two interlocutors spoke so much about representation in Anime in their material, I was curious to know if she watched it as well. Olive explains to me that she does *not* watch anime, and would not watch it to see any representation for herself because she feels like there are not that many Blasian people. She explains that she is not sure where to look for any kind of Blasian representation let alone any representation that is specifically black and Laotian. In the last part of the material we discussed the Blasian representation we *have* seen on the app Tik Tok, and Olive explained that there was still a circulation of a very specific type of Blasian beauty. Olive described this type of Blasian beauty as similar to the Asian beauty standards that are circulated: longer hair with looser curls, tall, skinny, light-skinned, and eyes that visibly appear 'more Asian'.

For Willow, the conversation began around cuteness versus hotness. Growing up, she was always complimented for being cute and at first, she thought of it as positive feedback, but as Willow grew older, she started to feel as though her cuteness was boxing her in and not allowing her to be considered hot. Willow breaks down cuteness into two categories: "the personality side" and "the visual side". She describes the visual side as both dressing visibly cute and the concept of cuteness being intertwined with the stereotype of Asian women being small and submissive. Willow has struggled to understand and balance the parts of her that lean into being cute and the parts of her that want to subvert the cuteness by leaning into being hot. "The

cuteness thing has always been this thing where I'm either playing it up or trying so hard to run away from it.” She explains that most of this struggle is because her sense of desirability has been mediated through cuteness and because she has received so much positive feedback for appearing cute. She often wonders, ‘am I cute because I'm Asian or am I cute because I *do* have, like, a cute disposition’. This is why Willow decided to get a “super menacing” dragon tattoo because she wanted a visible piece of her that actively and consistently subverts the cute box that she has been put into. At this point in the material, Willow addresses the way that her body dysmorphia informs her interaction with the public of pop culture and the internet. Willow explains that her body dysmorphia often makes her feel as though she can not be cute *or* hot. In these moments she, “looks to anime and online representations of what [she] thinks is hot or sexy to try and recreate those things”. As she explained it to me, she engages with these publics to figure out how she can make herself look and/or feel better.

Willow explains that Instagram has been a place of both confidence and insecurity that interacts with her mixed Asian subjectivity, her body dysmorphia, and the western gaze and hypersexualization of Asian women. She explains that she looks at the Asian women in her family and her mom to pick out the parts that she likes and the parts that she would not like to have. After looking at the body type that her Chinese Aunt has, she compares it to the Asian body types that are circulating on Instagram and figures out where she falls on the spectrum.

I don't know if you do this, but like I search high and low for a body that looks like mine. I stare at my body longer and I'm like ‘literally, what the fuck do I look like? But that's also like, I don't know if that's like an Asianness thing or like a body dysmorphia thing. But that's a big thing that I put on myself, you know.

Willow came to the conclusion that there are two main types of Asian bodies that she sees in her life: the Asian body that runs in her family which is petite and rectangle like and the Asian body on Instagram that is tall, skinny, and curvy. She explains that it is the *former* Asian body type that she does not wish to have. Willow notes that when she gains weight she tends to have the former body type and when she loses weight she tends to have the latter body type, but she also recognizes that this toggling back and forth is unsustainable and is also a part of her being mixed.

This hyperfixation on which body types are circulated in the public of the internet is an embodied tension and reality that Willow lives everyday. She explores the inner dialogue that occurs even when she *does* achieve the body type that these publics consider desirable. She wonders how it might affect her desirability to those who she might hook up with. She wonders if achieving that desirable body type might make her look too Asian, consequently putting her in yet another box and limiting her chances of being perceived in the unstable category of universally desirable. She worries that if she looks too Asian, she will only be seen as desirable to those who like that specific look, but the worry is that those who will appreciate her look and her desirability will also have an Asian fetish which would be another obstacle to navigate.

She explains how she manipulates the camera to navigate these worries. She has figured out the methods to achieve the “Asian face” that she likes by changing the angles of the camera and avoiding pictures that are taken straight on to give the appearance of a slimmer face. In these moments, where she figures out what looks good on her and sees features that she has circulated in the public of the internet, she finally feels relief. Her thoughts on what is desirable and how she measures up to these standards are often changing and she attributes this process as, “...a part

of both being Asian-American and being mixed Asian-American. That's the whole thing about your identity. It's not in one category.”

Another factor that affects Willow’s process and is also at work in the public of social media, is the way that Asian features being desirable has been objectified and commodified as attainable by all. While Instagram has helped with Willow’s confidence, it also fuels her frustration and insecurity when whiteness engages with the discourse of Asian beauty and desirability. The third sense of the public of the internet has created avenues to not only allow Asianness in general to become an aesthetic, but it also has allowed for a new aesthetic to form which Willow cites as, “...being white with this weird, racial ambiguity that white girls can kind of choose to turn on and off.” She continues to question how the switch of beauty standards and the ways that Asianness has become a trend will affect her own subjectivity and experiences as she moves through life, especially in her engagement with white men.

Nicki’s ethnographic material really parts from Olive’s and Willow’s in the sense that the bulk of her material does not directly address the public of the internet. Instead, it addresses Warner’s third sense of the public of the internet in relation to the culture that is produced and circulated. To reiterate, within the context of the internet, the third sense of the public is referring to the interactions and effects that occur when content and posts are created and circulated in the realm of internet landscape. The public of the internet and its audience is circumscribed within the domains of the internet whereas the third sense of the public of the internet carries through into real life interactions amongst and between those who participate. Although the majority of Nicki’s material has a focus on style and clothing, I employ the lens of the third sense of the

public to make the claim that her focus was a byproduct of the culture that was being produced on the internet.

The material begins with Nicki explaining that her sixth grade education was interrupted and uprooted when she and her family moved to Italy. She was introverted and shy throughout her entire middle school experience in Italy for many factors. One of the main factors was the language barrier. When she arrived at her school, she was immediately immersed into a setting where no one spoke English, and she struggled to understand her classes and her peers at the speed of which her environment operated. Another factor was her family's hypervisibility for a few reasons. The province that her family moved to was very small and connected, and the neighboring city, Pratto, was a city with a large Chinese immigrant population that many of the Italian residents resented due to the fear that the Chinese immigrants would steal jobs from the Italians in Pratto. At the time, Nicki's Italian father was well known as an actor in the province, and all of the residents were watching her family's every move.

Because Nicki grew up in a predominantly Asian and Latino neighborhood in Los Angeles, she recalls how jarring it was to experience racism directed to herself and her mother so directly when they arrived in Italy. She recalls the hypersexualized and racially charged comments that her and her mom frequently received. Her Italian family on her dad's side disapproved of Nicki's mom's inability to speak Italian, and blamed her mom for being the reason why her and her siblings were not connected to their Italian roots. Nicki says the level of racism being directed to her mom, "was a shock factor for her as well". She often experienced hearing the Italian mothers in the town referring to her mother and also directly calling her mom



‘the gypsy woman’. She remembers watching her mom’s reaction to these pejorative slurs that the Italian mothers thought Nicki and her mom could not understand.

She recalls how out of place she felt and how much judgment she received for not being able to speak Italian and for the way she dressed. She told me that when she left the United States, she brought with her the fashion and clothing that she felt comfortable wearing, but in Italy, her peers and teachers regarded her sense of fashion as provocative and inappropriate. Nicki was often pulled aside by her only female teacher, Professor Pisani, for wearing shorts to school. Her professor warned her that if she kept drawing attention to herself and dressing in this way, “the boys would start saying things about [her]”. That is exactly what started to happen to Nicki. After all of the negative racist, sexist, and hypersexualized experiences her and her mom had been going through, she began to resent the Italian culture that she was surrounded by. Because of her inability to speak fluently, she kept to herself and did not start making friends until it was her fourth month in Italy. She recalls being teased and harassed by the boys in her class. She carried with her a small, electronic translator that she took everywhere with her, and she explained to me how confusing it was to try and make out the insults that were being hurled at her by these boys in her class. Most of the insults were either sexual or racial. Before, when she got dressed in the States, she would wear whatever looked cool and stood out, but after the teasing at her school in Italy, she began to dress in a way that conformed to what her peers were wearing. She stopped wearing shorts and began to wear skinny jeans but she made it a point to still have some aspect that stood out. She would wear bright and colorful skinny jeans as her way of still having fun with her clothes.

As her time in Italy was coming to a close, she became really excited about returning to Los Angeles for high school. “In Italy, I did not want to be perceived, but when I got back to the States, I told myself that there was no reason for me to be shy and that it was my time.” In Nicki’s last year of middle school in Italy, her friend from back home in Los Angeles messaged her on Facebook, telling her that she should download Instagram because, “everyone is using it”. Nicki who had really only been familiar with Tumblr, was not familiar with Instagram and she told me that she, “thought it was a filter app”, so she did not post anything on her account, she would just take pictures using the Instagram filters and then save them to her camera roll.

In the transcribed material, Nicki explains that when she returned to Los Angeles for her first year of high school, she was trying to figure out what was fashionable and in trend. It is important to note that when she talks about the friend group of older girls that she became a part of, all of the girls in that friend group were white, and she looked at what those girls were wearing to emulate those styles. Although this was not in the transcribed material and while she did not realize this as concretely at the time, she explains, “that so many people were having the same sense of fashion because they were all using Instagram”. This is a moment where the third sense of the public of Instagram comes into being in the form of fashion trends being worn by these girls and Nicki emulating those trends. This sense of fashion was what she described as the ‘Brandy Melville look’. It is a brand with a very beachy, Malibu, California aesthetic. This can be seen in Nicki’s description of the clothes she started to wear: “really tiny cropped tank tops with cleavage” and “black skinny jeans”. She would dress in these clothes, “and hope for some

kind of validation”. This is an example of one of the many indirect interactions that can and *did* circumscribe her into the third sense of the public of the internet.

Later into her freshman year, Nicki formed a group of friends that she refers to as either “the in between group of girls” or her “main squad”. It was a group of friends who all used Tumblr, they were all of color, and they were also struggling to navigate these fashion trends. Her and her friends liked Tumblr because of their ability to create internet footprints with a sense of anonymity. As Nicki explained to me, Tumblr was helpful to her and her friends and different from Instagram because the focus and the style of Tumblr was more about getting aesthetic inspiration and creating aesthetic inspiration rather than just creating posts. As I mentioned earlier, because Nicki was more familiar and comfortable with Tumblr, she had not really figured out how to navigate Instagram and be active on her account.

Although the platform of Tumblr had negative effects on Nicki’s sense of desirability such as increasing Nicki’s body dysmorphia, her and her friends learned how to utilize Tumblr as a tool that would inform how they would engage with the public of Instagram and how they would create content on Instagram. Later into her freshman year, through the space created amongst Nicki and her main squad and their newfound comfortability in engaging with these various publics of social media, the conversations they were having and their navigations of fashion took a turn. Nicki explains that she and her friends began expressing their desires to subvert whiteness and the whiteness of the fashion trends they were following by saying things like, “ I don’t wanna look white, I’m not white enough to be this, or white girls are so basic”. The conversations and the fixations shifted from emulating the styles of the white girls around

them to needing to find their own styles that worked for and complemented them. Nicki explains, “we were all navigating this from different angles.” She began to explore styles of clothing that simultaneously, “masked [her] insecurities while playing up what was sexy about [her]”. An example of this is the shift from the tiny top and skinny jeans to baggy pants that would mask the insecurities she had about her legs, and wearing more tops that would accentuate the curves of her waist and boobs, which she had been told were some of the aspects that made her sexy. Even with the exploration of these styles that complemented her, she explained to me that she would still bring in-trend clothing items like flannels with her to school. She did this so that the clothing item could be used as a coverup if she ever did feel insecure about her outfit.

At the end of Nicki’s material she directly addresses her relationship with Instagram now and how it affects her. She explains how the creation of Instagram filters that allow users to see what they would like like with different facial features has made her aware of “what is wanted” and what is desirable to have. She makes the connection to what is in trend with plastic surgery by explaining how Instagram provides the platform to pick and choose the features that are circulated and how plastic surgery provides a method of achieving these features. Nicki lists off some specific features that are circulating as desirable and trendy on Instagram: “Asian eyes”, “full lips which is typically an African American feature”, “white noses”, “a skinny waist”, and “full hips”.

Through this material and analysis, I have explored the interlocutors’ very distinct and individual engagements with and within the public of the internet. After analyzing how the interlocutors engaged with these publics separately, I will use this section to point to some key

moments where the effects of these engagements were similar and where they were different. While all three of the interlocutors spoke about Instagram in relation to physical bodies, there was a key difference between Olive and Willow's explanation of it and Nicki's explanation of it. Olive and Willow both expressed that Instagram's fixation and circulation of one specific Asian body type has made them aware of this body type being seen as ideal and it has also made them aware of where their bodies are situated on the spectrum of Asian body types in relation to this ideal. This slightly differs from Nicki's explanation of Instagram's effect on her where she expresses that the public of Instagram she has been engaging with, presents ideal *features* that make her aware of which specific features of hers are considered desirable and ideal and which ideal specific features she lacks. She explains how these features on Instagram being presented as separate and attainable has reformulated and informed the current beauty standard. Willow expresses a similar perspective, but she also expresses her concerns with whiteness being in conversation with the reformulations of the beauty standard. She explains that the drawbacks of this changing beauty standard is that it allows for and sometimes even praises white people to masquerade as ethnically ambiguous or even Asian while commodifying and appropriating Asianess to do so. This is a frustration that Olive presented when she talked about the ways that Instagram popularized the fox-eye trend amongst white people. While there are many more similarities, differences, and patterns that can be drawn out, in an attempt to limit the dehumanization that can occur when applying a theoretical lens to their personal stories, I hope that the Interlocutors' material can speak for itself.

## **Chapter Three**

**Not so intimate encounters**

Chapter Two navigated the roots of the interlocutor's sense of desirability in two sections: the first section was about how the interlocutor's mom informed the interlocutor's sense of beauty and the second section was about how the publics of the internet informed the interlocutor's sense of desirability. After introducing Michael Warner's concept on publics in the context of the internet, I would like to continue using this theoretical framework, but this time, I will be examining the final site that the interlocutors have highlighted which is a dialectical public created out of social and intimate engagements. Even though some of the material does not directly address sexual experiences, I will be using the word intimate to stand in for any experiences that the interlocutors share that outline experiences of navigating their perceivable desirability. I say a dialectical site because the social landscape is created out of and informed by intimate interactions just as much as the intimate landscape is created out of and informed by social interactions.

Throughout the sections, desirability has been used in a somewhat general sense or having a relationship to the interlocutor's sense of self. Within the context of actual intimate experiences, desirability becomes much more specific in defining it as the interlocutors' level of attraction or to put it plainly, their sex appeal. When the concept of sex appeal is in conversation with Asianness, many more areas of exploration emerge that include hypersexualization and fetishization. This is another area I would like to explore in the analysis to see what patterns emerge from the material.

The interlocutors' material presented a range of social/intimate dialectical publics as well as a range of engagements with these publics. In my analysis, I aim to point to specific examples

of these engagements and explain why these examples fall under the category of this dialectical public. After locating these publics, I will use them to better understand the relationship between the dialectical publics and its effects on the interlocutors' negotiation and understanding of their mixed Asian subjectivity as well as their sense of desirability. I also argue that these intimate encounters provide the interlocutors with lived experiences that further reinforce their Asianess *being in conversation with* their desirability. For the structure of this analysis, I will provide the interlocutors' ethnographic material followed by separate analysis for each transcription before analyzing all of the interlocutors' material as a whole.

Because of the subject matter, I found that it made my interlocutor's feel more comfortable participating when I also shared some of my personal experiences and opinions. For these reasons, I felt more comfortable, from an ethical standpoint, in inserting myself in this chapter more than I did in the previous chapters. In the process of gathering material for Chapters Two and Three, the interlocutors have taught me that the comfortability and trust that we have built is founded on the *exchange* of our subjectivities, our personal experiences, and our *shared* relationship to the subjects we are discussing. I decided to include my insertions and participation to maintain the integrity of the conversations' structure, to make it more readable, and to provide more context for the reader. In this section, I also heavily relied on the social literacy and ability to employ code-switching through the use of colloquial speech, slang, curse words, and what some would refer to as 'improper English' in order to relieve and address the power dynamic between ethnographer and interlocutor.

Although I was able to gather rich ethnographic material in Chapter One, I quickly realized that the form and tenor of the interview structure would make the interlocutors more



reluctant to share their experiences for Chapter Three. Because of these factors and because of how personal the focus is in Chapter Three, I decided to continue gathering the ethnographic material by recording somewhat unstructured and casual conversations rather than conducting interviews. Even the interlocutors that might have felt more comfortable in participating because of our friendship, felt that they needed to prepare for the interviews. All three interlocutors in Chapters Two and Three expressed relief when I explained that we will only be having conversations for the rest of the ethnographic research process.

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**Olive:** Before we start, I just have one question. Are these like questions regarding like sex and coming into sexuality? Will our answers be anonymous? [00:00.05]

*Me:* Yeah. So basically I won't include your name. I won't use your name because I'm not allowed to and because I wouldn't want my interlocutors to be uncomfortable sharing private information with their names attached. So it'll basically be like a completely made up name, and you can choose it if you like! Also, only my adviser and two other professors will be sent this. And then all of the Sprojs will be published and made available to the Bard community through digital commons or the Bard Stevenson database. I think you have to search by department, then look for my name, but it's definitely there if you want to see it. [00:01:04]

**Olive:** Ok, cool. I'm done. All right. [00:01:20]

*Me:* No, no, of course. No, I know these questions are, like, definitely personal, but yeah, basically what two of my interlocutors were talking about last time when I did the same exercise with them was like any sexual accounts or experiences that they felt comfortable sharing that has a connection to their mixedness. And also, it doesn't necessarily have to be a sexual experience. It could be an experience that just has something to do with your sense of being wanted or being

seen as sexy. Desirable, basically. So, I don't know if you have any immediate thoughts off the top or if you want me to like prompt you? [00:02:39]

**Olive:** Ok, I see. You can give me some sort of prompt. [00:02:42]

*Me:* Ok, cool. Let me just say, like for me specifically, growing up was me in like a really white, conservative place in California. And I didn't have any sexual experience or experiences in high school because I was made to feel like I was ugly because I look like this and because I looked so different. The model for beauty was kind of like being a white girl from California and like blond. And it was like a lot of internalized racism for me. I also wanted to be more Asian than black at the time, and then I came to Bard and I came to New York for the first time and like, just started realizing that I actually *am* sexy and like many people think I'm hot. And that my beauty is *not* negated or questionable just because I'm not white or that 'I'm pretty despite me being black' or like any of these things. I had to learn that I was hot and sexy by really navigating desirability through race and like learning through my sexual experiences, like, I guess? Haha. [00:03:50]

**Olive:** Ok, I can see where you're coming from with that. I can relate to that in some ways. I guess I'll say starting with like in terms of where it comes from. I can definitely agree with you and with a lot of what you're saying because we both come from Cali. And in my city, I would say the school I went to, both the last high school I attended and definitely, the first high school, which was an all girls Catholic school, in both schools, all the girls were white. And it's interesting to see that like most of the black girls there would straighten their hair, hangout with groups of white people, and they try to like fit in, you know what I mean? And so, like, they're trying to like, I don't know, it almost seemed like there was this thing about black girls going to that school, that were trying to be white. And I think in some ways that kind of, I don't know, that kind of in some ways determined my idea of what it means to be sexy, what it means to be pretty, because I was surrounded by so many girls with long blond hair, all skinny and that was the desirability that a lot of the guys who went to the school next to us, which was all guys high

school, that's what they wanted. That was what they were into. And it was just kind of interesting. I remember this one time, it was like my homecoming dance, in the fall, and it was my freshman year. And I was just hanging out with my friends, like, we were all just chilling, having fun, dancing on our own. At the time, I had glasses and braces, so I looked super nerdy, and super depressed. *But*, I remember this guy. He was white. He went to the all boys school next to us, like, it was basically a party of all these . . . You know what I mean. He came up to me and asked me to dance with him and I was kind of, like, surprised because I was like, "oh, you're asking me?", like, knowing the people that I've seen him with throughout the night and stuff like it, just was really weird. But I did dance with him. But then after, it was so awkward. It was like the most awkward dance ever. He went back to his group of friends and they were just all laughing, and it was just really uncomfortable. And then I had a thought and I realized. I was like, 'oh, I think he asked me to dance with him as a joke'. [00:06:18]

*Me*: Ugh, what the fuck. That sucks. [00:06:20]

**Olive**: I know right? It wasn't even worth it. It was the worst thing ever. I didn't think of anything at first. I didn't care as much. But when I think back about it now, I'm like, 'Ok, I was young. I was naive'. At the time, I was like, 'oh, they just must be having fun'. I was like, "no, he was asking me to dance because it was like asking", 'oh, who is someone in here that you don't think is attractive. You should dance with them like for fun'. [00:06:37]

**Olive**: So I mean, that was something that kind of made me think, "oh, to be pretty, to be desirable, to be someone that, you know, a guy would want to, I don't know, dance with. You have to look like this, you know, basic white girl." But when I got to, I'd say, my second high school, sophomore year, there was definitely more diversity, at least in my group of friends. Like, it was really diverse. So my identity, I think, improved in the school aspect of this because I was surrounded by those types of people, but still not in the same way. Like, still in high school, you know, I didn't really see anybody, not seriously. So I had to come into my own sexuality, as I was saying. But I was still navigating what it meant to be black and Asian. I didn't know at the time, I guess, which I identified with more. But I think I would say at the time, romantically, I hadn't

been focusing on that. I was just focusing on, like, what I thought of myself, I guess. But I think when I came to New York, just being with different types of people and meeting different types of people that are very different from the ones I grew up with at home, I definitely feel like more comfortable being black. I just noticed the difference in culture here versus home. Like, I don't know, I feel like people here appreciate black women more and appreciate dark skin features, curly hair, big hair, you know, like braids, locs, all these things, you know what I mean? Characteristics of being a black woman. And I've just noticed that more here. And I think it's something I appreciate a lot because I didn't get a lot of that when I was home. Even though I had gone to a much better, diverse school. But just these conversations or I guess appreciation for it, it was not as shown in my high school. So, yeah. [00:08:58]

*Me:* Sorry! I lost connection, but yeah, totally. I feel like now that we are talking about Bard, considering your race, ethnicity, and positionality, if you consider these things at all, I'm wondering how these things have informed the way you go about getting to know someone romantically or hooking up with someone. [00:00:25]

**Olive:** Yeah. I mean. I think it is kind of like fucked up, but like sometimes I feel like I don't try to think this way but sometimes because of the media, if I'm interested in a guy or if I like a guy or something, there's a part of me in the back of my mind that thinks, "oh, he might like me just a little bit more because I'm mixed. Because I'm mixed with Asian and black". And sometimes a part of me is like, "ooo that's like an advantage I have over other girls", and it sounds terrible! I hate thinking that way. And I always try to suppress those thoughts because I feel like I think this way because I'm fed into these ideas by the media, by what people portray mixed women as, like as sexual, you know what I mean? And I think that over time, I don't really think that way as much anymore. I guess I would say, just like being honest, like I've been in a pretty long relationship since I came here and it took me a while before I was able to (what's the word I used to say), before I was comfortable performing sexually with that person and engaging in sexual activities. And I think because of that, that person was able to be patient with me for a long time before I was able to do that. I think that kind of helped because it made me think, "oh, this person is someone that I care about", or "that it's not always just about guys wanting to fuck me

because I'm their ideal person to have sex with", because I have these features because I'm mixed. So that has kind of helped me a lot with that. So yeah. [00:03:29]

*Me:* Yeah. I was just thinking about that because, like I said at the beginning of this, it's just so weird because I feel like I was already at a disadvantage. I mean obviously I love being mixed. I love being black, but just Bard is such a small school. It's very white, and the sex scene is very particular. So immediately coming in, I felt like I was at a disadvantage trying to hook up with people when I was a freshman. And then I felt like I was at an extra disadvantage because not only was I not like the norm of what the majority of the students look like at Bard, but I also was at an experiential disadvantage because I didn't lose my virginity until freshman year and that was only because, like, nobody paid me any attention at my high school. And so then it created this whole thing for me where I felt like I was behind and everybody was so fast. And then it was such a thing that played into my insecurity because I would find someone and I'd be like, "wow, this person actually thinks I'm attractive". And then I'd be like, "oh, wait. But now we're probably going to hook up and I'm too embarrassed to tell them that I have no experience." [00:04:57]

**Olive:** Right! [00:04:59]

*Me:* Like, obviously it's so different now, four years later, like, I'm also in a serious and long-term relationship. But I remember how messed up it was freshman year. I'm like, "damn, this is just like one setback after another just because I'm literally black and/or like black and Asian", I guess. But yeah, it just sucks because after talking to so many different interlocutors, I've heard very similar experiences like, Wasian, Basian, like any kind of mixture. Most of the interlocutors and just so many people of color that I know have come from like predominantly white institutions and came to Bard with, like, very limited sexual attention or sexual experience. And I'm like, "that can't be a coincidence". Like, this is like literally just straight up racist. [00:05:45]

**Olive:** Right? No, exactly! [00:05:51]

*Me:* Like it's a certain kind of sexual racism. Like, I don't even know how to describe it.

[00:06:01]

**Olive:** Especially with all those stories that have come out like over the past year, about how, you know, women of color are being treated when engaging in sexual activity with white men on campus. Like some of the things I've heard or seen on that page were crazy. What was it called? Oh, Black at Bard. But yeah. [00:06:21]

*Me:* I don't know if I follow it, but I think I think I saw it? [00:06:27]

**Olive:** No, like, some of that stuff was crazy, like being called the N-word with the hard R in bed. I don't know. Oh, there was quite a few on there. I can't remember all of them. But those things are just so scary. And I have so many black friends on campus, and friends of color on campus. And, you know, I worry for all our community too, for their safety with some of the guys here, because literally some guys just see black as a fetish. See women of color as a fetish. And it's very apparent here. And it's literally happened here. So yeah. [00:07:14]

*Me:* Oh, that is so fucking nasty and gross. Oh my God. Yeah, it's the type of thing where it's like fucked up because I'm so relieved to be in a relationship. I'm like, "thank God I'm not in the streets! Like that shit, I remember how it was, and it sucks. [00:07:45]

**Olive:** No, literally, I think the same way. Like, you know, obviously I'm happy in my relationship for other reasons. But like, you know, something I think about is like I'm happy that I don't have to deal with that. At this point I'm like, "I don't have to worry about that when I'm with somebody I trust." [00:08:04]

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When Olive and I scheduled this conversation for Chapter Three, she wanted an explanation of what topics we would be discussing. After I had provided an explanation, she

expressed valid concerns about my discretion and her privacy. On page 70, we briefly discussed how I would protect her privacy and where this project would be available to access. It was not until after I shared my relationship to the research through a personal experience that she felt comfortable in starting to share. I used my intuition to infer that I should *continue* actively participating throughout the conversation in order to make her feel more comfortable in continuing to share.

Olive starts the material by explaining that she went to a predominantly white institution. She explains the ways that the desirability of white femininity perpetuated by the neighboring all boys school informed what she thought of as desirable features to have. She also explains the ways that it informed other black students' sense of what was desirable and the ways that it affected them. The majority of the black girls at her school would wear their hair straight and be a part of predominantly white friend groups in what Olive describes as an attempt to fit in. To Olive, it appeared as if many of the black girls at her school were, "...trying to be white". Because of this dynamic, Olive shares that this was yet another factor that, "...in some ways determined my idea of what it means to be sexy, what it means to be pretty. . . ."

Olive shares a personal experience on page 71 about being asked to dance at her school's Homecoming event. The intimate/social dialectical public introduces itself after the white boy asks her to dance. She recalls how nerdy she looked and *that* in combination with the girls she had seen him with throughout the night made her doubtful and surprised that he was asking her to dance. After what Olive describes as, "the most awkward dance ever", he returns to his group of friends and she immediately felt uncomfortable after noticing that the group of boys were laughing at her. At the time, she wondered, "[if] he asked me to dance with him as a joke", but

then she rationalized that the boys must have just been having fun. Retrospectively, she explains her realization now, saying, “no, he was asking me to dance because it was like asking”, ‘oh, who is someone in here that you don't think is attractive. You should dance with them like for fun’. This experience reinforced and reminded Olive that “to be pretty, to be desirable, to be someone that a guy would want to dance with...you have to look like a basic white girl”.

To understand how this experience is situated in a dialectical public, it is important to first *locate* the publics that are present. Because I have mainly pointed to examples of publics that are not rooted in physical space, like the public of the internet, or are conceptually and discursively abstract, like the third sense of the public of the internet, it is an important to take a moment to clarify just how applicable Warner's concept of publics can be. To reiterate, Warner also defines a public as a tool to organize groups that are circumscribed by an event, a shared experience, and/or a shared physical space.

The Homecoming dance is a public that is inherently social and contains within it multiple publics. The dance that Olive and that boy had was bound by a shared experience and a shared physical space, but what turns an intimate encounter like this into an intimate *public* is the presence of the boys laughing at her. While I recognize that an intimate public is slightly unconventional and pushes the boundaries of Warner's ideas on publics, I argue that it could not be any more anthropological and any more Warner of me to think of publics in this way. I aim to question what is taken for granted and what is assumed as commonly known. For these reasons, I argue that the relationship between intimacy and its assumed privacy should be reexamined. I argue further that in the Warner tradition, there is a public for almost any group that is left out of the circumscription of a broader public. An intimate public is created when the assumed privacy



of an intimate encounter is mediated by the presence of an audience not circumscribed into the intimate encounter. An intimate encounter occurring in a private physical space is not an intimate public because of the assumption that true privacy would mean no known or unknown audience. In order for the privacy to truly be mediated, the audience must be unknown and undetermined by, in this case, Olive. If Olive were to have asked her friends to watch her dance with the boy, this would *not* be an example of her private moment being mediated by a public and it would *not* make her dance with the boy considered an intimate public. Olive asking her friends to watch puts her in control of the audience, and her awareness of her friends watching, makes her privacy not actually mediated. While she was unaware of it *during* the dance, it was the moment of realization that Olive was being laughed at that made this moment an intimate public. She was made aware of a presence that was mediating this encounter that she assumed was private. While this was not present in the material or in Olive's account, another example that would make this intimate encounter an intimate *public* is Olive's imagination of an unknown presence that would make her negotiate her own perception of this encounter. This encounter could be mediated through the circulation and retelling of what happened amongst people undetermined by Olive and people out of her control. A perfect example of this, a public not necessarily rooted in a physical space, is examining gossip as a public that mediates privacy. The gossip of this moment would be the agent that turns this dance between Olive and the boy into an intimate public by circumscribing him and Olive into this public of two.

The awkwardness and uncomfortability of the interaction was circumscribed into the Homecoming event, the shared experience, and the shared physical space between Olive and the boy and between them and the rest of the attendants. Finally, this awkwardness that Olive felt,

especially when she noticed she was being laughed at by others, was because her privacy was being mediated through the public of the Homecoming event and through the actual gaze of the audience in a public space. For these reasons, I argue that Olive's experience is an example of a social/intimate dialectical public.

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**Nicki:** Ok where did we leave off? [00:31:19]

*Me:* You were talking about how in high school, all of your guy friends would tell you that so many people had crushes on you and thought you were hot, but then, you never saw, like, any action? Something like that? [00:31:56]

**Nicki:** Oh, yeah. And then so I was like, what the fuck? So I just, like, never felt that attention. And like, even coming to a Bard, like it was still an insecurity. But I was like, "no, high school is just stupid". It's not going to go on like this forever. Like, something's going to change. Like either I'm going to get really hot all of a sudden or like, I don't know what's going to happen, but it always happens, so I'll just wait. But it was discouraging and definitely, like, even in my first relationship, like I was still so insecure. I guess that's probably what it is, just like unsure of myself the entire time. And like, it ended up being like just a really bad relationship where I was so compromising and in the same way, it made me feel shitty because then I was like, "I'm being so, like, dumb about this". Or, like, I'm not honest with myself. And like, it's funny because, like, all the white guys I've ever hooked up with have been kind of, in the end, having an Asian fetish. Like you take out the name? I'll say it for us. But like with [G], there was like a point, like very early on into us dating, where he was telling me about, like, who he had hooked up with in the past. We talked about experience or something. And he was like, "yeah, well I lost my virginity in like a really stupid way. Like at prom or whatever". And I was like, "oh, like who? Like, can I see a picture? Like, what does she look like?" And he was like, "oh, she kind of looks like you!" She didn't look like me at all! She was like, probably, like, full Japanese or something. I was like, "um, yeah she could look like me" but I was actually like, 'what the fuck'. And, like, maybe she had, like, light brown hair or something? I don't know, but at the time, I was like, 'hmmm'. And, like, that probably should have been like a red flag. He would always tell me, "you're like, you're like ideal" I was like, 'ok, but what is the ideal?' That's like so weird. Like what is the ideal? Ideal what? Like, handholding? Like, what is it? Like, ideal conversations? Ideal tits? Haha. Yeah. Oh my god. And then there was like, [C] who, like, straight up just has an Asian fetish

because he only hooks up with Asian girls, which I didn't even realize at the time until I had talked to [Z]. [00:33:57]

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In Nicki's material she continues the conversation presented in Chapter Two about her lack of sexual experience or sexual attention in high school. Nicki explains that for these reasons, "...[she] just, like, didn't have that kind of confidence of, like, thinking [she] was desirable." She reassured herself that it must have been the nature of high school. She figured that the solution would either just work itself out or that she would suddenly become desirable. She explains that this insecurity followed her to Bard and was still present even while in her first relationship. She described this relationship as a bad relationship that also made Nicki feel unsure about herself. She realizes that this relationship along with all of 'the other white guys she's ever hooked up with have had an Asian fetish'. She describes a "red flag" moment in her first relationship where she and her boyfriend, at the time, were sharing their sexual experiences. He was explaining to her how he had lost his virginity to a girl that 'kind of looked like [Nicki]'. She responded that she could maybe see the resemblance in the fact that they both had brown hair, but as Nicki relayed it to me, she didn't think that the girl looked like her at all because she was full Japanese. Nicki wrapped up the conversation about her first boyfriend by telling me how weird she thought it was that he would often tell her that 'she was ideal.' To this day, she still does not know exactly what he was referring to, but given the context of their relationship she assumed that it was not something she should take as a compliment.

The transcription ends with her sharing an experience with another "white guy" who she was intimately involved with. "Oh my god. And then there was C who, like, straight up just has an Asian fetish because he only hooks up with Asian girls, which I didn't even realize at the time

until I had talked to [Z]”. The importance of this quotation lies in the end of the sentence.

Although, it was too late to avoid or prevent Nicki from being involved with this guy who has an Asian fetish, the communication that transpired between Nicki and Z is because of and is situated in the social/intimate dialectical public. Z is a friend of Nicki’s who is also from Los Angeles, who also attended Bard, and she is also another mixed Asian girl that hooked up with C. Because of how small and connected the Bard community is, especially the Tivoli Bard community, it becomes quite clear as to why this conversation is a social/intimate dialectical public. It is its smallness and connectedness that makes the assumed privacy that is expected of intimacy so easily mediable by the social public.

In this specific account, the social public circumscribes Bard Tivoli residents and by proxy, Bard Tivoli gossip. The intimate public circumscribes Nicki and the boy that she hooked up with as well as the mediated privacy of them having sex. In formerly hooking up with C, Z was able to leave the intimate public with *him* and join the social public of the Bard Tivoli community. Because of the hypervisibility, the hyperawareness, and the social network that comes with Tivoli being so small, many people circumscribed into this social public, as well as, Z were made aware of Nicki hooking up with C. Without Nicki knowing that Z was told of Nicki’s intimate engagement with C, Z was able to move from the social public to the dialectical public to inform Nicki of her own experience with C just in the way that Nicki was able to move from the intimate public to receive this information. It is important to note that not only was Nicki not aware that Z knew anything about Nicki’s engagement with C, but she also did not know how Z knew or who told her. Z initiating this conversation with her, made Nicki realize that what transpired between her and C in a private space was no longer private and was now

being talked about. This moment is what transforms her intimate engagement with C into an intimate *public*. Even though Nicki's privacy was intervened by the social public, it was this mediation that allowed for Z and Nicki to compare and share their accounts of hooking up with the same partner. Through sharing their accounts and through the broader network of the Los Angeles social scene, Nicki and Z found out that he hooked up with another mixed Asian girl in between the time of hooking up with both of them. They realized that he hooked up with this girl after hooking up with Z and before hooking up with Nicki, and they came to the conclusion that he must have had an Asian fetish. This interaction between Nicki and Z is a social/intimate dialectical public that circumscribes both of them as well as their conversation into this dialectical public. The interconnectedness of the Bard Tivoli community and its gossip is the site of the social public that allowed for Z to find out, but it was ultimately the decision of Z to confront Nicki that made Nicki's encounter with C an intimate public and that made the conversation between Z and Nicki a social/intimate dialectical public.

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*Me:* I have to go out like one ish just to get tested on campus again, but ok, yeah. So basically Chapter Three is going to be about the Asian women in my sproj and talking about what sort of navigations of desirability that they've had from, like, personal accounts or like, sexual experiences that they're comfortable with sharing. Anything that has to do with, like, any weird comments someone made regarding like Asianess or mixedness. Are you desirable because of your Asianness or because of your non-Asianness? That sort of that sort of thing? [00:00:57]

**Willow:** Yeah, I mean, should I just go? Yeah, I feel like it's a combo situation. I mean, I feel like it's one of those things that are kind of like this super back and forth for me. I'm, like, super undecided and also a lot of it is that I never know if what I'm feeling is actually what's going on or if it's like my own fears. But I mean, there's definitely been like an instance of someone

saying, like, “I like that you're not just white”. And like, kind of saying it wasn't specifically that I was *Asian*, but it was that I wasn't *white*. And then from there, kind of being like, ‘ok, well, do you like me because I'm not white?’ And if I *were* white, ‘would you not find me as interesting or something?’ And then also, like, just being mixed, ‘is it kind of, like, just enough?’ You know, like, just exotic enough? Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I don't know if you feel this, ok, you probably feel a lot different from what I'm saying. But I'm like way more, or not like way more, but like I can be white passing and stuff. And so therefore, I, like, have this other element. For me, I think it's that, like, constant fear of being like, ‘I'm, like, safe enough so that makes me desirable’. But also then, ‘am I not desirable because I'm not, like, fully white?’ [00:03:10]

*Me*: Yeah. Totally. I mean, obviously I haven't had that experience of being white, but I've definitely had, like, weird experiences that were almost in the inverse. People have always said either something like, “I've always been attracted to black girls, but like there's something about you that's different” or it's always been worse, like, “oh, I don't typically find black girls attractive, but I like you, because your eyes are different”. And then once I say that I'm Asian, they're like, “oh, that's why I like it. Because you don't really look like the typical black person”. And that stuff really messed with my head growing up. [00:04:09]

**Willow**: Yeah. Well that's the thing. I think that, like, Asian features because of just how they are and how almost similar they are to the European beauty standards of, like, being small and petite, it's, like, somehow more familiar? I guess that's it. It's exactly what you're saying, it's like, ‘ok, there is something different about you’, in whatever direction you're going in, but it's supposed to be like a compliment. [00:04:45]

*Me*: Yeah, yeah. One thing that, like, me and Nicki were talking about was what it was like growing up with white people and like with white standards and being like, ‘which part of my features can fit into that?’ And which ones are different, that I need to change? That's honestly what it was for me. [00:05:29]

**Willow**: Yeah. Yeah I know for sure. I mean and that's kind of why, even right now, I'm trying to figure out what part to talk about and in terms of isolating it and just talking about desirability

and sex because I feel like so much of thinking about or at least like so much of my awareness and, like, and self-correcting with my mixedness is wrapped in that. It's wrapped in sex and wrapped in desirability. I think middle school and high school, there were definitely moments of being like, 'fuck, I'm not fitting the picture of what is desirable'. And it was, like, internalized kind of. I guess I don't know if I was ever super unhappy that I was Chinese, but I definitely was like, 'I obviously don't fit the blonde, white girl aesthetic', that I think that guys want. And so it was that kind of back and forth of a lot of my mixed identity being wrapped in desirability and sex, and it's when it kind of came out the most, I guess. Yeah, and that's in terms of that kind of dualness of feeling like you're not enough in a way. You're not what you want to be in terms of, like, whiteness. I think I really wanted to be, like, the white girl, you know? But then at the same time, I knew that there was this thing about me, that for some people, was desirable. That was like, 'ok, Asian girls are submissive and sexy and like hypersexual'. That was like, 'ok, this is something that's going for me'. And so, do I lean into it? Or do I hate it and hate that it's like being put on me, you know? [00:08:10]

**Willow:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, it's that back and forth of being like, 'ok, am I the exception that like they're sprinkling in?' Or are they fetishizing me and being like, 'oh, I only fuck with this'. I mean, that's like that whole kind of like weird preference thing but also it's fucked up. I mean that's why looking back at someone's ex is really necessary. It's necessary! And even if they didn't date. Even something like who they've been interested in. So with (D), his ex was either, half Asian or half Latinx or something, anyways, she wasn't like white. They broke up and then he hooked up with a bunch of white girls and then dated me and then after me, hooked up with *another* bunch of white girls, you know? That to me, confused me because I was like, 'Ok, you only date non-white girls'. Or is that your preference and you're just like, biding the time? And then is it also that you're settling down with the non-white girl because it also says something about your image of like not dating white girls. You know? And even with the person I'm hooking up with *now*, I looked at his ex and she literally is me. She is half Asian too. I think she's half Filipino. It's so funny because I hadn't seen her before at all. And I was like, 'you know what? Let me go take a look'. And I was like, oh she definitely had the cute but also cool aesthetic and also, all the people that I've heard that he has been interested in or like wanted to

hook up with is like [A and like B]. But just like either part Asian or Asian, and that is something that I definitely am like, ‘um, what’s going on here?’ And he would say, like, “you’re exactly my type”. Yup. Like petite, brown hair, brown eyes. Hahaha. And it was that kind of thing where I’m like, ‘do I say thank you?’ Like, happy to fit the mold that you’ve weirdly constructed for me? Ugh, it freaks me out, but also, Bard College is a wasteland so I’m gonna take what I can get. Hahaha. [00:17:08]

*Me*: No, forreal! There’s just so many things floating around especially with this whole Asian trend and Asian fishing that’s going on. As glad as I am to see that, like, whiteness is being removed from the pedestal status and while, yes, someone is open to ignore it or feed into it, it *does* put a pressure on those, especially who are partially Asian to be like, ‘wait, should I be playing up my Asian features even more?’ If a white girl can go from blonde to Japanese in an hour, what does that say? Like, should I be extending the eyeliner to [here], you know? Like, should I be learning how to put eyeliner on so that, like, people can see that I’m Asian too? And this whole thing of like the Bratz doll look. It’s like inherently, if not Asian, then, like, mixed. And it’s like, how am I not doing Blasian right? [00:18:25]

**Willow**: Exactly. It’s, like, I’m not doing this right. Like, what more can I do? So, I was reading, I forget who wrote it, but this paper made this, like, insanely accurate point. I was like, ‘oh, fuck that’. It was this Asian woman dating a white guy. And he also said to her, like, “I’m happy you’re not just another white girl”. And she felt, like, there’s this balance. She was saying that this balance is about playing up your Asianness, but not so much that they feel uncomfortable that it’s, like, *too* foreign to them. And, like, *too* culturally different that they don’t feel like they can relate. And that’s something that I’m constantly like, ‘ok, how much do I give to them?’ I’m like, ‘ok, yeah, I’ll teach you how to fold dumplings’, even though I literally learned just like you would learn. But apparently I have more of, like, this connection because it’s like part of my ‘heritage’. And also, people be asking me how to, like, make Chinese food and as if it’s something that I was born knowing? Rather than, like, me actively trying to learn and also kind of sucking at it, you know, to a certain extent. But I mean, ok, last night, I’m gonna show you what (Y) sent me. Because it was so funny because if I’m going to be honest, this is one of the



moments where I'm like, 'am I not Chinese enough?' Because I literally forgot when Lunar New Year was, apparently, it's tomorrow? But, we were just talking about random shit and he just randomly sends me this. And for a minute, I was like, 'what is this?' It's like this Lunar Calendar situation. Because it's what he's into. It's because he's into, like, Asian shit. I don't know. But it was this whole thing and I was staring at it and I was like, 'what the fuck is that?' But if you look closely there's, like, all the zodiacs. No, but I literally for so long was like, 'what is this? Why did he send it to me?' So I just responded, "pretty". I was like, 'I don't know what you want me to say here'. I don't even know what year it is. Maybe it's because I'm, like, a bad Asian but I really sat there like, 'what's going on right now?' And it was also, like, no context. Ok, people do this a lot to me. They give me a little piece of what they think that I am, like, into, what I'm knowledgeable on. It's like this little gift, it's like, 'oh, here's something that you can relate to'. And most of the time I have no idea what it is and it's like super random. I don't *dislike* it, you know, like Asian art is beautiful. A lot of things, you know, I'm going to watch anyways. But that's the kind of thing where it's like, 'ok, do I need to play up my Asianess for you to feel like I'm relating to you in some way or that you can, like, pretend to relate to me because these are your, like, interests?' That you love manga and you watch Anime. And I don't know, I've never read manga. I've seen, like, a little bit of anime, but . . . [00:22:07]

*Me:* It's just so weird! Only at Bard have I experienced it, to this extent, boys doing this in an attempt to pursue and flex and relate to me and flirt. Like, using certain cultural things that they've learned at Bard, like reading theory. Like, again, this is about Blackness for me and not Asianess, but like with (E), he would constantly throw around all of these, black radical authors and black revolutionary texts. Like, he was throwing Fanon at me like my first semester freshman year, as if I knew who the fuck that was. And I was like, 'I didn't come out the womb reading Black Revolutionary Theory'. I am just black. That's it. I mean, it's like they're going about it in this kind of weird, like, colonial mastery of this cultural and historical material. Like, 'oh, this is what it means to be Chinese'. 'This is what it means to be black'. Like, 'I have all of these authors and textual evidence because this is what I'm bringing to the table'. And then I'm thinking, 'well, I don't have the theory. I just have my subjective experience. [00:23:29]

**Willow:** Yeah, we have *our* experience. [00:23:32]

*Me:* Like, that's just what it is. [00:23:33]

**Willow:** Right. We *live* it. [00:23:35]

*Me:* But it's like they're dropping theory to flirt with me. It's awkward because it puts me in the position where it's like, 'wait, this white boy is basically making a space where it almost seems like he 'knows' more about being Asian or more about being black than *me*. [00:23:43]

**Willow:** Yeah. Or it's like, 'hey, I've read this'. 'I really like academic, theoretical papers on this'. And therefore, like, 'I know what your experience is'. Like, 'I know how to relate to you now because I *know* what's going on here'. Like, 'what your experience is'. When you just are living it and I mean, even *that*, like, with being mixed, it's one of those things where I feel like it's always been an intentional thing for me. Like, I did not grow up in, like, a heavily like Chinese cultural home. You know? We threw things in, you know, Chinese New Year. I bowed to my dad three times, I got a little red envelope. We went to Dim Sum, like, every week or whatever. But I didn't have, like, 'the typical Asian experience'. And so when people, like, send these things to me, it's something that I would have intentionally gone after *anyways*, just out of my own interest, *not* to, like, relate my own experience. 'Cause otherwise, like being Asian for me is very much like. It's I don't know. I don't experience a ton or I guess, I mean, I definitely experience like the little subtle racism and like shit like that. Like the typical, you know, stereotypes and stuff. But otherwise, I don't feel like *I'm*, like, an expert on Asianess. But it's to the point where people think that I *am*, you know? And like, people will send these things to me and be like, 'oh, you know, about this'. And a lot of times, I'm like, 'no, I *don't*'. [00:25:31]

*Me:* Yeah, but also, even when I don't, I honestly don't wanna admit it to white people. [00:25:34]

**Willow:** Yeah! No, *same!* [00:25:35]

*Me*: I'm at the point where I'm not gonna admit it. I would rather completely avoid it and not respond at all, or I would literally look that shit up and be like, 'oh, yeah. Like, Year of the Ox'. Like, 'Happy Lunar New Year'. Like, 'whatever, it's whatever'. 'Yeah, you know, I cleaned my room and opened the windows at midnight'. You know? I would rather do *that* than *ever* admit to a white person that they caught me slipping in my own shit. [00:25:50]

**Willow**: Yeah! [00:25:51]

*Me*: When it shouldn't even be like that honestly. [00:25:55]

**Willow**: Yeah, well, that's the whole thing. It's, like, I don't want to be caught slipping, but at the same time, if I *am* slipping, then, 'am I kind of demolishing this image of me that you've created?' And this is not even just with romantic or intimate relationships. It's also, like, 'is that why you're friends with me?' You know? 'Is that why you find me interesting? Why you find me cool or something?' Because I have some kind of, like you said, 'out the womb knowledge' of what being non-white means', you know? Or, like, 'because I have this kind of knowledge of everything Chinese? And also the things that people ask me about that I have an answer for is because I took a *class* in it. You know? Like, I'm an Asian studies major. Of course I'm gonna know Chinese history. I'm gonna follow certain traditions because we do it in my Chinese class in the intensive. But again, it's not something that I've necessarily lived. The experience that I've lived is very grounded in, honestly, this whole conversation of, like, desirability and of presenting yourself in a certain visual way and keeping up that kind of look. Um, yeah. [00:27:39]

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Willow's material begins with her explaining that her sense of desirability has always been unstable and confusing to her because of its relationship with her mixed Asianess. She explains her struggle with understanding if it is her Asianess or her whiteness that provides a subtractive quality or an additive quality. She explained that she has often had this fear and

struggle of not feeling attached enough to her whiteness or her Asianess both in her visible appearance and in her cultural upbringing. These fears are reinforced in conversation with her desirability, especially when she encounters comments or ‘compliments’ for “not being just white”. Comments like these in addition to her pre-existing confusion around her mixedness only reinforces the internalized and externalized tension she feels when straddling the line of desirability with her whiteness on one side and her Asianess on the other. This is evident when she says, “I’m, like, safe enough so that makes me desirable. But also, then, am I not desirable because I’m not like fully white?” Respectively, Willow’s mixedness being subtractive or additive is analogous to her explanation of her not being desirable or her being “safe enough”. Throughout the material her measurement of desirability has toggled back and forth between being attributed to her Asianess and her whiteness. From this quotation, it is clear that her measurement of desirability, in this moment, is through the lens of whiteness, making her Asianess the subtractive agent and her whiteness the additive agent. When Willow says that her being safe enough is what makes her desirable, this is addressing the racial markedness and unmarkedness that her desirability is informed by. This means that although her Asianess is a status of racial markedness and otherness, it is the status of her white unmarkedness that provides an additive quality which redeems her desirability and makes her “safe enough” in the gaze of whiteness. Conversely, when she questions if this safeness of being *only* half Asian or being half white is what makes her *undesirable*, she is asking if the additive quality of her whiteness is not enough to outweigh the subtractive quality of her Asianess. Again, through the lens of white desirability, it positions her whiteness as the hierarchical origin and her Asianess as the inferior, othered orient. Through this cultural and hegemonic encoding of whiteness as the origin, she

wonders if her Asianess makes her undesirable because of its subtraction from whiteness. Her Asianess is what prevents her from being “fully white”.

At this point in the material, Willow expresses her difficulty in trying to locate one area to talk about because, “...so much of thinking about or at least like so much of my awareness and, like, self-correcting with my mixedness is wrapped in that...wrapped in sex and wrapped in desirability.” She explains that this feeling came out the most in middle school and high school when she realized and was *made to realize* that she was “not fitting the picture of what is desirable.” She describes this as not fitting into “the blonde, white girl aesthetic that she thought guys wanted.” Willow explains that she wanted to fit into this category and be perceived as a white girl, but she also became aware of the hypersexualized trope of Asian women that seemed like a category of desirability that she could access. She describes this tension as the “dualness of feeling”, asking herself if she should ‘lean into this hypersexualized category or if she should hate it because it is being put on her’.

In both of these examples, it is clear that the concept of desirability and her mixed Asian subjectivity informs Willow’s measurement of her own desirability. However, I argue that desirability itself should be looked at as a dialectical public because of its social and intimate agents and also because of the spatial relationship that is embedded throughout Willow’s lived experiences. While I recognize that this is a bold and unconventional claim, I make the deliberate choice to consider her sense of desirability as a dialectical public rather than a site in which a dialectical public is built around because of how much Willow’s navigation of her life and her Asianess has been intrinsically tied to her sense of being desirable.

The general definition of desirable: being wanted for being attractive, does not encapsulate the true nature of the problem. It makes it seem as if being desirable is accessible and attainable by all, when in actuality, the parameters of desirability, in this context, are unstable and determined by those outside of the interlocutor's control. This situates desirability as an obstacle that is meant to be navigated by the interlocutor without addressing that the constituents of desirability are constantly moving and changing with each person Willow encounters. When desirability is colloquially considered good, yet theoretically is considered a problem, this presents a site of conflict. Desirability is born out of intersubjective relationality allowing desirability to move fluidly between interiority and exteriority positioning it as an intimate/social dialectical public.

When looking at Willow's sense of her desirability as a social/intimate dialectical public, locating and isolating the social public and the intimate public is a difficult process to do because of how many variable factors there are and because of how much movement occurs. The constituents of Willow's desirability are determined by Willow's intimate partner and her negotiation with these determinants. However, these constituents of Willow's desirability have the potential to change every time Willow's intimate partner changes. When Willow does change intimate partners, the intimate public changes as well as it moves with Willow and re-circumscribes Willow and her new partner into a new intimate public between the two of them. Because Willow's intimate partners have changed as she moved through time and space and because of the many other variable factors, I have outlined, it is only possible to present Willow's sense of desirability as a social/intimate dialectical public if I examine this social/intimate dialectical public at a given time. Meaning, her general sense of her desirability is

*not* what I argue to be a dialectical public. The dialectical public is her sense of desirability located in and informed by social and intimate publics in a specific moment of time. These moments in time present *multiple* social/intimate dialectical publics. When combined, Willow can use and refer to them in the process of understanding and navigating her general sense of her desirability. For these reasons and in order to make this argument, I will isolate time to point to a specific moment presented in the material that provides an example of her sense of desirability being a social/intimate dialectical public.

I mean that's why looking back at someone's ex is really necessary. It's necessary! And even if they didn't date. Even something like who they've been interested in. And even with the person I'm hooking up with *now*, I looked at his ex and she literally is me. She is half Asian too. I think she's half Filipino. And I was like, oh she definitely had the cute but also cool aesthetic and also, all the people that I've heard that he has been interested in or like wanted to hook up with is, like, (Natalie, like Bruno?) But just like either part Asian or Asian, and that is something that I definitely am like, 'um, what's going on here?' And he would say, like, "you're exactly my type".

This is an excerpt from Willow's ethnographic material where she had just finished providing many examples of different intimate partners telling her different reasons as to why and how her mixedness made her desirable to them. This prompted her to share her concerns about why intimate partners chose to be with her. She wonders if an intimate partner usually finds white girls desirable but is choosing to be with her as an exception *or* if an intimate partner is deliberately seeking her out because he has an Asian fetish. These experiences and fears are the reasons why Willow finds it necessary to look at all of the people her current partner has had an intimate history with or even the people that her partner has 'been interested in.' For the convenience of referring to him I will use the initial 'Y' to stand in for her current partner's name. She explains how she found Y's ex-girlfriend on Instagram and she realized that his ex was half Asian and white as well. After finding his ex, she started to figure out who else he was

interested in saying, "...all the people that I've heard that he has been interested in or, like, wanted to hook up with is, like, [A and like B]. But basically, just like either part Asian or Asian . . . ." She listed a few people at Bard [A and B] that she heard he was trying to hook up with who are also half Asian and white, but the operative word here is *heard*. This makes her critical of her partner's interest in her, especially when 'he would tell her that she was exactly his type'.

Willow saying that she *heard* who her partner has been interested in makes it clear that this is the agent that makes it possible to locate the social public and the intimate public. This explains that Willow was able to get information about her current partner through the circulation of information from those who are circumscribed into this social public. Willow found this information through first and second degree sources. I define a first degree source as a person telling Willow who Y has been interested in, so, an example of this would be, "Y was trying to hook up with this Wasian girl in your year". I define a second degree source as a person telling Willow who they have *heard* her partner has been interested in, so, an example of this would be, "I *heard* Y was trying to hook with this Wasian girl in your year. The second degree source is what makes this a social public in the factor of the unknown. This explains that the information is being mediated and filtered between people that is then relayed to Willow. This mediation of information makes the distinction between Willow just talking to her friends about Y's interest and a somewhat ambiguous public that is bound by the discussion in who Y has been involved with. In the case of the second degree source, Willow heard information from someone she knew who heard it from someone else who is unknown. When the information is circulating amongst so many people that it can transform into something that is just known or heard ,the inability to no longer trace or distinguish who said what suddenly makes it unclear who is



actually a part of the conversation. Anyone who joins in on this conversation or contributes to the passing and filtering of information immediately groups them into this social public furthering the ambiguity of the participants and reinforcing the public's being. Once the social public in this situation comes into being it begins to draw out the intimate public. It is easy to understand that Willow and Y are the two involved in an intimate relationship, but I argue that the social public's existence is what mediates the privacy of Willow's and Y's relationship thereby redefining it as an intimate public. It is the process of Y not knowing about this social public circulating who has been involved with and the process of Willow assuming that this social public will stay confined enough so that Y does not find out that reinforces this claim. While Willow may have initiated this social public by asking her friends if they knew anything about Y's past interest, it is far out of her control since she no longer knows who has told whom and also because the social public grows and moves everytime someone else makes the decision to tell another person.

Now that the social public and the intimate public have been isolated and defined, I can move on to continuing the claim that Willow's sense of desirability is a social/intimate dialectical public. Throughout this project I have pushed the boundaries of Warner's theory on publics in arguing for intimate publics of two, but for now, I will draw the boundary at a public of one and make sure not to cross it. As I mentioned, because Willow sense of desirability is negotiated with her intimate partner's sense of her desirability, this dialectical public of her desirability moves with Willow and re-circumscribes whoever her new partner is, along with her new partner's sense of Willow's desirability. While it is not a perfect analogy, I suggest looking at her sense of desirability as a forum page to understand this better. Because her desirability as a dialectical

public inherently includes the social and intimate publics I have outlined, this already circumscribes many more people than just her and her partner. In the example of a forum page, we can think of Willow's sense of desirability as a discussion that can contain many different threads or topics to consider when started by a user. In the case of most forums, users can be named or anonymous and oftentimes you do not need a login to have access to the discussion. Meaning, the way to be circumscribed into this public of Willow's desirability is by simply being present to hear, circulate, filter, or inform the current discussion of her desirability.

Of course in the case of all publics there is the constant possibility of re-circumscription or even ceasing to exist. If her sense of desirability was a social/intimate dialectical public what would it take for this dialectical public to end? Would this dialectical public cease to exist when she ceases to exist? Or would the memories of her be enough to make the discussion and dialectical public go on? Maybe this paper being read, shared, and discussed in the future would also contribute to this dialectical public's continuation. Will there be a time in her life where her sense of desirability is not so informed by an ambiguous public? Is that possible for anyone? Is it the internet landscape and its public that makes this seem so unlikely? What I have presented here is a challenge that I have certainly not defeated, but it was the process of attempting and approaching the answer that excites me.

## **Conclusion**

### **To look ahead, we must first go back**

Conclusions have always made me uneasy and doubtful of what was said. They were difficult for me to do in the sections and in the chapters, but attempting to conclude this paper feels intimidating because I do not want to be the one to signal its ending. I am not going to use this section to wrap up my arguments or to make a summarized list of what each chapter was about. The ability to capture the tiniest glimpses of the interlocutors' experiences is what I am

grateful for, and to even limit these glimpses to passages in sections that are in chapters feels disrespectful and contradictory to the attempt of explaining just how complex and daunting it feels to know that this will be a forever journey.

Although I chose to use the word interlocutor for the sake of consistency, they were truly the informants of this project and my understanding of it. It was out of the exchange with the informants that my project was able to change so much and become more real. In the process of interviewing for Chapter One, before my project had changed, I was trying to look ahead and gather information about how their parents immigration stories affected their current relationship with their mixed Asian American subjectivity. The informants reminded me that in order to look ahead, we must first go back. Their material brought me back and led me to examine elementary school, middle school, and high school as sites of American psycho-cultural development and identity making. In Chapters Two and Three, when I was trying to explore how their sense of desirability and its interactions with intimate partners informed their navigation of their relationship to mixed Asianess, the informants brought me back to examine how their relationship with their desirability had a relationship with what they learned from their mothers.

This project was a collaborative effort based on vulnerability, building trust, looking back, getting uncomfortable while still being comfortable, and painful memories. While my project freezes their processes of navigating their mixed Asian subjectivities in order to analyze and understand their experiences, the beauty lies in the continuation and futurity of these processes long after this project is submitted.

I do not wish to conclude anything about this project as what was discussed will be a journey that the informants and I will continue navigating long after the final punctuation of this project. Instead, I would like to say goodbye for now.

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