About the Cover: Artist’s Statement

When I was given the theme of “spaces” as the central idea to convey for the cover art, my brainstorming led me to my roots as a Chinese American. I drew inspiration from the Chinese traditional ink painting style, a key feature of which is the use of blank space in between the brushwork elements to create a cohesive landscape scenic tableau. The blank space emphasizes the envelopment and grandeur of the landscape against the miniature people within. I felt that these features of harmony between people and their surroundings and the emphasis of space are elements suited to this issue’s theme, and with that I created a modernized interpretation.

The red and blue frame in the center background is a watercolor-like gradient to convey the notion of dawn and the new era, while also using the United States’ colors as a framework for our life and identity. This choice of colors also represents the duality in cultural, political, and self identity that are central motivators toward activism and advocacy.

The elements in the artwork are depictions of landmarks that hypothetically feature in everyday life: the home, school, and society. These elements are not confined within the frame but flow in and out, creating a wider space that conveys freedom and exploration. I want to convey an expansive mindset of branching out and making our own spaces beyond preconceived notions of identity.

Overall, this artwork represents the importance of space in the conversation of Asian American policy and advocacy. It showcases the use of traditional Chinese art style to convey a modern message and the duality in identity. The use of space and environment to create depth in the artwork also highlights the importance of finding our own place in society and exploring our own spaces.
“Caring for oneself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

— Audre Lorde
Writer, Poet, Civil Rights Activist
Dear Reader,

The time is three years since the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, weeks out from the Supreme Court ruling anticipated to mark the end of affirmative action, and days since the last mass shooting. In some ways, moving through 2023 feels like treading water—with the long arc of justice barely visible beyond the horizon.

Playwright Virginia Grise asks, “If we believe that self-preservation is an act of political warfare, then we must not forget to ask the question: Who are we at war with? Who are we fighting?”

In this 33rd edition of the Asian American Policy Review, we are honored to make space for activists, artists, and academics who empower us to fight against hate, cultural erasure, and institutionalized violence—and to fight for the space to dream of and build a brighter tomorrow. Their work weaves together themes of collective liberation through transformative education, the power of remembering our intertwined histories, and the importance of cultivating public spaces so that we can thrive in community with our neighbors. They remind us that as we navigate this seemingly endless expanse of liminal space, we must give ourselves permission to rest and rejoice. We must remember that our practices of individual self-care are the salve that sustains our collective self-preservation—that our struggle to improve our own life circumstances are the groundwork to pave a brighter path forward together.

As Caroline Huang, Professor of Asian American Studies at Queens College, puts it—“It’s a really heartbreaking time to do this work. The things that sustain me, that give me the most hope are: connection, shared joy, shared pleasure, shared laughter. Those are the things that keep me going.”

We are infinitely inspired by our contributors for sharing their time, their souls, and their groundbreaking work with us. We are deeply grateful for the wisdom and support of our Advisory Board in guiding our mission. We are immeasurably thankful to our student staff, who have dedicated countless hours to giving life to these pages.

We believe that the future of our community hinges on the stories we choose to tell, and we are humbled by the opportunity to bring these stories to light. As we move forward, let us be guided by this message of hope and connection, of shared joy and laughter, and always keep our eyes on the horizon.

Kevin Chen
Co-Editor-in-Chief

Riva Han
Co-Editor-in-Chief
2022–2023
Staff

Kevin Chen
Co-Editor-in-Chief

Riva Han
Co-Editor-in-Chief

Kelly Jiang
Co-Managing Editor

Matt Kamibayashi
Co-Managing Editor

Jeanney Liu
Editorial Director

Bryan Michael Fores
Staff Editor

Dennis Takeshita
Staff Editor

Emily Ratte
Staff Editor

Leslie Nguyen-Okwu
Staff Editor

Priya Millward
Staff Editor

Helen Li
Marketing Director

Jenna Iskandar
Partnerships Director
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Place for Us: Parks as a Social Justice Issue for Asian Americans</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shekar Krishnan and Chuck Park</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Place for Hate California: A Model for Community-Centered Policymaking</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candice Cho, Annie Lee, and Santosh Seeram-Santana</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countering a History of Invisibility, Erasure, and Exclusion through an Asian American Ethnic Studies Course</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josephine M. Kim, Shubh Agrawal, Clara Kang, Kiki Nakamura-Koyama, and Leah Porter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saving Affirmative Action: The Youth-Led Coalition Fighting Back at the Supreme Court</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angie Shin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Rice</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire Liu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American Teachers as Interlocutors: Racializing Agendas of Ascription and Skill</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trish Morita-Mullaney, Diep Nguyen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American Youth and Spatialized Violence in Los Angeles</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Lam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Crisis</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ae sther Chang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla Mendoza Chui, Camille Ungco, Doua Kha, Kriya Velasco, Theresa Lee, Rae Jing Han, and Saraswati Noel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you hear us now?</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther Lim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembering the “Comfort Women”: Intergenerational Asian American Care Work</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace J. Yoo, Eunice Kim, and Soojin Jeong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten Years After Oak Creek: Federal Policy Recommendations to Protect Communities Targeted by Hate</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nimarta Narang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will they hold us?</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony DelaRosa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filibuster Reform Is the Critical for the Future of AAPIs in America</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varun Nikore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Evolution of Our American Dream: A Conversation with David Siev</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riva Han</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riva Han</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Conversation with Asians for Mental Health Founder Dr. Jenny Wang</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Chen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Photography by Jason Leung, 2021
Our communities of Jackson Heights and Elmhurst in New York City—home to a 75,000-strong, rapidly growing Asian American population—were the epicenter of not one, but two pandemics in 2020. As COVID-19 claimed the lives of our elders, trapped in nursing homes and cramped apartments, anti-Asian hate awaited us at every turn, stalking us on subway platforms and sidewalks.

As these twin pandemics surged through our communities, our parks saved our lives. Our open spaces allowed us to escape the physical, mental, and social constraints of quarantine into fresh air. They allowed us to exist in community with our neighbors. And today, from daily t’ai chi ch’uan and yoga to annual Diwali, Eid, and Lunar New Year celebrations, our parks have become places of continued healing and growth.

Here and across New York City, our public open spaces are essential to meeting the multiple challenges we face, from public health to public safety. We must recognize the extraordinary value of our park system and deepen our investment for all neighborhoods, and for future generations. Every community needs and deserves space to thrive.

Parks, playgrounds, and natural areas are not luxuries only for certain neighborhoods to enjoy at the expense of others. They are part of our critical infrastructure. But, like so much other infrastructure, poor communities of color lack access to high-quality parks. On average, neighborhoods of color have 44% less park space, per person than predominantly white neighborhoods. And because Asian New Yorkers experience the highest rates of poverty, of the city’s racial or ethnic groups, we are particularly in need of—and deprived of—park space. As an extreme example, the historic Upper West Side is sandwiched between 840 acres of Central Park and 310 acres of Riverside Park, while the immigrant communities of Jackson Heights and Elmhurst have fewer than 12 acres of public parks—some of the least park space per person in all of New York City.
This glaring imbalance is no accident. Maps of New York City prepared by the federal government in the 1930s show neighborhoods where the government decided not to invest at all due to the “infiltration” of immigrants and Black people. Today, these same communities are so-called “urban heat islands,” where sparse tree cover and exposed asphalt cause temperatures to soar to deadly highs each summer. In so many ways, the lack of green space caused by generations of disinvestment leads to real harm to the most vulnerable New Yorkers and exacerbates the impacts of the climate crisis on communities of color.

Beyond public health, our parks also promote our city’s civic health. For as long as New York City has existed, its parks and public spaces have been focal points of political organizing and mass movements. In 1970, Stonewall activists seized Christopher Street for the first Pride. The occupation of Zuccotti Park in 2011 mobilized a generation of economic justice activists. Over the past two years, Columbus Park and Confucius Plaza in Chinatown and Diversity Plaza in Jackson Heights have been gathering points for recurring protests against the wave of anti-Asian violence in the city. To deprive our communities of public space is to limit our political power.

And there are so many other intangible, but no less important ways that our parks improve our city. Well-designed parks and well-placed street trees can prevent the kind of stormwater flooding that took the lives of so many of our immigrant neighbors trapped in basement apartments during Hurricane Ida. Open plazas provide places for social interaction, for our youngest kids to our elders and everyone in between. Walkable public corridors support local businesses and vendors. Here in Jackson Heights, we cherish 34th Avenue, the city’s “gold standard” open street, which we should further transform into a linear park. Open spaces can help reorient our city towards people and our needs.

Beautiful, clean parks are also safe parks. If we are to provide public spaces for our physical, mental, and civic health, then we must dramatically increase investments in their maintenance to ensure they are safe for all to enjoy.

In short, our parks are a matter of social justice for Asian American New Yorkers. Beyond representing a vibrant community of Chinese, Nepali, Bangladeshi, Burmese, and Korean neighbors, our office serves as Chair of the New York City Council’s Committee on Parks and Recreation, and we believe we must use our resources to create parks where none exist, and systematically invest in green spaces in neighborhoods like ours that have long been ignored.

As we emerge from the double pandemic of COVID-19 and anti-Asian hate, our parks are critical to healing and transforming our communities and our city.

If we are to provide public spaces for our physical, mental, and civic health, then we must dramatically increase investments in their maintenance to ensure they are safe for all to enjoy.
About the Authors

Shekar Krishnan
Shekar Krishnan represents Elmhurst and Jackson Heights in the New York City Council, and as the Chair of the Committee on Parks and Recreation, he negotiated the largest-ever budget for the City's Department of Parks and Recreation. He is the first Indian-American elected to any office in the New York City government. Before his election to City Council, Shekar was a civil rights lawyer fighting housing discrimination and a long-time community activist in Jackson Heights and Elmhurst.

Chuck Park
Chuck Park is Chief of Staff to Council Member Krishnan. Prior to city government, he worked as Civic Participation Manager at the MinKwon Center for Community Action, overseeing the community organization's campaigns to increase the political participation of Asian immigrants across New York City. Before MinKwon, Chuck worked as a U.S. diplomat for almost a decade serving tours in Ciudad Juarez, Lisbon, and Vancouver before resigning in August 2019.

Endnotes


Two of my family members (an elderly grandmother and her adult daughter) were walking home and an elderly white man was following them once he saw what they looked like. He kept following them on the sidewalk and shouted, ‘Go back to your country!’ He started shouting and cursing, ‘f**k this, f**k you.’

FEMALE, NEW YORK

I was waiting for the bus at the bus stop. A man forced me to not take the bus. He said ‘Ching c---g c---g don’t take the bus. You will spread the virus to everyone.’ He told me if I entered the bus, he would stab and kill me. So, I had no choice. I went far away from the bus stop, and took Lyft to school.

MALE, MIDWEST

No Place for Hate California: A Model for Community-Centered Policymaking

By Candice Cho, Annie Lee, and Santosh Seeram-Santana

INTRODUCTION

These are just three of more than 11,000 reports of hate against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) shared with the Stop AAPI Hate coalition during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many more acts continue to go unreported, making the actual number much higher—potentially in the millions. Reports of anti-AAPI hate come from all fifty states and the District of Columbia, with nearly 40 percent from California.

In response to the rise in hate against AAPI communities, Stop AAPI Hate introduced No Place for Hate California, a package of first-in-the-nation, state-level policy proposals. Together, these proposals take a gender-based, public health, and civil rights approach to addressing the racialized and sexualized verbal harassment experienced by AAPIs (especially AAPI women) in public, which comprise a majority of the reports submitted to Stop AAPI Hate. Stop AAPI Hate partnered with state legislators and mobilized a coalition of over fifty community-based organizations. By the end of the 2022 legislative year, two of the proposed bills were signed into law: Increasing Safety for Public Transit Riders (Senate Bill 1161, authored by Senator Dave Min and co-sponsored by LA Metro) and Protecting Customers’ Civil Rights at Businesses (Assembly Bill 2448, authored by Assemblymember Phil Ting).
These new laws represent a seismic departure from existing policy responses to anti-AAPI hate, which typically focus on increasing the policing and prosecution of hate crimes.

The laws apply a non-carceral framework to addressing non-criminal threats to public safety. In many cases, the perpetrators who make public spaces less safe for AAPIs and others cannot be identified and prosecuted. Their conduct is not criminal and cannot be criminalized, consistent with First Amendment protections for free speech. Although these bills grew out of experiences shared by AAPIs, they are not limited to AAPIs. Verbal harassment based on race, gender, or other personal characteristics—often called street harassment when it occurs in public spaces like streets and sidewalks—restricts the safety, well-being, and freedom of movement not only of AAPI women but all women of color, especially Black women, and LGBTQIA+, low income, and other vulnerable communities.

These new laws begin to shift the burden of being safe away from individuals and toward institutions. Accountability should not depend on the person being harassed to respond or a bystander to intervene, and should not be limited to the individual perpetrating hate. Institutions such as government, businesses, and public transit should be held accountable for preventing and responding to hate, especially as they are not immune from, and often reinforce, structural racism and sexism.

These new laws are a first, but by no means the last, step toward addressing anti-AAPI hate. As our coalition looks back on what we learned and looks toward the next fight, we offer the following insights in the hopes that policymakers and policy practitioners embrace a richer and more complete understanding of what it takes to stop hate against our communities.

—

FROM DATA TO POLICY

Stop AAPI Hate was co-founded in March 2020 by AAPI Equity Alliance (then the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council), Chinese for Affirmative Action, and San Francisco State University’s Asian American Studies Department. Collectively, the organizations bring to the coalition more than 150 years of service in AAPI communities. This makes our online reporting form a trusted place for AAPIs to share their experiences with hate, in their own words, using the language they prefer, and without fear of retaliation or other collateral consequences. Today Stop AAPI Hate is the leading aggregator of hate, in their own words, using the language they prefer, and without fear of retaliation or other collateral consequences. Their conduct is not criminal and cannot be property damage, which, while potentially crimes, ranged in severity and would not all result in prosecution. More than three-quarters of reports described experiences with hate that took place in person, with women reporting at twice the rate of men. An overwhelming majority involved conduct that was not a crime, let alone a hate crime. Nearly two-thirds were of verbal harassment, such as racist or sexist slurs, obscenities, accusations (of causing or having COVID), or threats, often in fleeting encounters with strangers such as passing drivers or fellow customers. By contrast, fewer than a fifth of reports were of physical assault or other violent acts.

Based on our review of the data we saw that a majority of reports shared by AAPIs in California described experiences with hate that took place in person, with women reporting at twice the rate of men. An overwhelming majority involved conduct that was not a crime, let alone a hate crime. Nearly two-thirds were of verbal harassment, such as racist or sexist slurs, obscenities, accusations (of causing or having COVID), or threats, often in fleeting encounters with strangers such as passing drivers or fellow customers. By contrast, fewer than a fifth of reports were of physical assault or other violent acts.

In advocating for policy change in California or elsewhere, we believe in centering the thousands of AAPIs who have trusted us with their experiences. Our coalition already reviews each report of hate to analyze the data for our publications. We conducted a second review of the reports to identify patterns in AAPI experiences with hate. Then we engaged more than twenty experts across academia, government, business, and nonprofits on subjects ranging from gender-based violence to civil rights. These conversations helped us identify gaps in existing ways to address the policy problems emerging from the data.

In other words, the data confirmed what we instinctively knew based on our personal experiences, and our organizations’ experiences serving AAPI communities: that the harassment of AAPIs in public is pervasive. Even today AAPIs continue to tell us that they experience hate in every corner of life—walking to school, riding public transit, or shopping for groceries. Although these hate incidents may not pose a life-or-death emergency, their impact is real and immediate. They shatter one’s sense of normalcy, and profoundly alter a person’s feelings of safety, freedom of movement, and physical and mental well-being.

In our home state of California, we did not see any state-level policy efforts to address hate beyond hate crimes, to demand accountability from institutions, or to challenge the normalized, even banal, racism and misogyny faced by AAPIs, especially women. No Place for Hate California is a first step towards addressing this.

—

NO PLACE FOR HATE CALIFORNIA

No Place for Hate California consisted of three bills and two budget requests for the 2022 state legislative season, focused on protecting AAPIs. Most of the reports to Stop AAPI Hate do not involve a crime, let alone a hate crime. Second, focusing solely on individual accountability relieves institutions from responsibility for participating in the racist systems and structures that allow anti-AAPI hate to persist. Third, focusing solely on the pandemic ignores the historical antecedents of the anti-AAPI hate experienced today. For example, AAPI women have been long exoticized, fetishized, and punished at the crossroads of racism and misogyny. Too often these norms are ratified by time and rendered invisible over time, leaving them outside the scope of serious consideration by policymakers.

First, focusing exclusively on hate crimes discounts a majority of experiences with hate, as reported by AAPIs. Most of the reports to Stop AAPI Hate do not involve a crime, let alone a hate crime. Second, focusing solely on individual accountability relieves institutions from responsibility for participating in the racist systems and structures that allow anti-AAPI hate to persist. Third, focusing solely on the pandemic ignores the historical antecedents of the anti-AAPI hate experienced today. For example, AAPI women have been long exoticized, fetishized, and punished at the crossroads of racism and misogyny. Too often these norms are ratified by time and rendered invisible over time, leaving them outside the scope of serious consideration by policymakers.

In other words, the data confirmed what we instinctively knew based on our personal experiences, and our organizations’ experiences serving AAPI communities: that the harassment of AAPIs in public is pervasive. Even today AAPIs continue to tell us that they experience hate in every corner of life—walking to school, riding public transit, or shopping for groceries. Although these hate incidents may not pose a life-or-death emergency, their impact is real and immediate. They shatter one’s sense of normalcy, and profoundly alter a person’s feelings of safety, freedom of movement, and physical and mental well-being.

In our home state of California, we did not see any state-level policy efforts to address hate beyond hate crimes, to demand accountability from institutions, or to challenge the normalized, even banal, racism and misogyny faced by AAPIs, especially women. No Place for Hate California is a first step towards addressing this.

—

No Place for Hate California consisted of three bills and two budget requests for the 2022 state legislative season, focused on protecting AAPIs. Most of the reports to Stop AAPI Hate do not involve a crime, let alone a hate crime. Second, focusing solely on individual accountability relieves institutions from responsibility for participating in the racist systems and structures that allow anti-AAPI hate to persist. Third, focusing solely on the pandemic ignores the historical antecedents of the anti-AAPI hate experienced today. For example, AAPI women have been long exoticized, fetishized, and punished at the crossroads of racism and misogyny. Too often these norms are ratified by time and rendered invisible over time, leaving them outside the scope of serious consideration by policymakers.

In other words, the data confirmed what we instinctively knew based on our personal experiences, and our organizations’ experiences serving AAPI communities: that the harassment of AAPIs in public is pervasive. Even today AAPIs continue to tell us that they experience hate in every corner of life—walking to school, riding public transit, or shopping for groceries. Although these hate incidents may not pose a life-or-death emergency, their impact is real and immediate. They shatter one’s sense of normalcy, and profoundly alter a person’s feelings of safety, freedom of movement, and physical and mental well-being.

In our home state of California, we did not see any state-level policy efforts to address hate beyond hate crimes, to demand accountability from institutions, or to challenge the normalized, even banal, racism and misogyny faced by AAPIs, especially women. No Place for Hate California is a first step towards addressing this.

—

No Place for Hate California consisted of three bills and two budget requests for the 2022 state legislative season, focused on protecting AAPIs. Most of the reports to Stop AAPI Hate do not involve a crime, let alone a hate crime. Second, focusing solely on individual accountability relieves institutions from responsibility for participating in the racist systems and structures that allow anti-AAPI hate to persist. Third, focusing solely on the pandemic ignores the historical antecedents of the anti-AAPI hate experienced today. For example, AAPI women have been long exoticized, fetishized, and punished at the crossroads of racism and misogyny. Too often these norms are ratified by time and rendered invisible over time, leaving them outside the scope of serious consideration by policymakers.

In other words, the data confirmed what we instinctively knew based on our personal experiences, and our organizations’ experiences serving AAPI communities: that the harassment of AAPIs in public is pervasive. Even today AAPIs continue to tell us that they experience hate in every corner of life—walking to school, riding public transit, or shopping for groceries. Although these hate incidents may not pose a life-or-death emergency, their impact is real and immediate. They shatter one’s sense of normalcy, and profoundly alter a person’s feelings of safety, freedom of movement, and physical and mental well-being.

In our home state of California, we did not see any state-level policy efforts to address hate beyond hate crimes, to demand accountability from institutions, or to challenge the normalized, even banal, racism and misogyny faced by AAPIs, especially women. No Place for Hate California is a first step towards addressing this.

—
“I was shopping at a [store] with my mask on. A white older man came up and started screaming at me saying, ‘You need to stay 10 ft away from me, you disgusting bat-eating bitch!’

**FEMALE, CALIFORNIA**

**ENDING STREET HARASSMENT**

Stop AAPI Hate partnered with the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, a statewide grassroots organization that addresses the health and environmental needs of the nail salon workforce, to develop a bill and budget request to end street harassment. Authored by Assemblymember Mia Bonta, Assemblymember Akilah Weber, MD, and Assemblymember Al Muratsuchi, Assembly Bill 2549 (AB 2549) situated street harassment within a public health, rather than criminal, context by defining street harassment in the state’s Health and Safety Code and directing the California Department of Public Health to study street harassment and create a multi-year and statewide public education campaign for awareness and prevention. The bill defined street harassment as words, gestures, or actions directed at a specific person in a public place, without the consent of that person, based on the person’s actual or perceived protected characteristic, that the person experiences as intimidating, alarming, terrorizing, or threatening to their safety.

National reports confirmed the data from Stop AAPI Hate on the widespread nature of street harassment. For instance, the University of California San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health and the nonprofit Stop Street Harassment found that 71 percent of women in the United States reported experiencing street harassment. Furthermore, a 2014 national study commissioned by Stop Street Harassment found that street harassment especially impacts women of color, as Black and Latina women are more likely than white women to experience street harassment. Research and personal experiences also show that street harassment impacts a person’s freedom of movement, physical and mental health and well-being, and ability to care for themselves and their families.

Ending street harassment requires a public health approach, not a criminal one. While street harassment feels intractable because it is so commonplace, public health campaigns have been effective at changing societal norms. For example, through public health campaigns, Americans have reduced cigarette smoking and encouraged seat belt wearing. Similarly, AB 2549, with its corresponding budget request directing money to the Department of Public Health, was intended to tackle the societal challenge of street harassment by changing societal norms around acceptable behavior between strangers in public.

**IMPROVING PUBLIC TRANSIT RIDERSHIP SAFETY**

Stop AAPI Hate developed a bill and budget request to increase safety for public transit riders. Senate Bill 1161 (SB 1161), authored by Senator Dave Min and co-sponsored by LA Metro, required the top ten transit agencies in California to collect information on the street harassment of women and other vulnerable riders and, in consultation with communities, develop data-driven initiatives to prevent and respond to street harassment on public transit systems.

Stop AAPI Hate focused on street harassment on transit due to the pervasive nature of the problem, the critical role public transit plays in people’s lives, and the opportunity to reverse years of declining public transit ridership in California. According to the University of California San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health and Stop Street Harassment, 29 percent of women experience sexual harassment on mass transit. Yet women are also more likely to be dependent on transit because a smaller percentage of women in California have driver’s licenses and access to a private vehicle, compared to men. The reliance on transit and exposure to harassment is especially true for women and girls of color, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. As a result of the street harassment experienced while riding public transit, women and members of other vulnerable communities adjust their behavior or take precautions. For instance, LA Metro found that women leave a bus or train mid-trip to avoid harassment, avoid travel in the evening, avoid certain settings such as crowded buses, and avoid walking alone. Yet many transit agencies do not focus on rider experiences with street harassment when considering the safety of transit systems. Thus, they rarely capture information about street harassment and have limited understanding or knowledge of how to resolve this problem.

Stop AAPI Hate also led a budget request to provide funding for the top ten transit agencies to implement SB 1161, which specifically prohibited this funding from increasing transit police, private security, or other law enforcement. We incorporated this non-carceral approach because the communities that are most at risk of street harassment are also those who feel least assured by police and law enforcement. In fact, for communities of color and LGBTQIA+ communities, increased police presence does not always engender a feeling of increased safety but one of heightened scrutiny against these communities. Research has found that police in nearly every setting — transit, schools, sidewalks — disproportionately target Black and brown people. These interactions with police can become physically dangerous for people of color, as seen in the fatal police shootings of unarmed Black people and the deportation of Ariel Vences-Lopez after a Minneapolis police officer checked his fare. Even when police are in transit systems for race-neutral reasons (e.g., for fare inspection or patrolling stations), research shows they disproportionately stop Black and brown riders, which makes these riders feel targeted and unsafe on transit. Similarly, according to the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, LGBTQIA+ communities have experienced a long history of mistreatment by law enforcement, including profiling, entrapment, discrimination and harassment by officers, and victimization often ignored by law enforcement. Instead of failed carceral responses to transit safety issues, SB 1161 encouraged transit agencies to develop real solutions to serve riders.

Stop AAPI Hate focused on street harassment on transit due to the pervasive nature of the problem, the critical role public transit plays in people’s lives, and the opportunity to reverse years of declining public transit ridership in California. According to the University of California San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health and Stop Street Harassment, 29 percent of women experience sexual harassment on mass transit. Yet women are also more likely to be dependent on transit because a smaller percentage of women in California have driver’s licenses and access to a private vehicle, compared to men. The reliance on transit and exposure to harassment is especially true for women and girls of color, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. As a result of the street harassment experienced while riding public transit, women and members of other vulnerable communities adjust their behavior or take precautions. For instance, LA Metro found that women leave a bus or train mid-trip to avoid harassment, avoid travel in the evening, avoid certain settings such as crowded buses, and avoid walking alone. Yet many transit agencies do not focus on rider experiences with street harassment when considering the safety of transit systems. Thus, they rarely capture information about street harassment and have limited understanding or knowledge of how to resolve this problem.

Stop AAPI Hate also led a budget request to provide funding for the top ten transit agencies to implement SB 1161, which specifically prohibited this funding from increasing transit police, private security, or other law enforcement. We incorporated this non-carceral approach because the communities that are most at risk of street harassment are also those who feel least assured by police and law enforcement. In fact, for communities of color and LGBTQIA+ communities, increased police presence does not always engender a feeling of increased safety but one of heightened scrutiny against these communities. Research has found that police in nearly every setting — transit, schools, sidewalks — disproportionately target Black and brown people. These interactions with police can become physically dangerous for people of color, as seen in the fatal police shootings of unarmed Black people and the deportation of Ariel Vences-Lopez after a Minneapolis police officer checked his fare. Even when police are in transit systems for race-neutral reasons (e.g., for fare inspection or patrolling stations), research shows they disproportionately stop Black and brown riders, which makes these riders feel targeted and unsafe on transit. Similarly, according to the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, LGBTQIA+ communities have experienced a long history of mistreatment by law enforcement, including profiling, entrapment, discrimination and harassment by officers, and victimization often ignored by law enforcement. Instead of failed carceral responses to transit safety issues, SB 1161 encouraged transit agencies to develop real solutions to serve riders.
EXPANDING CIVIL RIGHTS AT BUSINESSES

Assembly Bill 2448 (AB 2448), authored by Assemblymember Phil Ting, required the state’s Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) (which was renamed the Civil Rights Department in July 2022) to create a model training for employees on how to spot, report, and respond to incidents of discrimination and harassment against customers, and model signage notifying customers of their rights. AB 2448 also required the Department to report on harassment at businesses and to develop and evaluate a pilot program that publicly recognizes businesses for creating safe and welcoming environments. It further empowered customers to patronize businesses prioritizing customer safety. Lastly, AB 2448 required large businesses (defined as a business with over one hundred employees in California) to train employees using the model training, post the signage, and report incidents of harassment perpetrated by customers to DFEH.

More than one-quarter of the incidents reported to Stop AAPI Hate occurred in businesses, mostly big box stores such as Costco and Target. Nor are AAAPIs alone in experiencing racialized harassment in businesses. A 2019-2020 study on racial bias in retail found that two in five shoppers personally experienced unfair treatment based on their race or skin color. Black customers have long reported unfair treatment while shopping, according to more than two decades of Gallup polling, and nearly 40 percent of Black adults and one-quarter of Hispanic adults reported experiencing race-based discrimination in a store where they were shopping. Bias-motivated harassment at businesses is not limited to race or ethnicity. Three-quarters of women in California reported experiencing sexual harassment in a public space, including a store, restaurant, movie theater, or gym, in a May 2019 study. More than one-half of LGBTQ respondents in a 2020 Center for American Progress study said they experienced harassment or discrimination in a public place, including a store.

While existing federal and state civil rights laws prohibit businesses from discriminating against customers and state law protects Californians from bias-motivated violence or threats of violence, including at businesses, these laws do not adequately protect community members against harassment, including harassment by other customers.

NAVIGATING THE CALIFORNIA LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

The California State Legislature is a full-time legislative body with two houses, the Assembly and the Senate. Thousands of bills are introduced each year, approximately 300 to 400 make it to the Governor’s desk for signature, and even fewer get signed into law. Stop AAPI Hate introduced the No Place for Hate California package in February 2022. By September 2022, Governor Newsom signed into law amended versions of SB 1161 and AB 2448, which became effective on January 1, 2023. Together, these laws are an essential first step toward preventing hate and harassment in the places where Californians shop and travel.

Legislating is an incremental and unpredictable endeavor. On the following page, we share some insights gained and lessons learned in our coalition’s inaugural legislative fight for comprehensive solutions to anti-AAPI hate.

STREET HARASSMENT: IMPORTANT BUT NOT URGENT

AB 2549, the bill to end street harassment, was widely supported in the California State Legislature by both Democrats and Republicans alike. The bill was placed on the consent calendar, which means both Democrats and Republicans agreed on the policy vision of the bill, rendering unnecessary a hearing on the merits of the legislation. Nevertheless, the bill did not progress past the Assembly, the house in which it was introduced.

Where the bill may have fell short was placing its oversight within California’s Department of Public Health during a time when the state was experiencing several urgent public health crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, the fentanyl crisis, and the U.S. Supreme Court decision reversing the right to an abortion in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization. All these issues may have collectively kept street harassment from rising to the top of the department’s agenda. While the street harassment of women and other vulnerable groups is important, it lacked urgency compared to the other public health crises the state was facing.

In addition to competing with other urgent public health priorities, the street harassment of women and other vulnerable communities is longstanding, commonplace, and considered socially acceptable. This may point to the need for campaigns to change the narrative around its acceptability and reframe it as a policy matter necessitating state action—in other words, to elevate its urgency for the women of color and others whose safety is compromised on a daily basis when navigating public spaces.

CIVIL RIGHTS AT BUSINESSES: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

AB 2448, the bill to expand civil rights in businesses, passed the Assembly and policy committees in the Senate before being significantly amended by the Senate Appropriations Committee. In the California Legislature, the appropriations committee within each house is where bills go to die without explanation. It is a black box where advocates, sponsors, and authors do not know whether their bill will be reported out intact and move to the legislative floor for a vote, whether it will be amended on its way, or whether it will stall.

It is also the place where AB 2448 was substantially modified. The final version signed into law directs the Civil Rights Department to develop a first-of-its-kind pilot program to publicly recognize businesses for creating safe and welcoming environments and empower customers with information about which businesses address hate and harassment through concrete steps, such as training employees on their duties under civil rights laws. We were able to move forward despite the modifications in part because the implementing agency, the Civil Rights Department, committed to implementing a robust version of the pilot program. We had engaged the Department early and often, even before we had introduced the bill, alongside other stakeholders such as the Chamber of Commerce and labor unions, to ensure that the bill was workable.

Many aspects of the legislative process are out of an advocate’s hands, including the final result. However, we were able to best position our bill to go the distance by building trusted relationships with key stakeholders, including securing buy-in from the implementing agency.
RIDER SAFETY ON PUBLIC TRANSIT: FINDING THE FUNDING

SB 1161, the bill to improve rider safety on public transit, received a great deal of support from the legislature and the media. The bigger challenge, however, was the accompanying budget request. In California, a bill that makes its way past the Legislature and to the Governor’s desk without funding is vetoed.

We did not begin the legislative year as experts in the arcane and complex world of state transportation funding in California, so—we with AB 2448—we engaged key stakeholders early and often. We worked closely with the state’s transportation agency and the main association representing transit agencies to identify a funding source intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Reducing street harassment on public transit can increase ridership, which in turn can lead to fewer vehicles on the road and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. However, the Legislature resisted opening this pot of funds beyond its prescribed uses, fearing the precedent that this would set.

Ultimately, we moved forward with a modified version of the bill for which there was funding. SB 1161 directed the creation of a survey tool that promotes consistency in the information transit agencies collect about their riders, from rider demographics to their experiences with safety, including street harassment. We can’t fix what we don’t measure, and this bill is the first step toward centering rider experiences to prevent and reduce hate and harassment on public transit.

In February 2023, we introduced the next step: SB 434, again authored by Senator Min. This bill directs the state’s ten largest transit agencies to gather and publish quantitative and qualitative data regarding the street harassment experienced by riders as they wait for and ride public transit. As transit operators look to bring back riders, centering their voices and experiences with street harassment is critical to making public transit a safer experience for AAPIs and other vulnerable riders and rebuilding rider trust and patronage.

Our fight for SB 1161 was a reminder that policy is made through legislation but also budgets, and that policy advocacy is an endurance sport. As we look back on our first legislative year as a coalition and advocate through our second, we remind ourselves that hate against Asians and Pacific Islanders has existed for as long as our communities have been in the United States, and even before the nation was formed. We receive reports of anti-AAPI hate still, even after the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially subsided. Dismantling these systems and structures of oppression is the work of many, from community groups like ours to those who walk the halls of government, to the public and press who beat the drum. It is the work of us all.

Stop AAPI Hate was co-founded in March 2020 by AAPI Equity Alliance, Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), and San Francisco State University’s Asian American Studies Department. The mission of Stop AAPI Hate is to advance equity, justice, and power by dismantling systemic racism and building a multiracial movement to end anti-AAPI hate. Candice Cho is the Managing Director of Policy and Counsel at AAPI Equity Alliance, Annie Lee is the Managing Director of Policy at CAA, and Santosh Seeram-Santana is the Director of Legislation at CAA.
About the Authors

Candice Cho
Candice Cho is the Managing Director of Policy and Counsel at AAPI Equity Alliance. She previously served as the chief legal advisor on immigration in New York City, advising on sanctuary city laws and suing the Trump Administration to protect immigrant New Yorkers. She was also Chief of Staff to a NYC commission whose proposals to increase democratic participation were approved by voters. She began her career as a legislative staffer for U.S. Senator Richard J. Durbin (D-IL). Candice is a graduate of Harvard College and Columbia Law School and is admitted to practice law in New York and California.

Santosh Seeram-Santana
Santosh Seeram-Santana is the Legislative Director for Chinese for Affirmative Action. She develops, advocates and implements CAA’s state budget and policy agenda at the state capitol. Santosh played a critical role in co-leading a budget campaign and administrative advocacy to create the One California Immigrant Services Funding. Prior to CAA, she was the Legislative Advocate for Asian American for Civil Rights & Equality, the Senior Lobbyist for Planned Parenthood Affiliates of California, and a staffer for Assemblymember Martha Escutia. Santosh is a graduate of the University of Southern California, Sol Price School of Public Policy and UC Berkeley.

Annie Lee
Annie Lee is the Managing Director of Policy at Chinese for Affirmative Action, where she advances workers’ and immigrants’ rights, language diversity, education equity, and racial justice. Annie previously worked as a Civil Rights Attorney with the U.S. Department of Education and enforced civil rights laws that protect students from discrimination. Annie began her legal career as an Equal Justice Works Fellow at the Department of Education.

Endnotes

3. “Two Years and Thousands of Voices,” Stop AAPI Hate.
9. See e.g., COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act.
Endnotes Continued


19 In California, the following are protected characteristics: race, color, ethnic group identification, ancestry, national origin, religion, mental disability, physical disability, medical condition, genetic information, age, marital status, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation.

20 Street harassment has been defined slightly differently by other entities. For instance, Washington D.C.’s Street Harassment Prevention Act of 2018 defines street harassment as any disrespectful, systemic review,”


23 “California State Policy Recommendations,” Stop AAPI Hate.


26 “Measuring #MeToo,” UC San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health and Stop Street Harassment.


30 Poignant anecdotal evidence (see below for research): Cynthia (@cynthia4nyc), “A Girl I Know Felt Unsafe on a Train Car with Just One Other Person on it so She Switched Cars and Was Subsequently Questioned by NYPD Officers. They Proceeded to Follow Her off the Train, Refusing to Let Her Leave the Station, Accusing Her of Fare Evasion & Assaulted Her,” Tweet, [Twitter](https://twitter.com/cynthia4nyc/status/1508135096745926662); huxi ai (@huaxiyxz), “Today Three Cops Randomly Stopped Me at Canal St to Ask Me to Translate for a Confused Asian Woman They Were Charging for Fare Evasion and They Kept Refusing to Let Her Go Bc She Didn’t Have an Id I,” Tweet, Twitter, May 12, 2022, [Twitter](https://twitter.com/huaxiyxz/status/1624572155360286976).

31 Van Eyken, “Safety for All.”


33 Van Eyken, “Safety for All.”


37 Stop AAPI Hate found promising initiatives, including the Not One More Girl campaign launched by Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) in conjunction with community organizations Alliance for Girls, Bettì Onì, Black Girls Brilliance, and the Unity Council’s Latinx Mentorship and Achievement Program. The campaign brought awareness to sexual harassment on BART by adding a new reporting category (“unwanted sexual harassment (non-criminal)”) to the BART reporting app, publicizing youth-created campaign posters and slogans about sexual harassment, increasing unrated transit ambassadors and youth leaders with violence prevention backgrounds, and more. A year after the launch of Not One More Girl, BART found that 65 percent of riders responded they were more aware of sexual harassment, 59 percent responded they know what to do if they witness harassment on BART, 46 percent responded they know where to get help if they experience harassment on BART, and 36 percent responded feeling safer riding BART. Such evidence proves that transit agencies can implement SB 1181 and prevent and reduce harassment on transit without a criminalization approach.


45 “Asian American and Pacific Islander Historical Timeline," Stop AAPI Hate, [https://stopaapihate.org/timeline/](https://stopaapihate.org/timeline/).
In response to the racial reckoning in 2020, school districts and classrooms across the United States have started to incorporate more histories of diverse people in their curriculum. A long line of scholars and activists, including members of the Third World Liberation Front at University of California Berkeley, Rudine Sims Bishop, Jocelyn Glazier and Jung Seo, and Beverly Tatum, have published numerous empirical studies highlighting the significance of curriculum representation on the development of positive ethnoracial identities of students of color. More contemporary scholars interested in understanding identity development specifically in Asian American populations have discovered that positive ethnoracial identity is associated with higher social, psychological, and academic wellbeing. Moreover, exposure to Asian American representation in the media, curricula, and interpersonal interactions extends to non-Asian Americans and their everyday treatment of Asian Americans.

Despite the growing scholarship on the significance of nurturing positive ethnoracial identities for Asian American populations through accurate representation, the standard curriculum falls egregiously short. Students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) who have taken Professor Josephine Kim’s course HS03M Race, ethnicity, and culture: Contemporary issues in Asian America, reported that while their K-16 curriculum incorporated Asian American history, the content only included brief comments about wars, threats, and immigration policy. Without accurate Asian American representation, the full context of a complex racialized nation is lost, rendering Asian Americans invisible and wedged between an uncomplicated Black-White binary that often dominates race conversations in the U.S. In addition, without representation of Asian Americans, the Asian American population is vulnerable to stereotype and discrimination. Asian Americans are the fastest growing population in the United States, and in order to sustain a disparate nation, it is imperative that the educational curriculum is reflective of its population.

Countering a History of Invisibility, Erasure, and Exclusion through an Asian American Ethnic Studies Course

By Josephine M. Kim, Shubh Agrawal, Clara Kang, Kiki Nakamura-Koyama, and Leah Porter

A Japanese American business puts up an ‘I am an American’ banner in Oakland, California the day after the Pearl Harbor attack, December 1941. Photo by Dorothea Lange, Library of Congress
Since the development of Ethnic Studies courses in the 1960s, numerous studies have consistently found Ethnic Studies curricula to have a positive impact on students, both academically and socially. Participation in Ethnic Studies courses has been shown to increase student outcomes such as attendance, GPA, graduation rates, academic engagement, and more. Many researchers attribute these outcomes to the relevant and meaningful nature of Ethnic Studies curricula, which highlights the narratives and voices of those traditionally excluded from education, increasing visibility and combating erasure. Ethnic Studies courses promote cultural relevance and make explicit connections to students’ ethnoracial identities, presenting a “race-reimagined” perspective in which students see themselves directly reflected in curricula.

H503M is an inaugural Asian American Ethnic Studies course at HGSE. Through the voices of its students, we examined the potency of ethnoracial curriculum representation and its impact on Asian American students and their ethnic-racial identity development. Of notable observation was the sense of “being seen for the first time,” as students in H503M discussed how curricular representation enhanced their sense of engagement, belonging, and pride (all student names are pseudonyms):

Patty, a multi-racial Japanese and White woman stated, “As simple as it sounds, just being seen and in a class full of people with a similar background felt so welcoming. Sharing that space and learning about shared history—that alone was effective.” Sarah, a Chinese American woman, named that in H503M, “I finally existed again in the classroom space. Every single class was about us!” Maggie, a multi-racial Chinese, Vietnamese and White woman, echoed these sentiments, noting that “taking this course allowed me to be in community with so many wonderful people. I felt seen and appreciated as the person I am.”

While students’ sense of visibility increased as H503M progressed, it led to both a lamenting of “not knowing” what they “did not even know to know” through their prior K-16 schooling and a newfound awakening of “finally knowing”:

Peter, a biracial Japanese and white man expressed, “I did not learn about Asian American history in any of my K-16 educational experiences...and H503M made me acutely aware of how Asian Americans have experienced invisibility, erasure, and exclusion. It gave me historical context for these forms of oppression and helped me connect that context to my own experiences and those of my family,”

John, a Chinese American man, further highlighted his own experiences of erasure from prior schooling, “In this course, I learned history that I literally didn’t know existed. I was given access to readings, media, and stories that I genuinely maybe never would have encountered on my own, and now, I feel like I have things that I can bring and share with others.” Julie, a Korean American woman, shared similar sentiments in this way, “This was the first time I learned about Asian American history...H503M opened up a lot of conversations that I didn’t know existed until it was brought up in class.”

Students also reiterated and celebrated the role H503M played in furthering their understanding of their own intersecting racial and cultural experiences and identities:

Jobe, a Taiwanese-American man, said about engaging in the course, “I took away the realization that Asian Americans are not a ‘privileged’ minority. They have experienced tremendous oppression over the last few centuries.” Parker, a Korean American woman, shared that she learned “more about the nuances of the Asian

“Learning about Asian American history in this class—both the heartbreaking parts and the encouraging parts—made me feel empowered and has helped me gain a sense of self-agency in crafting my own narrative of who I am.”

MIA, CHINESE AMERICAN

American’ experience,” while Shuqi, an Asian woman, described how she feels more “proud” of her “Asian identity following this course.”

How Asian American students experience their racial, cultural, and ethnic identity critically affects their self-perception and influences how they engage with others. Asian American Ethnic Studies courses like H503M often provide the first space of its kind for students to gain insight into the historical context of their racial and cultural identity. Multiple students highlighted the ways in which the course was indeed their introduction to identity affirmation through a contextualized historical lens:

Mia, a Chinese woman, elaborated, “Learning about Asian American history in this class—both the heartbreaking parts and the encouraging parts—made me feel empowered and has helped me gain a sense of self-agency in crafting my own narrative of who I am. Even though I did not learn about Asian American history in college (I don’t think it was ever offered at my school...), the ideas and stereotypes of the model minority constantly came up in conversations and life outside of classes, which in retrospect shows how much my peers and I have been affected and have both consciously and subconsciously played into the model minority myth.”

Students also gave voice to navigating a K-16 curriculum that rarely recognized Asian American history, further contributing to their feelings of being perceived as “perpetual foreigners.”

Many students expressed varied reactions to recognizing the lack of attention given to Asian American issues in the K-16 experience, contributing further to their feelings of erasure and invisibility in American history, their education, and even more broadly, in life:

Carrie, a Korean American woman, described the sense of grief and loss stemming from a missing history, “By contextualizing the history of Asian America and putting Asian American experiences and narratives in dialogue with more widespread knowledge of other racial groups in the U.S. around the same timeline, I was able to clearly see how much Asian American history was left out in my K-16 educational career. While I learned about the challenges and triumphs of Western culture, I was never exposed to the stories of Asian America, let alone told from the perspective of a fellow Asian American.”

Andre, a Filipino American man, shared further that the course made him feel “angry and proud,” and that he was “angry knowing that Asian Americans are a part of building this country yet are rendered invisible and erased due to the model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner stereotypes.” He added, “I'm proud to know that this course...
exists at Harvard and that even non-Asian Americans are taking this course. That, in and of itself, is a metric of social change towards the Asian American community.”

The invisibility and marginalization of cultural identities can be reinforced as students progress through their own racial identity development while navigating the pressure to conform to majority culture. This process may lead some students to implicitly idealize white culture and consider rejecting their own Asian American identity, often resulting in dissonance, anxiety, and racial ambivalence. H503M students described the role the course played in challenging pro-white idealization and racial ambivalence that many had first-handly experienced throughout their lives:

Susan, a multi-ethnic Asian American woman, writes, “I have...learned of my own trauma maneuvering the U.S. as an Asian American and the impact of assimilation on me and my children. I bought into the notions of white beauty, wanting my eyes to be bigger, my skin to be fairer, and my accent to be whiter. I regret not insisting that my kids learn Mandarin because I feared their not being able to stay on top of school work if they speak a different language at home...After this class, I now know that my children and I have trauma stemming from trying to change ourselves so that we fit into the white American mold.” Similarly, Jen, a Korean woman, described her observations in this way, “H503M...allowed me to unpack years and years of unspoken, sometimes unidentified, struggles,” while Mee, another Korean American woman, elevated the importance of facilitating a collective space, “I realized that my own racial, cultural, and ethnic identity cannot be shaped by myself. Connecting with other students through the course materials gave me the comfort and courage needed to open up and ask tougher questions.”

Enrollees in H503M were impacted by the course in ways that were as disparate as their ethnoracial identities, and they emphasized the importance of stories as their key takeaway from H503M:

Sam, a Korean American woman, wrote that she hoped to share more stories from her community, “I started asking myself tougher questions. I am in Korea for the first time in my life, and I’m working on a project where I hope to share stories from traditionally marginalized communities. I realize that a lot of the stories I hope to share were sparked from H503M discussions and the final project.”

Students also expressed pride for the way H503M amplified Asian American narratives and empowered the lived experiences of Asian Americans:

Amy, a Chinese American woman, wrote, “H503M centers the history, literature, and lived experiences of Asian Americans. Rather than vainly straining for visibility, the course is grounded in the assumption and belief that Asian Americans matter and their stories and histories matter. Learning about Asian American issues with this foundational belief already in place has been transformational.” Tee, a Vietnamese American man, added similar reflections, “H503M validated the fact that Asian American history is American History,” while Sue, a Korean American woman, pointed out that “even just being able to put a name to the experiences that we face made us feel more powerful and able to engage in dismantling systems of oppression.” Furthermore, Joe, a Chinese American man, shared that after taking H503M, he embraces “the power of stories and the individual stories of people.”

Other key takeaways from H503M related to critical theory, in particular the impact of “racial triangulation” and its role in maintaining the status quo of anti-blackness and pro-whiteness. While students described how the course instilled in them the importance of advocating on behalf of Asian Americans, the most compelling key takeaway from H503M was how the course fostered in them the salience of perspective-taking and acting on behalf of other marginalized populations:

Erica, a Korean American woman, explained that “the complex relationships amongst the Asian American community and other people of color communities and coming face to face with ways in which we have both suffered because of racist systems was invaluable. Most importantly, discussing the responsibility we have to engage in our collective liberation from these systems was empowering. Representation matters not only as a conduit to understanding one’s own history but also in understanding how all of our fates are entwined.”

Students who enrolled in H503M reported that the course influenced them personally in a myriad of ways and named the reverberating effects of Ethnic Studies that not only benefit students who take the class but the society and community in which they interact and reside:

Patty, a Chinese American woman, stated, “H503M was easily one of the best courses I’ve taken during my time at Harvard. The impact it has had on me, and as a result, on my students, is immeasurable.” Another student further elaborated that, “This course was so impactful, resulting in students applying to law school, wanting to start similar courses at other institutions, and creating the APAI graduation ceremony at Harvard University.” Tommy, a Filipino American man, shared, “I eventually want to pitch a similar course as I pursue my Ph.D. in Asian American Ethnic Studies Policy. Most institutions outside of HGSE that focus on Education Leadership or Policy Analysis, don’t teach anything on Asian American studies. That needs to change. This course has the ability to be a successful template in teaching other schools of education how to teach Asian American histories and studies.”

Much like Beverly Tatum’s ABC framework which posits that marginalized groups are best positioned for success and leadership when they locate affinity in groups, H503M is a testament to the power of healing in an education setting and the exponential potency of Ethnic Studies curriculum in reaching all students. Students found their voices in their curiosity of the Asian American diaspora and learned to gauge the sensitivity of the current Asian American climate, racism, and conversations around them, actively engaging their voices to push against social injustices against Asian Americans.
CONCLUSION

Ethnic Studies courses like H503M provide a psychologically safe forum where collective grieving, celebrating, and exploring can take place, resulting in newfound pride, resilience, and strength for marginalized racial, ethnic, and cultural groups in the U.S. Augmenting awareness on the historical context surrounding the lived experiences of Asian Americans powerfully shifts internalized perceptions of inferiority so commonly harbored by ethnic and racial minorities in the U.S., accurately locating the problem in the systemic and prolonged oppression, deprivation, and denigration that Asian Americans have endured for centuries. The testimonies of H503M students elevate the urgency of proactively and deliberately creating intentional and institutionalized opportunities for students to explore their ethnoracial identity within the confines of a classroom. Co-curricular diversity and inclusion programs that facilitate critical race conversations have an important role to play in higher education, but they are optional, peripheral, and at best, serve as isolated, one-off attempts at increasing knowledge and awareness of a self-selected few. Incentivizing Ethnic Studies courses with academic credit as part of a sustained and comprehensive curriculum ensures student access to appointed faculty, dedicated staff support, designated physical space, and pointed library resources, concretizing an institution’s ongoing commitment to equity and justice.

“By contextualizing the history of Asian America and putting Asian American experiences and narratives in dialogue with more widespread knowledge of other racial groups in the U.S. around the same timeline, I was able to clearly see how much Asian American history was left out in my K-16 educational career.”

CARRIE, KOREAN AMERICAN

About the Authors

Josephine M. Kim
Josephine M. Kim is an East Asian American Senior Lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a Licensed Mental Health Counselor. She lends her expertise on diversity and inclusion training design focused on anti-racism in the workplace at The United Nations and in The Inclusive Policy Lab at UNESCO, and she is a Diversity Scholar at the National Center for Institutional Diversity at the University of Michigan.

Shubh Agrawal
Shubh Agrawal is a South Asian clinical psychology doctoral student at William James College and a graduate of HGSE in the Prevention Science and Practice and C.A.S. programs. She centers her work on strengths-based, culturally humble practices and the intersectionality of identities and experiences of clients. She hopes to continue to amplify the voices of Asian youth and dismantle barriers to mental health within our communities.

Clara Kang
Clara Kang is a Korean American school-based social worker and counselor in Boston with an EdM and CAS from HGSE. Born in Korea and raised in Southern California, she started her education career as a Fulbright English teacher in Gwangju, South Korea, where she was born. In her current role, she focuses on supporting young people’s mental health, social emotional wellbeing, and identity development.

Kiki Nakamura-Koyama
Kiki Nakamura-Koyama is a Japanese American educator at Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child. She was formerly a high school English teacher passionate about “mirrors and windows” literature in rural, white public schools. She taught at Northampton High School, Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, and abroad through the Fulbright program in Indonesia prior to receiving an EdM at HGSE.

Leah Porter
Leah Porter is a Chinese-Malaysian American administrator at Red Rocks Community College who supports minoritized students on the STEM pathway. Born and raised in Malaysia, she started her education journey as an adult learner, mom, and first-generation college student at Arapahoe Community College. Leah has an Ed.M. in Education, Leadership, Organization, and Entrepreneurship from HGSE.
Endnotes


Student demonstrators outside of the Supreme Court. Photography by Scott Applewhite, AP

ISSUE 33

Saving Affirmative Action: The Youth-Led Coalition Fighting Back at the Supreme Court

By Angie Shin

The day after the Supreme Court heard oral arguments for the Students for Fair Admissions’ (SFFA) case against Harvard College, Prof. Ben Eidelson from Harvard Law School posted a Twitter thread to “highlight the incoherence of the position put forward by opponents of [affirmative] action yesterday.” In this thread, Eidelson proposes a hypothetical scenario: If student S submits an essay about being a Black Republican, SFFA’s current argument as presented before the Supreme Court would not know how to formulate a lawful input to a favorable judgment about S’s candidacy and application to a university. He expands on the problem: there is no way to “reason coherently about people’s pasts or futures—both spent in a world where their race bears some significance—while stipulating that one’s analysis must come out the same way regardless of a person’s stated race.”

The Supreme Court, according to Eidelson, will be perpetually unable to formulate coherent standards about race-blind admissions, because it won’t be able to get around the fact that admissions decisions are about people, and race unequivocally matters in people’s lives.

This fundamental truth formed the basis for the vibrant, ambitious and intentional organizing that students of Harvard, including myself and more than two dozen other Harvard student and alumni organizations, did in opposition to the goal of this suit: to overturn affirmative action. SFFA first sued the President and Fellows of Harvard College in November of 2014 with two claims: that Asian American applicants experienced stricter standards for admissions based on their race and that Harvard had violated the Equal Protection Clause and Title VI of The Civil Rights Act by engaging in a prohibited form of racial balancing. Headed by conservative financial adviser Ed Blum, this lawsuit is the newest addition to his lifelong career dedicated to race-blind American policy. In a duplicitous move, Blum’s lawsuit claims to represent the interests of Asian prospective students, but his goal is to overturn affirmative action with the intention of reducing Black and Hispanic enrollment in our nation’s universities.
As the largest minority groups in America, Black and Hispanic students are already disproportionately underrepresented in the hallways of Harvard and many other universities; affirmative action is one tool that schools have used to rectify centuries of discrimination and oppression that systematically excluded these students from the chance at a college education.

In September 2019, the United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts ruled in favor of Harvard, having found that Harvard’s admissions policies did not exercise any discriminatory practices against Asian American applicants. The First Circuit found the same. 18 months later, SFFA’s appeals reached the Supreme Court of the United States, for both this case and a similar one they had brought against the University of North Carolina (UNC). The Supreme Court granted both petitions, and on July 26, 2022, 25 Harvard student and alumni organizations, represented by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF), filed an amici curiae brief in support of Harvard.

I first became involved in the case in the summer of 2021, when I began my tenure as Co-President of the Harvard-Radcliffe Asian American Women’s Association (AAWA). At the time, I only helped liaise attorney-client privileged communications from the LDF, who represented AAWA and 25 other student and alumni groups to file an amici curiae brief in support of Harvard. In April the following year, the LDF’s legal team invited me, my outgoing Co-President, and the student leaders of other select amicus organizations to become members of a new Activism Working Group for the case, which included students, civil rights nonprofits, grass roots organizations, and other civic and social partners all over the country. We met weekly on Zoom from May to October to discuss organizational goals; I served as acting secretary.

By leveraging our collective networks, the Working Group grew over the summer of 2022 to include student representatives from Yale, Princeton, MIT, Stanford, Columbia, UPenn and dozens of other educational institutions across the United States. The Harvard students created a new ad hoc student group on campus the following Fall, called the Affirmative Action Coalition, with four key organizing goals for the semester: a student-led teach-in with the LDF; an intercollegiate sign-on statement; a national week of action dedicated to holding affirmative action events every day for a week leading up to the date of oral arguments; and a public demonstration in front of the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. 150 students joined our Slack workspace and attended weekly virtual meetings to plan our programming ahead of the Court’s hearing of the case.

There was not a single waking minute in the month of October when I wasn’t completely consumed by my organizing role. I ate, slept, and breathed this coalition, constantly turning the Slack workspace with preparation requests, making myself available for every meeting with every stakeholder, and sharing endless feedback and questions in discussions of programming and intention. I skipped lectures that I could afford to watch remote recordings of later in the week, I came late to club meetings and rehearsals, and I put everything else in my life on hold. And I was so, so happy to do it. Organizing for Harvard’s affirmative action was the most meaningful work I’ve done in my life so far. I was swept up in this incredible wave of momentum, focus, determination, passion, connection, and community that was only made possible by the members of the Coalition. I was so grateful to my peers who had signed up to join, not because of any established organizational prestige or a promise of a guaranteed job after college, but because of the mere idea that students of color deserve equitable, just, and policy-supported access to higher education.

This work culminated with our trip to D.C., where we held a protest outside the Supreme Court the day of the SFFA v. Harvard oral arguments. We trudged our way to airports and bus stops, catching rides back to Harvard’s campus when oral arguments began. Most observers expect the Supreme Court will overturn affirmative action. Whether or not it will be because they decide the initial justification for its use has expired, or because they decide that race-conscious admissions is flat-out unconstitutional, it will have massive repercussions on how not only higher education institutions but also businesses and industries across America’s economy select and intake future generations of students and employees. The nation’s faith in the Supreme Court is already at an all-time low; in the post-Dobbs age, it is now possible to think that the Supreme Court could overturn a landmark decision that once protected the civil rights of millions of Americans.

I came home from D.C. tired beyond belief. It hadn’t occurred to me that the momentum building could make me feel that way, where suddenly ceasing the overdrive of action and energy left me dizzy, eager for rest. However, after a couple of weeks spent catching up on my schoolwork and recharging with my support network of friends and family, the core nagging question started plaguing me again. What can activists do if the Court overturns Grutter?

Hypothetically, a few things, however unlikely. Congress could pass a bill to technically strip jurisdiction from the Court with regards to hearing the Harvard case. But this remedy is unlikely to work for state schools such as UNC, another plaintiff in this case. President Biden’s recently-formed Commission on the Supreme Court of the United States is exploring changing the make-up of the Court, from term limits to floating appointments to court-packing. And states such as California have been working on reparations legislation that could allocate funding to students descended from slaves, making access to higher education financially easier.

But we cannot forget the power we have as Harvard students to stage public protest that can push the needle on this vital issue. The Harvard community has a history of organizing for justice, from the early days of the Civil Rights Movement to standing in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. The work of the Coalition harks back to this rich legacy and has rejuvenated the campus and its civic engagement with issues of educational justice. Such action must be kept alive on campus, to keep these problems salient in the eyes of not only undergraduates but graduate students, prospective employees, high school students and prospective college applicants, and all other allied bodies in the fight for fixing America’s broken education system.

Work like this rarely sees short-term goals to fruition. Instead, we are part of an incredibly driven group of students, alumni, researchers, lawyers, journalists, and leaders committed to creating national momentum around this vital issue. This is the work that sets up the changemakers of the future, and nourishes their hopes and ambitions for a world where race and its complexities can be truly understood by all and treated with care in the eyes of the law. This is the work that honors all those who have been fighting for justice and peace for so long — and I am excited to keep honoring that legacy while I can.
Endnotes

1 Ben Eidelson [@beidelson], “(C) ’S’s Stated Belief about the Likely Effects of Admitting S...” Tweet, Twitter, November 1, 2022, [https://twitter.com/beidelson/status/1587461755655147521](https://twitter.com/beidelson/status/1587461755655147521).

About the Author

Angie Shin

Angie Shin (they/she) is an undergraduate student concentrating in Physics and Government at Harvard College. In light of the SFFA v. Harvard Supreme Court case, they co-founded and co-led the Affirmative Action Coalition—a group of student activists from over 30 undergraduate and graduate organizations at Harvard University—to organize events of public action and education about the future of affirmative action, its constitutionality in the United States, and the importance of race-conscious college admissions and diversity in higher education institutions. They worked with students, community organizers, practitioners, allies, and leadership at Harvard University, Princeton University, Yale University, NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, The Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, The African American Policy Forum, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, and The Coalition for a Diverse Harvard.
“When the sun is at the highest point, sweat drips down to the earth, who knows that in the bowl of rice, each grain is made of exhausting work.”

White Rice
By Claire Liu

Place your middle fingers on your temples. Closer to the corner of your eyes. No. A little up. Ok. Press them tight and pull back.

Leer at yourself in the mirror. Keep pulling until you can feel the smooth layer of white under your pores and the water in your eyes makes it too hard to see.

***

Chinese poems are a few lines. Chinese epics are novels. There is no in between. The value is concentrated in small shots of espresso or taken in chugs of water. From the ages of three to four, every Chinese-American kid has these poems drilled into their heads in the vain hope of retaining their culture in a big (read smaller) new country. Poems that shook the earth they were read upon, poems that consumed the souls of their creators, poems that were specifically expressed in the exact brushstrokes of ancient Chinese calligraphy, awkwardly stacked into even fonts of simplified typography in overpriced textbooks.

The Chinese school I attended was technically my brother’s middle school, hijacked by a ferocious team of Chinese teachers every Saturday from 7:00 in the morning to some ambiguous time in the afternoon that I never waited long enough to discover. Chinese was my first language for all of my life but after three years of American public school education, I had unlearned everything I knew and was sent back to my brother’s middle school to learn it again (properly this time, I was told).

The first poem I learned in class was one of the most famous, meaning I had already heard my parents tell me it dozens of times before.

No one could remember the poet.

锄禾日当午，
汗滴禾下土，
谁知盘中餐，
粒粒皆辛苦。

White Rice
"When the sun is at the highest point, sweat drips down to the earth, who knows that in the bowl of rice, each grain is made of exhausting work."

I mean, that's what it should have sounded like. In my mouth, it sounded more like this.

The students stood in a phalanx, pronouncing the characters, unfeeling. Relatives and teachers alike have taught us the meaning, but when we read it, we're never really sure we understand. We are not Chinese. Too foreign to be considered American, too ignorant to be named Chinese. Nevertheless, we recite the poem perfectly. Verses of sweat and heart brush past our lips, carelessly thrown into the world. Left to defend themselves and find meaning in cold classrooms called Chinese for the weekend.

We cannot comprehend the poem. We will never experience the push of the soil against a till, never feel the beating sun split our skin on an open field, but we have been taught well. We lift our bowls and shovel mouthfuls of rice into our open jaws, no grain left behind. Our pride does not allow us to use spoons. Instead, we furrow our brows and focus on pushing individual kernels with thin bamboo chopsticks, and for half a moment we are almost Chinese.

***

I never fully understood American weddings. There's a lot that is difficult to grasp, something old, something new, something blue. The most puzzling tradition was not the haunting white dresses (the pale color was reserved for funerals in China), the four tier wedding cakes (Chinese hotels skip the fourth floor out of superstition), but the rice. A couple walking hand in hand down an aisle on what is supposed to be the happiest day of their lives, striding through a rain of white. Handfuls of grain tossed into the aisle, stepped on and sprinkled into the earth like salt.

Every time I see the happy couple grind the pebbles of starch under their heels, my innards flinch. They coil up inside themselves, disgusted and bewildered at the gross expense of the food.

In Mandarin, the character, “fan,” represents both “meal” and “rice.” Each is equivalent and incomplete without the other. The crunch of each footstep down the aisle ricochets in my stomach: breakfast, lunch, dinner, repeat. I feel my grandmother look on with her brows furrowed in disapproval, lines creasing down her mouth, letting out a heavy breath from the other side of the world. Americans are so wasteful, she sighs, and I nod heavily in agreement. The words have lost their meaning but it feels empty to leave them unsaid.

This is the only time my grandmother looks at me without seeing a foreigner. Every other time she examines me, my tan skin, flat nose, black hair, and brown eyes; she laughs and pats my head, exclaiming how funny it is to see such “Americanness” in a familiar body. But during these specific moments, when we turn our heads and our insides grimace in the shared protection of our precious rice, we step closer together. And so I must look like a fool. Shaking like a bobblehead on the happiest day of some strangers’ lives, nodding along to the unspoken words of my grandmother across the sea.

***

Good habits save you money, treat your belongings well. I don’t mean to pontificate on overused comparisons of Chinese families refusing to wear shoes in the house, but the notion is true. So it came at no surprise to me when it took my father fifteen years of habitually picking up leftover potato peels and soggy peppercorns from the sink with bare hands and throwing them into the trash until he finally called a plumber to come unclog our sink pipe for the first time.

The man held himself with confidence, tracking dust prints into my home with stained sneakers without a second thought. After clearing up the pipe, he stood up, dusted his knees, and proceeded to give a lecture to my father and I on all the things we had learned by the first two years of our fifteen year run. Understanding the man's intentions as good, we stood smiling, waiting to escort him out. Before he turned to leave, he snapped back and pointed at the sink.

“Make sure you don’t rinse any rice down there.”
Our smiles widened and we chuckled. No, we would remember not to do that. Of course, put it in the trash. Right, we’ll call you if there are any problems. It belongs in the garbage. Great, thank you for coming by. Watch your step. Goodbye.

My father went back to his endless tabs of research and I returned to my room and sulked on my bed. How dare he assume that my family ate rice, of all things? My brain supplied its indignation with the ammunition of facts I had gathered: there are dozens of ethnicities in China, each has unique cultures and foods, et cetera, et cetera.

Yet no matter how many arguments poured out of me, in my most private heart, I was ashamed because he was right. I did eat rice. Almost on a daily basis. Something that had once been a point of pride that proved my almost-Chinese identity turned bitter. My admiration of the countless hours, totaled years, of backbreaking work that my ancestors spent on rice patties disappeared into nothingness.

Finally, the years of discipline and pride my Chinese teachers and relatives had instilled in me learning how to be Chinese finally bubbled to the surface and I laughed. I howled at the absurdity of watching our precious rice slip down into the plumbing until tears ran down my face and my laughs were silent gasps of air. My family is too Chinese for that.

***

Daily bowls of plain white rice serve as a reminder of the unlucky miracles that push my life forward. Rice is my great grandfather moving from his rural town in West China to the cities, knowing he would never see his family again. Rice is my grandmother sacrificing her education for her family in the largest famine of human history. Rice is my father and his sisters surviving the organized prosecution of their parents. Rice is my mother ignoring whispered slurs in sanitized workplaces. Rice is the hyphen in Chinese-American.

It is dizzying to look at the experience of a Chinese-American, of any second generation immigrant I’d wager, because the eyes on a human being are fixed to the front. An all-encompassing view of our lives requires one to spin around constantly: snorts at our ignorance from our relatives on the left, glares of distrust from our neighbors on the right, calls from the media to defend our culture from their appropriation at the back. We were not born to live in human bodies. Rather, our function calls on us to be the giant Argus, except the eyes that cover our skin are squinted, angled, and small.

Unfortunately, as a person sans any extra eyes, I keep my view trained ahead, counting days by bowls of rice and writing out little horizontal lines bisecting the only options listed for me on bubble sheets for standardized tests. I imagine a grain of rice sitting between the words. Rice is the harsh outer shell of an uncooked pearl, a dash that divides and connects two uncontrollable identities that I cannot wholly claim as my own.

I live in the grain. It is inseparable from my body, and after years of failed psychological surgery, I am no longer interested in removing it. The gleaming shell of white is the extension of my soul that holds me together. To my left, I am both ashamed and comforted by all that I have abandoned by being born. To my right, I am proudly highlighted yellow by my skin. The pang of metallic humiliation and the delightful narcissism of being “different” are contained in steaming bowls of white. The Chinese-American identity crisis in a four letter word.

***

Scoop up the rice in your spoon and suck it into your mouth. Smash the overcooked mush against the roof of your mouth with your tongue, feel the grain split apart on your gums. Savor the bland sweetness of starch and swallow it down, let each fragment slide down your throat and sink into your stomach. Focus with the efforts of a new sommelier-in-training.

Do you taste the fragrance of Chinese sweat and tears? Is it plain? Boring? The word rice is thrown at you from all sides. Chinese and Americans alike hurl the grain towards you with none of the extravagance of the wedding tosses. Let the rice sink into your pores, settle under your skin, and live there. Stand under the white stream with an open mouth. Catch a
handful and hold it in your palm, count the grains under your thumb. One. Two. Three. Four. The rice is not good. It is not bad. It is not bland. It is not interesting. It is not exotic.

Five. Six. Seven. It is a little girl relearning her native language in a classroom. It is the love between a foreigner and her grandmother. It is a plastered smile towards a plumber with good intentions.

Eight. Nine. Ten. Give up counting, but clench your fingers together and squeeze the kernels into your skin. Each grain is precious. Press one into your pocket. Do not let it get stepped on, flushed down the sink, or left behind. Learn your culture, regard happiness with confusion, keep your belongings in a good condition, never leave a grain of rice behind. Look back into the mirror and stare at your reflection. Observe your features. Poke at your skin and peel back your eyelid.

Don’t blink.

Claire Liu
Claire Liu is a student at Harvard University pursuing a dual concentration in the realms of Economics, Theatre, Dance, and Media. Originally from Illinois, she became involved and enthralled with the arts from a very young age. Throughout her life, she has grown an immense passion for the intersection between activism and the arts, particularly in producing art with purpose and meaning. This mission has driven her to create Project Said: A Global Platform for Diversity and Equity in the Arts. In the future she hopes to work as a producer, director, and writer that traverses industries from Hollywood to K-pop.
In racialized America, Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) often describe the space they occupy professionally as the “in-between space,” ascribed to the role of interlocutor, and expected to mediate conflicts between groups and ease the operation of institutional goals and policies. Interlocutors are individuals who are 1) involved in a conversation; and 2) within that conversation, they are representing another individual or group of individuals. Other sources regard an interlocutor as a neutral, arbitrating party that equally represents two or more parties that may have different perspectives, beliefs, and dispositions. The construct of interlocutor has been used within business, and translation studies, but less so in education. For business, an interlocutor is an individual who is a liaison between the institution’s interests and the client who may be doubtful about the product or service a business is marketing. Sometimes referenced as ambassadors or liaisons, the interlocutor attends to the interests and beliefs of the client while simultaneously representing the greater interests of the company. Their role is to understand the client and come to a consensus on what products or services will be best suited to their needs. In the end, the hope is for a business transaction to be made.

Asian American Teachers as Interlocutors: Racializing Agendas of Ascription and Skill

By Trish Mott-Mullaney and Diep Nguyen
In translation studies, a bilingual interpreter works between two parties to convey a source message. The interpreter does not merely transmit a precise message from source message to receiver; rather, the interpreter anticipates how the receiver may conceive a message and adapts their words and expressions accordingly. Oftentimes, such interpretation events take longer as the interpreter anticipates what the source messenger means and how the receiver will conceive that message. The source messenger may be doubtful that the actual message is being sent with precision as such adaptivity involves more time and lengthier descriptions. As the source messenger lacks the language proficiency and capacity to understand the message being delivered in a language other than their own, they often must trust the interpreter to convey the message as intended since they do not have full access to the conveyed message.

In these two examples from business and translation studies, an interlocutor is seen as a neutral practitioner. However, in practice, the power disequilibrium that privileges the institutional structures, policies, and goals as the primary source of truth changes the function of AAPIs from a neutral interlocutor to one that serves mainly the institutional purpose as the primary and superior source. Scrutiny and suspicion prevail.

In this paper, we theorize through a lens of decoloniality that interrogates how power is positioned and embodied by AAPI-identifying educators in the field of K-12 education. Our inquiry takes place in the Midwest, providing a unique context for investigation given the smaller proportion of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). We ask the following research question:

**How do AAPI K-12 educators describe their experiences as racialized interlocutors?**

Asians are underrepresented in the teaching profession. The proportion of AAPI teachers in the field of K-12 teachers is 2.5%. This ratio is lower representation has been persistent throughout the last 30 years, with many AAPI students being geared into professions other than education, based on the potential for a higher income and due to lower threats of discrimination. K-12 education is perceived to have an evolving and changing landscape, with new students coming into classrooms each year with faculties and leadership shifts. Education is perceived as a profession with less career advancement and less stable working conditions.

Despite the low representation of AAPI teachers in the profession, the AAPI student community has nearly doubled between 2000 to 2019. One of the impacts of this disequilibrium between the number of AAPI students and professional educators is that these students continue to be underserved, and AAPI teachers are overworked and underrepresented.

**AAPI representation.** For the small proportion of AAPI teachers who do join the field, they are confronted with how they are ascribed within the field of K-12 education. Some become the de facto Asian curriculum provider for their colleagues and students, and are assumed to be interpreters for any Asian language represented within the student body. While AAPI individuals may resist such ascriptions, claiming that the community is monolithic and no person can universally represent the Asian diaspora, such constructions are commonplace in schools. This construction is aligned with another ascription of AAPIs as the forever foreigner, regardless of their immigration and generational status, alongside the racialized construction of the model minority myth.

**Forever Foreigner.** The forever or perpetually foreign has long been ascribed to Latino and Asian groups in the US, detailing their supposed lack of English proficiency and non-adoption of cultural and ethnic norms of the dominant society as reasons for their legal and, later, their ascribed exclusion. Regarded as unassimilable or insufficiently acculturated, they are under-identified for advancement and reach a perpetual glass ceiling in their work, inclusive of K-12 education, where senior administrative roles are seldom attainable. The forever foreigner stereotype was reproduced more overtly during COVID-19, with the pandemic constructed as the fault of the international Asian diaspora who imported the disease from Wuhan, China.

**Model Minority Myth (MMM).** The MMM has historic ties among Protestant missions who worked persistently to spread Christianity across the globe, a movement that largely regarded Asians as malleable converters. The actual naming of the MMM can be traced to Petersen’s commentary about the mediated and attained success of Japanese Americans. He wrote, “Denied access to many urban jobs, both white-collar and manual, they undertook menial tasks with such perseverance that they achieved modest success.” With this ascription of Japanese Americans as tenacious, cooperative agents of the dominant American ideal, they came to be regarded as the successful minority relative to other minimalized groups. The East Asian ascription later mapped itself onto other AAPI groups, and Asian groups not inhabiting the MMM were considered aberrant and uncooperative with this positive stereotype of success, creating intra-racial tension across differently identifying Asian communities. The MMM can reproduce itself when AAPIs inhabit and perform White adequacy—reducing markers or affiliation with their Asian identities and heritages. The aversion to the negative stereotype of the forever foreigner may be pushing AAPI individuals toward ideals of the seemingly positive alternative of the model minority myth, problematically constructing these two intersecting stereotypes to exploit AAPI labor and talents without granting them the benefits of group membership, reproducing the ideals of colonialism and White Supremacy (Figure 1). Neither stereotype is a suitable description for the multivocality of the Asian diaspora.

**Figure 1. Performativity that Reinscribes the Model Minority Myth**

Such constructions occur in relation to the Black/White binary, particularly given the Midwestern context of this investigation, where the proportion of AAPI families is smaller relative to the coasts. Kim’s research shows that this construction is two-fold. First, there is a racial construction of hierarchy where Blacks have little privilege, whereas Whites have the most, and any other groups fall between these two bookends. Secondly, there is ‘relative valorization’ where a dominant group valorizes Asians over Blacks while still subordinating both groups. Concurrently, Asians are
depoliticized by the dominant group, and thus Asians experience ‘civic ostracism,’ constructing them as outsiders and, thereby, unassimilable. Kim’s racial triangulation theory claims that racial subgroups are essentialized as fixed social categories, immutable to alternative constructions. Claims of multitude and intersecting identities and hybridity do not fall neatly into this paradigm of countable and fixed identity categories.

**ASIAN EDUCATORS AS INTERLOCUTORS**

As Asians are stereotyped as immutable and unassimilable but positively hardworking and smart, this shapes the experiences of AAPI educators in K-12 education. Asian-identifying teachers aspiring to professional advancement and attempting to refute or reframe the forever foreigner ascription may do so by taking on educational leadership roles, both in formal and informal ways, often reinforcing the MMM. Their efforts are perhaps driven by the belief that their individual and collective identities will be more positively regarded, holding promise for their greater and fuller inclusion. In their leadership experience, the AAPI educators find themselves assigned to the role of being an “intermediary/broker” for White and all identifying groups of color. The tenet of our examination is the AAPI educator serving as the racialized interlocutor. We begin with a review of the definition of an interlocutor who has entered the arena of education of and with AAPI educators and students.

In the application of the interlocutor role to education, Ramanathan found that AAPI educators were informally identified as interlocutors between Black and White students and parents when conflicts arose. Conceived as neither Black nor White and rendered “colorless,” AAPI educators were commissioned to serve as liaisons in these often-tenuous negotiations between different racial groups. Because Asian teachers were constructed as impartial, they could mitigate the conflict without showing alliances or allegiances to either group.

Interlocution is positioned as a distinct skill that can be contracted out to AAPI teachers when the senior administration has no such representation in their teaching and administrative team, creating additional labor distinct to AAPI teachers. Morita-Mullaney and Greene found that being an Asian interlocutor between a Black teacher and a White parent disgruntled over her child’s grades was not an invitation to engage in cross-racial dialogue but rather to subcontract out the work, so the Asian teacher would simultaneously represent the administration and alleviate potentially volatile arguments with the parent. Praised for such work, the power relationship was inherently unequal, with the institution claiming its solution-oriented stance and the Asian teacher ignorant and/or acquiescent to the request, further constructing AAPI teachers as invisible, and reinforcing the ideal that Asians are honorary Whites. Ultimately, being a guest or having honorary status contributes to such invisibility or what Hong references as “disappearing” and what Chang calls the muting of other identities.

While interlocution is a positively framed skill that transcends multiple fields and social locations, how it is ascribed to AAPI educators is problematic because it places an undue burden upon AAPI educators, where the institution does little to change its structural and ideological practices. Utilizing AAPI educators in the interlocution role to serve the school senior administration is a silent maneuver by the institution to maintain its power and control and, thereby, effectively reproduces a system of inequity within education.

**METHODOLOGY**

Employing a narrative case study, we look to the narratives from previously conducted studies with AAPI identifying female teachers and administrators in the Midwest along with more recently collected data with a new lens of interlocution. Narratives are the storied embodiments of participants that reflect their current and historical dilemmas and attend to long vignettes so traces of emotion and nuance are more adequately captured.

**Data collection**

The data consists of interviews conducted from 2011 to the present with anyone identifying as an AAPI educator in the field of English language learning. Participants were recruited at various educational venues throughout the Midwest. Interviews were semi-structured and focused on questions related to teaching and leadership within their school and district contexts and specifically on their racialized experiences in schools. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and ranged between forty-five minutes to two hours.

**Data analysis**

Using the lens of interlocution, we attended to two units of analysis: Power distribution and racialization. Using emergent coding, we examined how themes of power were racialized and experienced by the participants in the context of interlocution. To ensure consistency across coders, we compared our respective themes. When disagreement emerged, we discussed it until a consensus was met.

**FINDINGS**

Three AAPI-identifying participants from the Midwest participated in the study. All served in teacher roles; some had advanced into administrative roles in their districts. Madeline identified as a third-generation Chinese American with a Chinese mother and a White father. She described her appearance as ethnically ambiguous, as her colleagues would ascribe her racially as fitting into a Latina or mixed category, but not White. She has nineteen years of teaching experience and served as a teacher leader in her middle school. Tanya identified as a third-generation Japanese American with a Japanese father and White mother but phenotypically presented as an East Asian woman. She has twenty-four years of teaching experience and served as a district director for bilingual education at the time of the study. Thu identified as a first-generation Vietnamese immigrant, having moved to the US during the Fall of Saigon. Her first language is Vietnamese, and her second is English. At the time of the inquiry, she served as a senior administrator in a mid-sized school district and has forty-one years of teaching experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Role at time of study</th>
<th>Years in education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madeline</td>
<td>Beginnings District</td>
<td>English Learner Teacher</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>Beginnings District</td>
<td>Bilingual Director</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thu</td>
<td>Clockenstein District</td>
<td>Senior District Administrator</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In all district contexts in which the participants worked, their districts had committed to a public inquiry with their teachers on race and racism. The motives for their district’s professional development on race and racism were mixed, with some focused on racial disparities in achievement. Other interests were driven by a neoliberal agenda of maintaining the economic stability of their districts, with one district mainly focused on retaining a White student constituency with the unspoken discourse of “keeping up real estate values.” In one district, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was applying pressure given the disproportionate representation of Black students in suspensions and expulsions. The inquiry into race and racism in all the districts created the conditions for revealing how AAPI-identifying educators were racialized as interlocutors.

Madeline and Tanya’s district had contracted with an agency to facilitate professional development for its teachers on racial equity. Madelyn and Tanya reflected together on an activity called the “color line.” Based on the foundational work of Du Bois and built upon by Peggy McIntosh, educators were asked to create a line based on their racialized experiences. Teachers began in one straight line together, all standing up and facing the facilitator. The facilitator then posed a series of questions inviting teachers to step back if they experienced levels of privilege. Such examples included “I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time” or “I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.”

Once the activity concluded, predictably, those with the most privilege stood on the outskirts of the room looking at their colleagues of color, with Asian colleagues closest to them, Latinos next, and Blacks most distant from them. Instrumentally, the goal was for educators to experience and identify that race and racism are not overt acts of “meanness” but institutional acts that reproduce dominance along the lines of race with Whites prevailing. Madeline shared,

So that’s where it became, like, visually apparent to me. And when I was able to start articulating like, oh, I’m like, solidly in the middle. Not just because I feel that way, but because all of these tangible things and all of these tangible ways that I experience the world in the middle.

Madeline continued to describe her role in the ‘middle’ in the context of how she was racialized at school.

But also, there is still that sense of like, well, you’re not really with us, though, no matter which side I’m looking at. Like, Black people kind of pushed me towards grouping with Whites, and I think White people kind of pushed me towards working with people of color.

An interlocutor is seen as a neutral practitioner. However, in practice, the power disequilibrium that privileges the institutional structures, policies, and goals as the primary source of truth changes the function of Asian Americans from a neutral interlocutor to one that serves mainly the institutional purpose as the primary and superior.

Scrutiny and suspicion prevail.
Tanya, also from Madeline's district and a district leader, discussed how she felt this in-betweenness that she struggled to negotiate with her colleagues, who were predominantly White, with a few Black colleagues. She shared,

While we were talking about racial diversity and Critical Race Theory in our district, White colleagues would come to me to reconcile conflicts with our Black colleagues. Black colleagues would use me as a sounding board for issues with White colleagues. This was a weird role. I wasn't one or the other. I was a neutral in-between. But it sure didn't feel neutral.

Invisible labor. While Tanya's colleagues regarded her as a neutral arbitrator, this was not an identity nor position that she had claimed, nor was it a formal assignment. It was a role that emerged as the investigation of race and racism had fueled discomfort and conflict among her White and Black colleagues. Such informality demonstrates the invisible labor that Tanya adopted, believing that this could contribute to this critical inquiry on race and racism.

Labor in Secrecy. Despite Tanya's peculiarly situated enthusiasm to continue in this role, it was a particular labor that she felt operated in relative secrecy. Tanya sensed that her White and Black colleagues wanted her interlocution role to be confidential. White colleagues did not want to be constructed as racists, and Black colleagues did not want to be constructed as uncooperative with racial equity pursuits. Tanya guarding their secrets is a form of interlocution. By taking on this mediator role, she constricted intra-racial dialogue between them as she provided the venue for a dress rehearsal for interaction. In the end, an intra-racial performance never took place.

Instrumental Tokenization. Thu's district also engaged in racial equity professional development. As a senior administrator in a school district where she described a history of power struggles between Whites and Blacks, Thu found herself in a complex intermediary role. She was invited formally to assist a set of White and Black educators in arriving at a consensus about professional development content on racial equity. Her White supervisor made it clear that she should not become embroiled in conflict or disagreement. The leadership expectation was to get the two groups to arrive at a consensus. Yet, in the end, the final decisions were made by White and Black individuals and groups other than herself. Her contribution as an interlocutor did not seem to influence the ultimate decisions. Thu reflected that she became an instrumental device for White and Black stakeholders to claim agreement and consensus because she, the AAPI, was involved. Thu was discouraged that she was tokenized by her White boss, who wanted instrumental agreement across racial lines and could ultimately claim it had been accomplished, even though Thu felt like she was the casualty of the event as she was rendered invisible.

Despite Thu's frustration with the tokenization and the instrumental labor she provided to her district, she found creativity within the role of interlocutor. Thu stated,

What we really are, in some ways, is a power mediator in a very oppressive, racialized system, in that we translate, buffer, and protect. In some ways, we buffer the impact of harmful actions that those in power imposed on those who are not. Yet, in other ways, we also buffer for those in power against the criticism and complaints of those who are being oppressed. It is a complicated, precarious role that we play at the intersection of racial struggles. We are dependent upon to get things done, yet not entirely trusted, excluded, and not quite accepted. I don't know if "mediator" is even a good word to describe this complicated role...

Thu demonstrated how her consistent enactment of interlocutor in the districts moved her "up the ladder" into the senior ranks of district administration. Unlike Madeline and Tanya, who were flummoxed by their positioning, Thu's years of experience allowed her to inhabit the interlocutory role, developing a resiliency that informed her steps of subversive advocacy.

Subversion as a Suspect Class. Yet, Thu's adoption and continued development of the interlocutory role ultimately led her to be regarded as a suspect class due to her adjacency with White leadership. In the school district where Whites' and Blacks' struggles were prominent; she called herself 'discarded'. Despite an excellent performance evaluation, her contract was not renewed. This decision effectively ended her school administration career without impunity to the school district or its leadership. Thu summarized her painful experience in this way:

I had a great year and felt highly optimistic when I was given an excellent yearly evaluation by my supervisor. Then, two days later, I was told that my contract was not going to be renewed. The decision for non-renewal came swiftly, behind closed doors and without any opportunity for appeal or due process. 'Reorganization' was the school administration's public pretext to explain my departure. Internally, a code of silence was imposed to suppress any inquiry into the matter. It was a perfect storm that caught me completely by surprise. When I insisted on knowing the reason for my termination, I was given no evidence except that I had become a suspect to one of the school board members. It took me a long time to recover from this trauma. In reflection, I realized that I was merely a convenient pawn in a long history of racial struggle between the White and Black communities in the school district and that I could be easily discarded when I was no longer useful for both parties. I felt dehumanized and erased.
“While we were talking about racial diversity and Critical Race Theory in our district, White colleagues would come to me to reconcile conflicts with our Black colleagues. Black colleagues would use me as a sounding board for issues with White colleagues. This was a weird role. I wasn’t one or the other. I was a neutral in-between. But it sure didn’t feel neutral.”

TANYA

All three AANHPI participants took on interlocution roles informally, pointing to a de facto educational policy directing their labor, a role that was not officially sanctioned nor recognized but expected and adopted. This de jure policy led to an invisible labor of the AAPI participants, which reinforced their marginalization, with little to no process for discussion or resolution.

In this study, we illuminate the invisible labor that AAPI educators experienced in their Midwestern contexts. While all the districts had de jure policies stating that there would be professional development focused on racial equity, with the aim of disrupting and dismantling ideological and institutional structures, how AAPI educators experienced this policy differed. All three AAPI participants took on interlocution roles informally, pointing to a de facto educational policy directing their labor, a role that was not officially sanctioned or recognized but expected and adopted. This de jure policy led to an invisible labor of the AAPI participants, which reinforced their marginalization, with little to no process for discussion or resolution. Madeline, Tanya, and Thu’s aspired to help their districts with their de jure policy of racially conscious professional development, yet in practice it led to their contractual and invisible labor. In the end, a de facto policy of AAPIs as interlocutors emerged, which reinforced their invisibility among their White, Black, and Latino colleagues.

Invisibility is a component of erasure or what Hong references as not being the power “but becoming[ing] absorbed by power, not share[ing] the power of Whites but be[ing] stooges to a white ideology that exploited our ancestors.” By defining and framing erasure as a structural behavior of oppression, interlocution is unsettled as a skill and, more specifically, defined as a social location and positioning of marginalization upon AAPI educators. The unrecognized labor of interlocution that AAPI navigate is a means for institutional structures to naturalize this construction and its related behaviors. Interlocution operates best when it masquerades.

When erasure is ascribed to AAPI communities as a whole, other identities are muted, obscured, and omitted. One’s skills as a teacher or an educational leader, a curriculum specialist, or a multilingual interpreter become squashed as they are secondary to the primary construction of “Asianness” and supposed cooperation with maintaining historic school structures and practices. In the end, they are dismissed and rendered invisible.

Drawing on the construct of erasure and its manifested ‘interlocution,’ Kim’s racial triangulation theory is helpful. Interlocution within cross-racial dialogue can create suspicion from both ends of the racial continuum. Interlocution events could be constructed as Asian-Black conflict, and such cleavages need to be resolved among communities of color, making the work of racial reconciliation incumbent upon people of color and not the labor of Whites. Such a de facto policy was and is not the aim of the racial equity work that Madeline, Tanya, and Thu’s schools adopted, but it reveals how Whiteness and White supremacy avoid the gaze of disruption and unsettling. Ultimately, the racial equity pursuits that their districts commissioned fell short of its policy aims of racial reconciliation (de jure), with the de facto policy taking hold for the AAPI female-identifying educators. In the end, Tanya, Thu, and Madeline left their school districts for academic posts, now enabling a systematic view of their shared experiences of interlocution in social locations presumably focused on racial equity pursuits for all groups of color.

This study has specific implications for educational policy focused on solidarity building. Many districts claim the problematic moniker of “diversity” or “changing demographics” as their rationale for seeking outside help to fix the constructed effects of diversity. Such transformative and equity-oriented work cannot be contracted out; rather, it must draw from the inside and be long-term in focus and commitment. To this end, we recommend that such professional development and/or technical assistance begin with affinity mapping.
Affinity Spaces. Asian educators within schools may or may not have formally sanctioned or organized groups as was the case in our study, and thus racial affinities may be constructed informally. Yet, creating a structure for Asian educators to meet can uniquely identify what they believe to be the challenges and issues within their schools and community in relationship to their claimed identities. In practice, affinity groups can be regarded as suspicious by dominant, White stakeholders who are concerned that their centrally located position of power is being questioned. Other groups of color may also wonder about the discussions taking hold in other affinity groups of color, yet it is important to recognize that this sort of suspicion operates in relationship to Whiteness, and should not dissuade affinity groups from gathering. The purpose of an affinity group is not about acquiring power like that of the dominant group, rather the focus is on finding the power and the resources within each given affinity group and ultimately, reconstituting power in systems and practice. Further, an AAPI identifying affinity group can create a sense of belonging that may be absent within their local institutions.

In the affinity groups, it is crucial that members historicize the racial experiences of their given community. For the AAPI community, what drew them to live in this school community? What are the histories of migration, immigration, and resettlement across different generations? By mapping these histories, they come to understand their shared experiences, but also where differences may be evident, building intra-racial understanding.

In historic racially conscious projects like the one described in our study, we often move too quickly into cross-racial discussions with the aim of solidarity building. While this is an aspirational goal, moving toward this too quickly can delimit the types of conversations within AAPI identifying groups. Oftentimes AAPI affinity groups begin based on shared experiences, but they have an important goal of developing belonging and a source of healing, which takes time. Further, because AAPIs may be called upon to embody interlocution activities, understanding the normalization of this role, and detailing how it manifests is a crucial exercise in recognizing their positionality within their institutions. As such, AAPI educators can begin to formulate the ways in which defacto policies of interlocution create a racialized exercise of exclusion that is historic and systemic.

By recognizing the allure of interlocution, AAPIs can begin to identify how this is locally constructed and formulate methods of response that may include recognition, refusal, or remedy, creating newer defacto policies that can inform newer dejure policies. For example, if an AAPI educator is delegated to serve as a racial interlocutor, how can they assist their expectant colleagues in understanding the positioning of this type of labor? The mere questioning of this type of behavior, demonstrates key tenets of resistance which may lead to refusal or remedy, while simultaneously pausing the system to recognize the aims and the problematic habits of interlocution imposed upon AAPI educators. In this way, there is ideological space to collectively unpack such actions and beliefs, holding hope for policy changes impacting the AAPI community over time.

About the Authors

Trish Morita-Mullaney
Trish Morita-Mullaney is an Associate Professor at Purdue University. Her research focuses on the influences of educational policy at the federal, state, district, school, and classroom levels and how this informs the practices and policies of educators who work with and among racialized emergent bilinguals. Framed by critical language, critical race, and feminist theories, she uses participatory and constructivist methods with her study participants, as they unpack, critique, and analyze their orientations towards racialized emergent bilinguals and multilingualism. Her most recent work focuses on how equity is obscured and trapped for AAPI identifying emergent bilinguals.

Diep Nguyen
Diep Nguyen is the Director of Research, Educator Learning and Practice at WIDA, a project of the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Using the lens of critical language and critical race theories, her research focuses on how pre K-12 dual language education impacts students from various racial groups differently and how this informs bilingual educational policies and practices. She also investigates the experiences of AAPI professionals in K-12 education and the challenges they face in their professional trajectories as educational leaders.
Endnotes

3. Trish Morita-Mullaney, “Trustworthiness in spoken interpretation among English Learner (ELs) families: an elementary case study” (Ohio TESOL Journal, 2017).
21. Id.
29. Id.
30. Hong, Minor Feelings.
32. Id.
33. Id.
Asian American Youth and Spatialized Violence in Los Angeles

By Kevin D. Lam

ABSTRACT

This article engages the relationship between spatiality and racialization for Asian American youth gangs in the Los Angeles area during the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike black and Chicano/Latino youth groups in Southern California, Asian American youth are not confined to the traditional understanding of space. Rather, they have what I call “imagined territoriality.” That is, their relationship to space is very different due to the particularities of Asian labor migration and resettlement in the diaspora. I articulate a critical theory of spatiality for Asian American youth and call for a return to historical and geographical materialism.

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the estimated number of youth gangs nationally was over 30,000, and the number of gang members was over 800,000. The Los Angeles area, with its 8,000 gangs and 200,000 gang members, is often referred to as the “gang capital of the US” if not the world. Asian American youth gangs account for three to six percent of the entire gang population, as reported by the National Youth Gang Center. These statistics provide a general sense of Asian American youth gang involvement for Asian American youth. While Asian American youth gangs make up a relatively small percentage of youth gangs nationally, they are overwhelmingly concentrated in the major cities, especially on the West Coast. At its peak, it was reported that there were close to 20,000 gang-affiliated Asian American youth in Los Angeles County alone.

The dominant discourse on US youth gangs often suggests that youth gangs are a black and brown issue. The images of black and Chicano/Mexicano/Latino gang youth have been front-page fodder since the 1980s. Nancy Reagan’s “just say no” became, in some way, the slogan of the decade in the fight against “inner-city” gangs, drugs, and crimes. However, youth gang formation in these communities in the Los Angeles area is nothing new—with Chicano gangs emerging in the 1920s and 1930s and black youth forming groups for protection from white youth in the 1940s and 1950s after migrating up from the US South shortly after the Second World War. Asian American youth, at least in their “street” variety, began to emerge in the late 1960s and early 1970s with Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American youth, and the 1980s and 1990s with Southeast Asian youth. Dominant discourse also suggests that youth gangs are an “urban” problem—at least the way “urban” has traditionally been defined. It has been described as something that can be controlled, marked, and demarcated, and thus, can only happen in so-called spatially defined “inner-city” areas. Liberal social science research, a by-product of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “war on poverty” campaign of the 1960s and 1970s, has helped shape how scholars and policymakers alike make sense of racialized populations in the US for decades to come. The “underclass” argument becomes part and parcel of the narrative imposed on the natives and refracted by the colonizers. The roots of inner-city pathologizing can be traced back to liberal social science research, Sociologists, anthropologists, and other social science scholars became immersed in trying to understand the urban political economy and poverty. However, in the process of marking, demarcating, and categorizing youth of color and people of color in general, they have also been objectified and thingified—and hence frozen in time. The terms “ghetto,” “barrio,” and “the hood” become synonymous with gang violence and inner-city discord. This suggests that anything outside of socially constructed and racially marked spaces is deemed insignificant or worthy of research and analysis.

This paper examines how Asian American youth gangs occupy and make sense of space. I begin by discussing the dominant discourse on youth gangs and space. I continue with a brief genealogy of Asian American youth gang formation in Los Angeles. Next, I focus on Asian American “suburban” gangs, using Los Angeles’s San Gabriel Valley (the “SGV”) as a specific site to engage the dialectical relationship between 1) spatiality and racialization, 2) racialization and violence, and 3) class struggle and spatiality for Asian American youth in the Los Angeles area over the last four decades, with an emphasis on gang formation in the 1980s and 1990s. These two decades marked a significant moment in urban history when thinking about gang formation, anti-youth legislation, educational and public policy, and the concept of place—in context of economic restructuring in the capitalist city. They followed the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s, which were marked by social and political upheaval both domestically and abroad, including the fallout of the American War in Vietnam, student protests for ethnic studies (and hence self-determination), and economic recession. By the late 1980s, youth gang formation in Los Angeles and across a number of US metropoles had firmly cemented its place in both popular and sociological imagination. I conclude with a discussion of the need for critical human geography—as the body as a starting point of analysis.
The history of youth gang formation in Los Angeles dates back almost a century and is intertwined with the legacy of enslavement, genocide, and US imperialism for youth of color. The formation of Asian American youth gangs is by no means isolated and is connected to other gang formations, particularly Chicano gangs, due to migration history and resettlement patterns. Given the history of residential segregation and the sheer number of Latinos in Southern California, Asian Americans and Latinos are closest to each other in proximity, which affects how they occupy, share, and negotiate space with each other and among themselves. Chicanos began to migrate from Mexico to Southern California in large numbers in the 1920s and 1930s, and by the early 1940s, an emerging second-generation Mexican American youth subculture began to form. Black Americans were also fleeing the Jim Crow South after World War II in the 1940s and 1950s seeking work in the defense plans and other public sectors that opened up in the ensuing decades.

Although Asian American youth gangs emerged in mainstream consciousness the last few decades, there is a much longer history with Filipino and Mexican American cross-fertilization in the 1920s and 1930s around the Temple Street area in Downtown Los Angeles (now what is known as Filipinotown). Japanese American youth became involved in the decades after interment during World War II, often sharing and occupying spaces with Chicanos and blacks in areas like Boyle Heights, Crenshaw, Sawtelle, and Gardena. Due to their socio-spatial history in Los Angeles, Japanese Americans were comfortable and highly familiar with minority cultures. A Japanese American stated: “If you lived in Boyle Heights, you hung out with Chicanos and acted Chicano. If you grew up in South Central, you hung out with blacks and acted black.”

Heeding national trends, it is important to note that while Los Angeles has become more diverse than ever, it has also become more segregated than ever.

Two major events changed the face of Asian American youth subculture. First, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (the “INA”) allowed for a large influx of immigrants from Asia like never before—drawing predominantly from the professional and highly-educated classes. It was an attempt by the US to compete internationally with the Soviet Union during the Sputnik-era “space race.” Second, the impact of war and genocide in Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s led to the mass exodus of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong to the belly of the beast. This legacy set the stage for major Asian American gang movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Asian American youth violence was already a known commodity within ethnic pockets on both US coasts by the 1960s and 1970s, but the influx from Southeast Asia brought it to the mainstream. Asian American youth (especially those most marginalized) were trying to find a sense of identity and belonging in a country that did not necessarily welcome them — and in a context that had always been framed within a black/white analytical lens. However, the Los Angeles area is unique in the sense that it has long been home to diverse populations, including a substantial number of Asian Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, blacks, and whites.

Asian American youth do not claim space the same way that Chicano and black youth do. The idea of place is much more associated with Chicano and black youth gangs because their territorial claims go back multiple generations — a genealogy tied to state-sanctioned racism and residential segregation. On the other hand, Asian American youth (with the exception of perhaps Cambodians in Long Beach and a few other examples connected to the central city) do not necessarily claim streets, blocks, and neighborhoods in ways that are deeply entrenched in Chicano and black spatial and geographical experiences. Instead, Asian Americans have what is called “imagined territoriality,” drawn from Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined community.”

P-Dog, an Asian American gang member in Los Angeles’s San Gabriel Valley, explains the connections between space, racialization, ethnic difference, and class location for different Asian American youth groups:

“Even though we’re family, we’re from the same thing, there’s always that line you don’t pass, you know. They [Cambodians and Filipinos] always going to look at you differently because of your race. You look at them differently because you don’t know what the fuck they’re saying to you. Like us down here in the West San Gabriel Valley, we gangbang the Asian way...like [Asian gangs in] Long Beach. “Long Beach” gangbang like Mexicans and blacks...stand around the corner and shit, taking care of blocks, you know. Why take care of one block when you can take care of the whole neighborhood, the whole city?”

This paper focuses on “suburban” gangs in the SGV. Recent concerns with suburban gangs as a new phenomenon simplify and reify the false urban/suburban divide. In fact, “suburban” formation (relative to central city formation) is not new and not necessarily unique. Although certain groups originated from the urban core, a number had originated from “suburban” spaces. This has always been the case for Asian American youth. In the past, Asian American youth gangs might have origins in the central city — in ethnic enclaves like Chinatown, Filipinotown, and Koreatown. However, given the educational attainment and class status of some Asian Americans prior to arrival on US soil, they end up resettling in relatively affluent neighborhoods across different parts of the Southland, particularly in the suburbs of Los Angeles like the San Gabriel Valley, which have become new ethnic enclaves.

As geographer Wendy Cheng notes, the San Gabriel Valley covers a wide range of areas, including forty-five municipalities and unincorporated communities stretching just east of central Los Angeles to the western edge of the Inland Empire. I focus specifically on the West San Gabriel Valley. It consists of the four municipalities of Monterey Park, Alhambra, San Gabriel, and Rosemead, described by Cheng as:

“A densely populated suburban region just minutes by car east of downtown, with a landscape characterized by sprawling strip malls, clusters of industry, and housing ranging from nondescript apartment complexes to faux-Mediterranean townhomes to stately mansions.... This subregion’s distinct features have been shaped by processes including differentially racialized suburbanization and global economic restructuring — forces that have structured the landscape and created a unique Asian American and Latino/a majority characterized by shared residential spaces and relative class parity.”
spatial designation of “suburban” gang formation for Asian American youth. I examine three issues or points of analysis for Asian American youth when articulating the suburbanization, globalization, and Californization of youth gangs. To borrow from critical geographer Edward Soja, given the changing demographic terrain and economic restructuring both nationally and internationally, we not only need to redefine “urban” youth gangs—we need to redefine the “suburban” as well.

The notion of racialization, as described by British Marxist sociologist Robert Miles, is an ideological process of “delineation of group boundaries and of allocation of persons within those boundaries by primary reference to (supposedly) inherent and/or biological (usually phenotypical) characteristics.” In addition, the use of racialization encompasses a “dialectical process of signification where those characteristics that are ascribed to define the Other, necessarily elicit a definition of the Self by the same criterion.” In thinking about the spatial dimension of Los Angeles, geographer Laura Puído offers the notion of “differential racialization.” That is, different groups have been racialized in distinct ways as a particular set of racial meanings are attached to different racial groups that affect not only their class position and racial standing but also a function of it. Puído states that there is insufficient attention to how different communities of color may experience racism, and in that sense, how their bodies (and histories, discourses, etc.) serve as a racializing mechanism and hegemonic force.

For this reason, a political economy of labor migration and racism, forcefully articulated by Miles, and hence a critique of capital and US imperialism, is useful in understanding the specificities of Asian America in the twenty-first century. The popular and scholarly image of Asians and Asian Americans as affluent, highly educated, and living in suburban spaces is a refutation that reinforces historical and contemporary racialization. While this may be true for some, it is misleading and ignores the experiences of many others.

Framing youth violence as an “urban” problem that only affects black and brown bodies and spaces oversimplifies the complex understanding of this phenomenon in a changing political economy of the US, California, and Los Angeles. For Asian American youth who come from middle-class families, go to middle-class schools, and live in middle-class communities, it leads us to question why they would choose to be involved with gang life and extreme violence. In addition, Asian Americans as “gangbangers” disrupt the conventional (according to Gramsci) notion of Asian Americans as the “model minority” or Vietnamese as the “good refugees.” It speaks to how Asian Americans have always been used as a strategic wedge for other racialized groups, particularly blacks and Latinos in the US, and how Asian American youth gang members disrupt this picture.

The impact of racism on Asian Americans is real and cannot be easily dismissed given its adhesive value. The mainstream media and academic research have racialized Asian American youth as the “good student” and Asian American males as meek, soft, and effeminate have left their imprint. They essentialize the ways in which young Asian Americans move, occupy space, and make sense of the world. The hegemonic logic is that they are not capable of violence. The juxtaposition of the Asian male body as emasculated and weak but “smart” and the black male body as hyper-masculine, strong, but deemed “unintelligible” gets reproduced in our analysis of youth gangs. Hence, racism and violence are represented as confined to only urban, and hence, black spaces. Such racialization delimits and conceals violence outside its spatial, ideological, political, and pedagogical parameters. Hence, violence in suburban or relatively affluent spaces is unfathomable nor deemed as not legitimate because it does not play neatly into the “underclass” narrative of gang formation in social science research and public policy analyses. Youth violence and crime, for understandable reasons, are already unreported or underreported. This is perhaps even more so for Asian American youth in suburban spaces (i.e., anywhere outside the “inner-city”) since their involvement is considered minimal and inconsequential.

Scholars and policymakers often fail to understand the root and depth of Asian American youth gang involvement, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, because of how Asian American bodies are racialized. As a way to signal their place in the gang discourse and affirm their Los Angeles-based identity and “street” legitimacy, a number of Asian American youth (primarily the second generation) adopted “cholo” dress and style and working-class black vernacular, with West Coast “gangsta rap” serving as the soundtrack. This was a conscious break from how Asian immigrant youth gangs dressed in the mid and late 1980s, as their influence of dress, style, and music came from Europe during the “New Wave” period. Indeed, there is a strong connection between spatiality and temporality with racialization. The impact of black and Chicanx style, discourse, and aesthetics in the 1990s harkens back to Japanese American youth making sense of their identity and belonging after being systematically incarcerated by the US government during World War II. This speaks directly and indirectly to a burgeoning “third-world” consciousness that profoundly influenced their political and intellectual formation.

The process of spatially containing youth violence also obscures the reality of youth violence for Asian Americans. Youth violence is usually understood within the confines of certain racialized and classed spaces. Sociologist Victor Rios discusses the hyper-criminalization and under-policing paradox when it comes to thinking about the policing of young black and Latino boys in Oakland, California. Speaking of an area known as the “Lower Bottom” in Oakland, Rios states that “criminalization created spatial demarcation: police set parameters for where individuals could loiter or commit a crime. The school consequences of “playing” or “hanging out” beyond the established limits of invisible and marginalized spaces included brutalization, harassment, and arrest.” In other words, certain transgressions were permissible within the parameters of certain streets, blocks, and even apartment complexes. Moving beyond such spaces (with law enforcement patrolling its borders) becomes an exponentially punitive process for youth of color. Although Rios focused on black and Latino boys, Southeast Asian youth also face similar recourse in the area. But unlike the policing of young black and Latino boys, the policing of Asian youth is not discussed, articulated, and analyzed in the same manner.

As a result, scholars and practitioners alike might not be aware of the actual lived reality and material conditions for Asian American youth and their families—in all of its complexity in the last half a century (perhaps even more). Particularly, intense racialization and violence, especially in the early and mid-1990s, were happening in Asian American communities in unprecedented ways. Anti-youth and anti-immigrant legislation (Prop 21, STEP Act of 1988, Prop 187, etc.) in California and nationally profoundly impacted marginalized communities, leaving a deleterious legacy for Southeast Asian American communities who were trying to find their footing in the years following the imperialist war in Southeast Asia.
For example, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA), both signed into law within months of each other in 1996 by President Bill Clinton, have had serious and far-reaching implications for Southeast Asian refugee and immigrant youth—as they were being summoned to be deported due to their criminal records. US-socialized Cambodian youth, for instance, were (and are) being sent back to their country of origin, where they left as babies or toddlers, and thus, have very little connection to the place. According to Asian American studies scholar Soo Ah Kwon, the IIRIRA, in particular, made significant changes by “facilitating the deportation of permanent residents and refugees to their home countries after serving out their prison sentences. But it was not until Cambodia and the US signed a formal repatriation agreement, a memorandum of understanding (MOU), on March 22, 2002, that deportation began.” 229 Cambodian refugees (all male except two), according to the Returnee Integration Support Center, have been deported from the US since 2010, and approximately 2,000 more await deportation. In many ways, Asian American youth are coming full circle being deported back to a country they were forced to leave due to the circumstances created by the very presence (and then absence) of the US military and economic apparatus. This is especially the case for youth caught up in urban/gang life.

The articulation of Asian American youth gangs in Southern California requires a different analysis of urban and suburban spaces—a different scale. Perhaps the scale in this instance must also include a legacy of war, genocide, and US imperialism when considering Asian American youth violence. To understand this phenomenon in Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Van Nuys, we must broaden our scope of analysis to Southeast Asia, 8,000 miles away. By widening our aperture and scope of analysis, we can gain a broader and more nuanced perspective. Youth violence as containment delimits our analysis around the complexity of spatiality and temporality. Asian American youth violence (and perhaps for other minoritized groups as well) in Los Angeles during the 1980s and 1990s would be difficult to duplicate anywhere else and at any different time. In addition, this one-dimensional understanding reproduces essentialized notions of land. Youth violence has never been and never will be just a “ghetto,” “barrio,” or “inner-city” problem. This is especially the case for Asian American youth who do not claim space in that traditional sense, as they are not necessarily tied to land, space, and territory. In addition, there are historical, cultural, political, and economic specificities that make their experiences different from others.

Youth violence outside the confines of “urban” or permissible spaces disrupts an analysis that has been ingrained in our psyches, what sociologist Robert Blauner referred to as the “internal colony” of the US. Perhaps it is convenient to suggest that youth gang formation and violence are just in black and brown spaces and white, “poor people” problem. Youth violence outside the “ghetto” or “barrio” or “poor East Asians)” came to the US under very different circumstances and class position. Both social groups are under the “Asian American” category, but their material conditions and lived histories are diagnostically different. One does not have to go to “historic ethnic enclaves to find poor and working-class Asians working side by side with poor and working-class Latinos, where they labor as garment workers, busboys, dishwashers, mechanics, butchers, manicurists, and other service-sector jobs.”

In the aftermath of the INA, class struggle must be central to analysis and articulation when thinking about questions of spatiality, racialization, and youth gang formation in the capitalist city. It is not possible to separate political economy and gang formation in the US, given the legacy of imperialism for Asian American youth as well as other immigrant and racialized youth. This struggle became prominent by the 1980s as a
TOWARD A CRITICAL THEORY OF SPATIALITY

I borrow from a chapter title of Soja’s Postmodern Geographies, which in turn borrowed from a slogan of the Los Angeles Times: “It all comes together in Los Angeles.” Los Angeles proves to be a significant site because, in many ways, this analysis only comes together in the Southland and cannot be duplicated, given its particular history, location, and time. Although Los Angeles has made systematic efforts by way of campaigning and organizing for the city for much of the twentieth century, the Los Angeles area has always been decentralized. In that sense, it is reflective of gang formation in the region. Unlike the spatially developed central cities of the Midwest or other metropolises along the East Coast, Los Angeles is like “a hundred suburbs” that want to be a city. Hence, gang formation is a product of excessive structuring and modernization in the capitalist region. It is not by accident that gang formation is most pronounced in the region. Not surprisingly, Asian Americans (given Los Angeles as the hub of the Pacific) have left an indelible mark on the West Coast.

One would be remiss not to think about the impact of US capitalism on youth gang formation. This is especially the case in the Los Angeles urban area (covering the five counties Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, Riverside, and San Bernardino), which by the mid-1980s was one of the largest industrial metropolises in the world surpassing the greater New York area in manufacturing employment and total industrial production. Second, I argue that the legacy of colonialism (both external and internal) has profoundly affected youth gang formation and place. There are reasons why youth violence has been part and parcel of racialized communities and why it comes together in Los Angeles. It is the cumulative impact of racism and colonialism coupled with modernization in the capitalist region. It is not by accident that gang formation is most pronounced in the region. Not surprisingly, Asian Americans (given Los Angeles as the hub of the Pacific) have left an indelible mark on the West Coast.

A large number of Asian migrants arrived in the US as both sought-after labor (H-1B visa) and also political refugees from Southeast Asia. These two groups have been brought together in Asian American racialization but have also had to contend with major differences. This gets played out on the streets and in the restaurants, pool halls, clubs, and other social spaces Asian American youth occupy.

Therefore, understanding context is imperative to understanding difference. For example, during the 1990s, a war was brewing between the two largest Asian American youth groups in Southern California: Asian Boyz (AB) and Wah Ching (WC) in the San Gabriel Valley, and especially in the municipalities of Monterey Park, Alhambra, San Gabriel, and Rosemead, as well as other adjoining cities like Arcadia, Rowland Heights, and Hacienda Heights. Wah Ching (WC) members, depending on factions or “sides,” were primarily of Taiwanese/Chinese descent and affluent, while the Asian Boyz were more working-class, and at least in the San Gabriel Valley, consisted primarily of Vietnamese and ethnic-Chinese Vietnamese. Along with ethnocentrism (ethnic pride), the notion of “class warfare” manifested between the two groups. Class conflict and tension arose with different Asian ethnic groups (inter-ethnic) and Chicano/Latino youth in the area (inter-racial). P-Dog, a member of the Asian Boyz at the time, stated:

“A lot of people struggle [economically]. The point is that some bad people make it right. There’s a lot of rich kids out here gang-banging. They’re from Arcadia [a middle-class area in the San Gabriel Valley]. . . . a lot of Taiwanese gangs. They’re rich man. . . I don’t understand my damn self why rich kids gang-bang. I figure it’s for the thrill. . . . a lot of us, we go out there and make our money to survive. I don’t have to get money from my mama or dad, you know. We got to do what we got to do to survive, ay. The lifestyle we live. . . . It’s not [that] we choose this life... I was given this fucking life.”

As Soja noted and as I have attempted above, I provide “life-stories” that have a geography. It is a geography that is mapped spatially, historically, and theoretically. It is mapped on bodies as well:

“They have milieu, immediate locales, provocative placements which affect thought and action. The historical imagination is never completely spaceless, and critical social historians have written, and continue to write, some of the best geographies of the past.”

It is from this historical materialist tradition that this paper owes much of its intellectual and political debt—in thinking about youth violence, spatiality, and racialization.

In addition to political economy of migration and racism analytical framework that is connected to restructuring in Southern California in those historical moments, there is also a bodily/physiological dimension at play. At the core of the space/time dialectic is the body—and the ways in which the body has always been implicated. The biopolitical is commensurate with a globalization of capital, as well as a globalization of violence. That is, for Southeast Asian Americans like Cambodians and Central American youth groups like those from El Salvador, there is a transnational element to youth gang formation—by bringing in and taking violence out to other spaces.

This points to the significance of a critical human geography—that is, a starting point of analysis. It articulates a critical theory of spatiality. That is, the reassertion of space is germane to analyzing youth gang formation. This paper makes it clear that this is especially true for Asian American youth. A paradigmatic shift in how we make sense of place and racism in the city over the last four decades is not only essential, but necessary. It requires different historical and theoretical framing to understand the practical. Articulating a critical theory of spatiality, in conjunction with naming the “life stories” this paper posits, allows us to understand how youth violence impacts us in all very real and profound ways. There are ideological implications and material consequences. Hence, in line with other critical scholars working from this tradition, I am also calling for a return to historical and geographical materialism.
About the Author

Kevin D. Lam

Kevin D. Lam is Associate Professor of Urban and Diversity Education at Drake University, USA. His research and teaching interests include Asian American youth violence, critical theory of racism, critical pedagogy, urban education, and political economy. Lam is the author of Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling: Vietnamese American Youth in a Postcolonial Context (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Endnotes

8. Robin D. G. Kelley, Yo’ Mama’s DisFUNKtional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America (Beacon Press, 1997).
15. Pulido, Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left.
Endnotes Continued

19. Lam, Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling.
23. Lam, Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling, 132.
28. Lam, Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling.
30. Miles, Racism, 75, quoted in Darder and Torres, After Race: Racism After Multiculturalism, 11.
34. Pulido, Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left, 24.
38. Lam, Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling.
40. Pulido, Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left.
42. Rios, Punished, 56.
43. Gilmore, Golden Gulag.
52. Lam, Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling, 70.
54. Lam, Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling, 124.
57. Soja, Postmodern Geographies.
58. Soja, Postmodern Geographies, 192.
59. Soja, Postmodern Geographies, 11.
60. Soja, Postmodern Geographies.
62. Soja, Postmodern Geographies, 14.
63. Harvey, Spaces of Hope.
Artist’s Statement

This drawing is a self-portrait that touches upon the themes of displacement and an illusion of belonging as an Asian American. In this drawing, charcoal is used as the primary medium due to its tendency to be erased and wiped out easily. This reflects the centuries of U.S. history in which the voices of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have been either omitted, marginalized, or forgotten. On a personal level, the interwoven marks and the many layers of charcoal express the elusive identity of the portrait, whereas the engulfing darkness evokes a sense of displacement and suggests an uncharted inner-world where identity has formed no roots. What is left is but a faint trace of the past, a specter of an identity waiting to awaken.

About the Artist

Aesther Chang (she/her/hers) identifies as a Taiwanese-American artist and a current student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education: Learning Design, Innovation, and Technology (LDIT) Program with a concentration in Arts & Learning. Prior to HGSE, Aesther graduated from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in 2017 with a B.F.A in Painting. She spent the past six years between Italy and New York City exhibiting with galleries around the world and teaching at various art institutions. Works by the artist reside in numerous private and public collections worldwide, including New York; Los Angeles, Paris; London; Tokyo; Singapore; Milan; Amsterdam; and Taipei. Aesther is currently represented by Jean Jacobs Gallery (New Canaan, CT) and Galerie Une Fille Aux Cheveux Noirs (Paris, FR). Beyond her studio practice, Aesther is interested in the intersection of art and youth education. By designing engaging and authentic art-learning experiences within informal settings, she is committed to helping learners develop a lifelong appreciation for art beyond the classroom. For more information about her work, please visit www.aestherchang.art.

By Kayla Mendoza Chui, Camille Ungco, Doua Kha, Kriya Velasco, Theresa Lee, Rae Jing Han, Saraswati Noel

Under the structures of white supremacy, the pandemic has unveiled the dehumanization of Asian folks in the US. For many of us who are members of Asian communities, these lived realities have existed since the arrival of Chinese laborers in the 1850s. We went from “dog eaters” to “bat eaters”; we exist dually as model minorities and perpetual foreigners; we’re seen as apolitical, non-combative, and submissive, yet also as the threatening yellow peril; we’re fetishized yet desexualized; weaponized to perpetuate anti-Blackness; submissive, yet also as the threatening yellow peril; microaggressions to mass murder. Asians in the US. Every level of this normalized violence must be disrupted—from this dehumanization over hundreds of years has allowed for continued violence against communities, these lived realities have existed since the arrival of Chinese laborers in the 1850s. We went from “dog eaters” to “bat eaters”; we exist dually as model minorities and perpetual foreigners; we’re seen as apolitical, non-combative, and submissive, yet also as the threatening yellow peril; we’re fetishized yet desexualized; weaponized to perpetuate anti-Blackness; and the list goes on.

This dehumanization over hundreds of years has allowed for continued violence against Asian Americans. Every level of this normalized violence must be disrupted—from microaggressions to mass murder. Therefore, it is important to teach and learn about the strategic ways that Asian communities in the US continue to resist oppressive forces. By passing down sociopolitical wisdom and experiential knowledge, we refuse to be included into a white supremacist and settler colonial school system. Anti-Asian violence is quite literally an issue of life or death, and we call for accountability on domestic terrorism,

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans were largely invisible from schools’ curricula, and representation was limited to deficit-based narratives.

Demands to address anti-Asian hate in schools during the pandemic gave rise to Asian American Studies state legislation in PK-12 public education in 2020. This change offers a space to critically engage learners in (1) seeing themselves represented in the curriculum from a strengths-based perspective, (2) becoming aware of interlocking systems of power, (3) identifying their positionalities within these systems of power, and (4) actively choosing to disrupt systems of power and build liberatory futures.

Ten states across the US have already passed mandates to include Asian American histories in public school curricula, and eight states are currently considering similar policies. However, as Dr. Jason Oliver Chang states, “In some ways the legislation was the easy part.” Many Asian American Studies scholars, educators, and community organizations are now contending with how to teach these (soon-to-be) mandated courses, with Illinois and New Jersey being the first states to implement this mandate in high school public schools in 2022. Other states will soon follow suit, like Rhode Island in 2023, and Connecticut and California in 2025.

We urge policymakers and educators to learn with and from Asian organizers, community educators, and artists who have and continue to teach and pass down critical and navigational knowledge and practices toward liberatory futures. It is important to note that these legacies have been and continue to be a fugitive practice in light of the ongoing attacks on Critical Race Theory and Ethnic Studies and the threat they pose to colonialism and white supremacy. Further, for many Communities of Color, public schools are sites of harm, cultural erasure, and spirit murdering, as evidenced by the slow and arduous introduction of Asian Ethnic Studies in public schools. It is often in community spaces outside of school where organizers, community educators, and artists of Color cultivate young learners’ critical consciousness, honor their communities’ cultural wealth, and engage them as leaders for social change.

As a collective of Asian PhD graduates and candidates in the fields of critical studies and teacher education, we value and continue to learn with and from Asian organizers, community educators, and artists to inform our teaching, research, and engagement in our communities. From these experiences, we recognize the use of Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) frameworks to facilitate the passing down of critical and navigational knowledge and practices in their/our communities’ spaces. Therefore, we recommend utilizing AsianCrit and CSP frameworks to guide curricula, instructional strategies, and educational policies. Below, we briefly describe these frameworks.

AsianCrit offers tenets that speak to the specific experiences of Asian American diasporic communities in the US and address the disruption of systems of oppression. It is inclusive of but not limited to the specific stereotypes and forms of racialization that are placed upon Asian Americans across intersectional identities, their/migration stories and transnational contexts, and strategic organizing and commitment to social justice. Additionally, this lens recognizes entangled oppressions and liberations of all peoples. AsianCrit therefore critically acknowledges Indigenous histories and sovereignty. It also honors cross-racial solidarities and aims to disrupt anti-Blackness, cis-hetero patriarchy, imperialism, and settler colonialism.

Additionally, raising consciousness in Asian Ethnic Studies cannot be done in silos as we look to ongoing movement within spaces and practices of Communities of Color. CSP recognizes this need and offers expansive instructional strategies that center (1) the knowledges and practices of Communities of Color; (2) collaborations with students and communities; (3) commitments to being in good relationship with lands and waters, Indigenous communities who steward the lands and waters we are on, and one another; and (4) consistent and scaffolded opportunities to engage in self-reflexivity in order to disrupt internalized oppression and our complicity in any and all systems of oppression.
For the AsianCrit Collective, utilizing AsianCrit and CSP in teaching, research, and in community with each other and beyond includes the following examples:

Teaching
1. We invite creative storytelling within our reflective assignments. This includes photography, autobiographical mapping, music, collective altar building, and poetry.
2. We center discussion topics around the ways Asian folks are targeted by and perpetuate systems of oppression. Topics include model minority myth and anti-Blackness, perpetual foreigner trope and settler colonialism, legacies of queerness in our cultures, and intersectional experiences with gender and disability.
3. We intentionally build our classes around multimodal resources by assigning podcasts, Instagram videos, comics, music, videos, and zines alongside academic readings.

Research
1. We prioritized ongoing consent (e.g., in participation, photos), accessibility (e.g., carpooling to and from the meeting space, food allergy and religious accommodations, ADA compliance), and safety (i.e., masks required and made available, option to pass on any activity).
2. We practiced communicating recognition and appreciation toward community partners through active listening and affirmations of their shared stories, personalized gratitude gift bags, and promotion of their work (e.g., art, photography, articles).
3. We ensured relatable and meaningful focus group discussion prompts to honor the complex identities and experiences our co-researchers hold (e.g., explicitly asking what they hope to come from the research project, meeting and building a relationship with them individually before the start of the project).

In community with one another and beyond
1. We support and tend to each other’s holistic well-being; for example, by sharing scholarly resources, community engagement opportunities, and job prospects in addition to personal life updates and dreams of establishing our own community space.
2. We recommend local Acupuncturists and Healers of Color to one another in addition to personal life updates and dreams of establishing our own community space.
3. We ensured relatable and meaningful focus group discussion prompts to honor the complex identities and experiences our co-researchers hold (e.g., explicitly asking what they hope to come from the research project, meeting and building a relationship with them individually before the start of the project).

Moving forward, we demand the following from policy makers:
1. Improve data disaggregation and use. Asian and Asian American communities are often treated as a monolith, and this practice continues to fuel misconceptions and hyper-invisibility. One example is the way federal reports often present Asian families as having attained social and economic upward mobility while ignoring how Southeast Asian communities, especially those who are refugees or immigrants, often lack access to the same resources. Disaggregating data by dividing “Asian” into ethnic and cultural groups allows us to see and address gaps within different communities when creating policies, especially when improving education for Asian students.
2. Invest and build long-term, reciprocal partnerships with local community-based organizations that serve Asian communities, especially young people. By building partnerships with organizations that are leading the work, policymakers can learn with and from them to ensure that policies strengthen and address the needs of the local community.
3. Invite and compensate local community experts when drafting policies. There are many experts within our community who can provide unique and important insights. By inviting them to be a part of policy development from the beginning, we can ensure that policies will reflect the community they are meant to serve and protect.

At the same time, we invite educators to take action as follows:
1. Critically reflect on their own intersecting identities and how their positionalities impact their work with Asian and Asian American students. Engaging in ongoing listening and learning assists with understanding the many different experiences within Asian diasporic communities.
2. Amplify Asian and Asian American perspectives within learning spaces across all grade levels and contexts. Attending to intersecting identities when making decisions about representation (e.g., Asian folks with disabilities, queer and trans Asian folks) will center Asian folks’ lived experiences and worldviews. Remember that no one person can speak to the Asian experience.
3. Consider how knowledge and ways of knowing are culturally situated and create space for expansive forms of learning (e.g., creative practices, storytelling, multigenerational learning, land-based learning). Educators should attune to and disrupt the ways that certain forms of knowledge production are privileged over others within learning spaces.
4. Directly address sociopolitical issues that affect Asian and Asian American students and holding space for youth to process and share their experiences. Educators can support their participation in social transformation and collective liberation work.

We are grateful and indebted to the Black, Indigenous, Latine, Pacific Islander, and Asian scholars and community organizers who have and continue to pave the way for Asian Ethnic Studies and the liberation of all people. Our commentary is not intended to suggest that this is the only way to implement Asian Ethnic Studies effectively. Rather, we offer one way rooted in our values of community, collective care, the abolition of all systems of oppression, and liberatory futures for all. We hope to continue to be in dialogue and collaborative action with those committed to the same.
AsianCrit Collective, University of Washington

The AsianCrit Collective at UW is a group of Asian and Asian American (HMoob, Korean, bi-racial Malaysian, Filipinx, Chinese), first- and second-generation immigrant and refugee, non-binary folks and women, who are current and former doctoral students at UW-Seattle. They came together because they wanted to see themselves and their values of abolition in the curriculum. Instead of waiting for the college to offer a class centering Asian experiences and voices, the AsianCrit Collective created it themselves. They facilitate interactive classes and workshops that utilize creative and artistic storytelling methods to center Asian American narratives and learn about collective liberation from systems of oppression.

About the Authors

Kayla Mendoza Chui  Camille Ungco  Doua Kha  Kriya Velasco

Rae Jing Han  Saraswati Noel

Endnotes

1 We complicate “the first arrival” of Asians in the US. While Filipino laborers were brought to Chumash lands (Morro Bay, California) by Spaniards in the 1580s, we are intentionally differentiating between Asian existence on pre-colonial Turtle Island and Asian existence within the structures of a settler colonial US. While white supremacy and its consequential dehumanization of Asian folks precedes the formation of the US and its geopolitical boundaries, our commentary focuses on Asian folks within the US context. e.g., “Valerie Ooka Pang and Li-Rong Lilly Cheng, eds., Struggling to be Heard: The Unmet Needs of Asian Pacific American Children (SUNY Press, 1999),


5 Rosalind S. Chou, Asian American Political Sociology: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012),

6 Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt, “Colonized Loyalty: Asian American Anti-Blackness and Complicity” (2020), Faculty Publications, Published Version, Submission 78,

7 Tatiana Piper and Jackie Strohm, “Racial and Sexual Violence Pyramid”, 2019, Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape,


I consider the San Gabriel Valley (SGV) an Asian melting pot. Growing up here meant that you were surrounded by the best Asian food (you would know when it was really good if the restaurant took cash only), boba was life, and your parents were most likely immigrants. For me and my friends, being a child of immigrants entailed silently dealing with being interpreters for our parents. I can’t tell you the countless times my mom pushed the phone to my ear out of nowhere to carry on a conversation with the cable company or to translate school flyers, even when she always had the Korean-English dictionary on hand. As I grew older, translating written material got more complex.

My mom immigrated to California with her siblings from South Korea in the 80s and was so excited to live in the country that promised so much hope and opportunity, where it was the “best” place to live. Shortly after, she married my dad, who was also new to the States, and they both learned quickly that they needed to assimilate to their new American environment to survive. We had the American flag posted on our car window and celebrated Thanksgiving with dry turkey and ham even when we preferred galbi and kimchi. From what I saw first hand, no matter how hard my parents tried, assimilating to American culture meant to be stripped of their pride, to be humiliated in public because of how they pronounced a word differently, to be mistreated, to stay silent, and to have to endure it all. Even through their hurt buried deep inside and their silent cries at night, my parents put on a happy face in front of me and my siblings.
When hate crimes against Asian Americans began rising amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, my parents and I once again struggled with being treated as an “other.” I couldn’t bear the thought of them becoming victims of hate when it seemed we had finally found our place in this country. I said to myself “not again and not to my parents” and asked myself how I could protect them when the government didn’t seem to care. The only way was to empower them by advising them on the steps necessary to stay safe, find support, and report the crime if they are ever physically assaulted.

I created the How to Report a Hate Crime booklet as a means for my parents to fight for their rights by utilizing the free resources that are already in place for these types of situations (i.e., victim compensation, mental health care, etc.). While researching all of this information to educate my parents about, I realized everything was written in English and there was nothing accessible to them in their native Korean language regarding these existing resources.

At the beginning of my research in April 2020, I called the LAPD Hate Crimes Division and learned that they had only received 7 reports of hate crimes that year. This small number did not accurately add up to reflect the personal stories I’ve heard from friends and community members. I realized then that the problem was underreporting due to a lack of language access and made it my mission to bridge that gap by creating a series of booklets called How to Report a Hate Crime.

Considering that the Asian population is the fastest growing racial group in America, and that there are over 4.6 million Asians who are not fluent English speakers, the ability to access resources and services provided by the state and federal government is a fundamental right that seems to be lacking in this community. To serve the immediate need for my parents to know their rights — including that California has a penal code for hate crimes and that there are specific resources dedicated to support hate crime victims — I created a booklet for them in Korean. From there, people from different Asian communities started reaching out to ask how they could access this booklet in their parents’ native languages. The need was desperate when I first started this work and it still is now.

From a team of two, me and my graphic designer, the How to Report a Hate Crime team has grown to become a movement of 40, a true testament to community effort. Volunteers of various languages with immigrant parents/grandparents/loved ones, have readily and generously offered their skills, time and resources to address this common need. The shared experiences of witnessing our elders othered in America resonates deeply among us, moving us to empower our aging parents and pave a brighter future for the younger generations through peaceful action.

This little booklet of How to Report a Hate Crime has been published in 13 different languages and counting, with over 110,000 booklets printed nationwide. Its pages hold the cries of our community and empower us to bring attention to our grievances; do you hear us now?

---


---

About the Author

Esther Young Lim

Esther Young Lim is the creator of the How to Report a Hate Crime booklet as well as the founder and Executive Director of Through Peace, a non-profit that focuses on educating minority communities of their fundamental human rights. Esther received nationwide media recognition for her advocacy in the AAPI community. She has been recognized by Lizzo at the People’s Choice Awards and by the County of Los Angeles as recipient of the Yvonne B. Burke Courage Award. Esther currently serves as Board Chair of the Los Angeles County District Attorney AAPI Advisory Board.
Remembering the “Comfort Women”
Intergenerational Asian American Care Work

By Grace J. Yoo, Eunice H. Kim, Soojin Jeong

ABSTRACT
Asian American activists have been key to remembering the “comfort women” in the U.S. and globally. The act of remembering is often done through creating memorials, exhibits, films, conferences, and educational efforts. This paper examines Asian American activists’ remembrance work in building a memorial in the city of San Francisco. This paper utilizes a content analysis of the September 17, 2015 San Francisco Board of Supervisors hearing to identify key frames that Asian Americans have used to advocate for the building of a “comfort women” memorial. A key theme is that the act of remembering is often done with “care.” Additional key themes of the care work to build this memorial highlighted the role of breaking silences and speaking personal truths and stories; demonstrating pan-ethnic compassion and solidarity; and building to remember and teach the next generation. Understanding remembrance work as care work across generations has implications for voice and empowerment, solidarity, and healing for “comfort women” and all who are connected and exposed to this work.

INTRODUCTION
Approximately 400,000 young women and girls from Korea, China, the Philippines, and Indonesia (then Dutch East Indies) were forced into sexual slavery by Japanese soldiers during World War II. In 1991, former “comfort woman” Kim Hak-Sun of South Korea broke over fifty years of silence to tell her story. Her public disclosure started a global campaign demanding justice and reparations for former “comfort women.” The need for acknowledgement of the Japanese military system of sexual slavery has been a transnational movement.

Although generations removed, the “comfort women” experience of World War II is a historical trauma that has impacted many Asian Americans including those of Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, and Filipino descent. Stories from WWII of the fear and trauma faced by women and girls fleeing Japanese soldiers have been part of many...
Asian American intergenerational family histories. Asian Americans have been key to bringing voice and remembrance of “comfort women” locally, nationally, and globally. Emerging in the mid-1990s, the stories of the “comfort women” inspired diverse Asian American generations to bring voice to the “comfort women” issue through writing, film, exhibits, and the creation of various organizations and campaigns for reparations and remembrances. They include fiction and nonfiction such as Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Women and Evelina Galang’s oral histories of Filipina comfort women Lola’s House. Filipino Women Living with War, as well as her children’s books: Ángel De La Luna and The Fifth Glorious Mystery. They also include films such as Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women, The Apology, and Shusenjô: The Main BattleGround of the Comfort Women Issue. Campaigns in the U.S. have included those spearheaded by the Gabriela Network (a Filipina/o network against sex-trafficking of Filipinas) and the work of the “Comfort Women” Justice Coalition.

Asian American activists have been working in solidarity with former “comfort women” to confront the Japanese government’s denial and coercion of hundreds of thousands of women and girls into the largest known sexual slavery system of the twentieth century. There have also been various campaigns for apologies, reparations, and remembrances such as the U.S. House Resolution 121 in 2007, introduced by third generation Japanese American Congressman Michael Honda, which urged the Government of Japan to bring closure to the issue by way of formal apology and reparations to the victims of those crimes. YouTube videos created by filmmakers Annabel Park and Eric Byler mobilized the international movement via the internet. Additional campaigns for remembrances/memorials and inclusion in public school curriculum have all been spearheaded by Asian Americans who have come together to bring voice to “comfort women.”

REMEMBRANCE WORK: REMEMBERING “COMFORT WOMEN” THROUGH PUBLIC MEMORIALS

More recently, there has been activism to remember the “comfort women” through the building of memorials. To date, there are sixteen memorials that have been built in the United States. In 2010 the first “comfort women” memorial in the U.S. was erected in Palisades Park, New Jersey. It was followed by locations in Westbury, New York; Eisenhower Park, New York; Glendale, California; Fairfax, Virginia; Union City, New Jersey; Southfield, Michigan; Fullerton, California; and San Francisco, California. Outside South Korea, the U.S. is home to the largest number of memorials with a total of sixteen as of April 2020. Indeed, hosting such a number of memorials on U.S. public lands is the result of three decades of organizing and consciousness-raising by Asian Americans, especially Korean Americans. Korean Americans’ involvement in erecting “comfort women” memorials is a prime example of how diaspora can play out homeland issues in their adopted home in ways that take advantage of the institutional features and distinctive environment of that adopted home.

Active opposition groups to “comfort women” memorials in the U.S. have included ultranationalist individuals from the Japanese government, Japanese Americans, and Japanese immigrants who have created an alliance to regularly oppose “comfort women” memorials in the U.S. and operate in a politically similar fashion as other right wing groups in the U.S. Opposition groups have long denied justice for comfort women. For instance, an opposition group filed a lawsuit in 2014 seeking the removal of a “comfort women” memorial in Glendale, California. After a three-year legal battle, the Supreme Court decision concluded by declining the lawsuit filed against the City of Glendale in Los Angeles County by the Global Alliance for Historical Truth-US Corporation (GAHT-US). In addition, upon the erection of a “comfort women” memorial in San Francisco, Osaka cut “sister city” ties with the city, Osaka mayor Hirofumi Yoshimura said the monument “destroyed the two sides’ relationship of trust.”

Despite opposition groups’ efforts, public memorialization of “comfort women” has brought together a decentralized social movement involving diaspora politics, coalition building, and gender rights. The movement has achieved the erection of “comfort women” memorials or statues and the passage of the U.S. House of Representative Resolution 121, which called for Japan to acknowledge and apologize for the use of sexual slavery during the 1930s and 1940s. These efforts in the U.S. occurred simultaneously with lobbying for the inclusion of “comfort women” in United Nations reports on sexual violence and the UNESCO Memory of the World register.

In San Francisco, the “comfort women” memorial building was spearheaded by the Comfort Women Justice Coalition (CWJC), a multi-ethnic and multi-national organization of people guided by the surviving grandmothers of the “comfort women” experience. CWJC played a pivotal role in unveiling the memorial in San Francisco. The organization’s co-chairs, Lillian Sing and Julie Tang, led a movement to recognize the importance of educating the war atrocity so it is never repeated. CWJC asserts “few memorials speak of women, even less of their suffering, courage, endurance and determination to achieve justice.” With their efforts, in 2015, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a resolution to build a memorial for the “comfort women” in the city.

In policy hearings, framing has traditionally been a key way in which policy is moved forward. Framing is about the construction of meaning. Although the movement to build “comfort women” memorials has been reported on in different ways by various organizations and in locations outside the U.S. such as South Korea, Japan, and Australia, there have been no in-depth studies of local policy hearings. Rather, the study of framing of “comfort women” has been limited to new stories and media depictions.

This paper examines the framing used by Asian Americans advocating for a “comfort women” memorial at a San Francisco Board of Supervisors public hearing.

METHODS

This paper utilizes a content analysis of the transcript and video of the 2015 San Francisco Board of Supervisors public hearing on “Urging the Establishment of a Memorial for ‘Comfort Women’.” The purpose of this approach is to identify key frames that Asian Americans have used to advocate for the building of the San Francisco “comfort women” memorial. Analyzing the framing of Asian American remembrance work in building the “comfort women” memorial in the City of San Francisco is important since public hearings in the US have included Japanese nationalists using the public comment to voice opposition to any sort of remembrance. In this content analysis, we focus on Asian Americans who were in favor of the memorial in San Francisco, including public officials, guests, and the public.

Past studies examining policy issues have used a content analysis of policy hearings to understand how issues have become framed. The transcript and video from the City and County of San Francisco Board of Supervisors Public Safety and Neighborhood Services Committee meeting of September 17, 2015, were obtained through the San Francisco Open Access Portal (SFOAP).
Francisco Board of Supervisors meeting archives. This hearing was selected as it included the statements of politicians as well as guests and public comment from the community. The transcript was read in its entirety by all three authors and analyzed using standard coding analysis procedures. In reviewing this transcript, the authors focused on statements made by Asian Americans in favor of the memorial. These statements were then thematically analyzed, from which the authors developed frames of how Asian American politicians, activists, and members of the public advocated for and supported the building of this memorial.

**FINDINGS**

The findings of this content analysis highlight frames that Asian Americans used to support the San Francisco memorial including the following: breaking silences across generations, speaking personal truths and stories, demonstrating pan-ethnic compassion and solidarity, and building to remember and teach about “comfort women” to the next generation.

**BREAKING SILENCES ACROSS GENERATIONS: SPEAKING PERSONAL TRUTHS AND STORIES**

“Comfort women” remembrances have been important symbols for breaking silences. A model for this has always been the public testimonial by Grandmother Kim Hak-sun in August 1991 that was soon followed by the first class action suit against Japan by a Korean “comfort women” survivor. Moreover, in 1992, survivors in South Korea protested every Wednesday in front of the Japanese Embassy, requesting that the Japanese government formally apologize. In 1993, eighteen Filipina former “comfort women” filed lawsuits against Japan. These events broke decades of silence. Such courageous and resilient actions have been models for Asian Americans in speaking, teaching, and creating actions for remembrances.

Breaking silences and speaking truths were key themes in the San Francisco hearings. In the September 17, 2015 hearing, San Francisco City and County Board of Supervisor Jane Kim discussed how the present moment is about breaking silences, and shared her memories hearing stories about the occupation, the war, and women and young girls taken from their homes to serve as sexual slaves for the Japanese military. These were stories that she grew up hearing from so many women in her family who were fearful that they could have been taken as “comfort women.” She stated:

The greatest revolution that you can give is not just to survive but survive and tell the stories. The experience and the story are humiliating and challenging to hear... It is so important we not only know our history but we remember the story so they won't happen again.

Supervisor Eric Mar also described the San Francisco hearings acts of breaking silences. He stated:

Today's hearing is about a history of breaking silences. It's about a fight for justice, for hundreds of thousands of women and girls. It's a fight for justice, and my hope is that we focus on the stories that are told today. I wanted to say that, as a member of this board of supervisors, we pass lots of laws and policies, but I think there are times where something in our chambers within us and with visitors transforms us. It changes us to be more human. As Detroit's Grace Lee Boggs shows, how we've become more human with more compassion and empathy for others is a way to move our city forward.

Mar further shared that as a Chinese American and a father of a 15-year-old daughter who is Chinese and Japanese American, he wants youth and future generations to know these stories. He further broke his family's silence by telling a personal truth of domestic violence in his grandparents' family. He stated:

Allow those stories and that spirit to transform them as well as we move forward with a history and with a passion for peace and justice...Grandma Lee brings us together, unifies our communities for a future without oppression of women and girls, a few of peace and justice for all...I wanted to say that grandma lee helps to bring together many of our communities.

Breaking silence over generations is one common theme we saw in the Board of Supervisors meeting. Mar, then Supervisor of District One, introduced Grandma Lee as "an example of courage and a story of breaking silence over generations.” Former “comfort woman” Grandma Yong Soo Lee (Halmoni Lee) traveled from South Korea and spoke at the hearing, presenting herself as living history of the hate crimes against her and many other women by the Imperial Japanese Army. For the sake of future generations, she was committed to speaking out and sharing her truth before she and only forty seven other survivors were not able to do so. She stated:

I am the living evidence of history...For the sake of our next generation and children and grandchildren I think we need to teach them accurate history. I want to tell you the truth will come out no matter what. I want to tell the leaders of Japan to change your mind...We are nearly at the end of our lives. We are old people. In Korea, there are only 47 survivors...These grandmothers are so sick... They cannot get up... they cannot talk clearly... So before they all pass away I want to urge you to resolve this clearly as soon as possible in a peaceful manner.

Several speakers during the open public comment reiterated the need to break silences.

They spoke about the importance of personal experiences. Jihi Yoo, a mother and activist, spoke to the audience about the importance of seeking justice for the victims and acknowledging these hate crimes as not just a political issue but a human rights issue. Yoo spoke on the importance of breaking silences and teaching future generations about justice and truth. She stated:

This is not a Japan/Korea issue. It is a human rights issue. It's a women's issue. it's a justice issue. It's [about] doing the right thing for our children so they understand the history [and] they understand what is truthful.. They understand that when we hurt somebody that we make it right.

She stated that she personally got involved because she wanted to educate the next generation — her 17-year-old daughter who had been asking about the “comfort women” after learning about a resolution introduced in Congress six times that has still not passed. Her daughter’s questions and concern became a catalyst to her own awakening of the importance of speaking up on this issue.
COMING TOGETHER:
PAN-ETHNIC ASIAN AMERICAN COMPASSION AND SOLIDARITY

During the September 17, 2015 hearing, “comfort woman” survivor Halmoni Yongsoo Lee came to support San Francisco’s effort to build a memorial. These meetings entailed hours of public comment primarily by supportive Asian Americans but also denialists to the comfort women experience. The movement to memorialize was marked by sharp divisions and tensions between Japanese Americans and Japanese nationalists who deny the existence of comfort women for fear of backlash directed towards Japanese Americans reminiscent of WWII. Despite divisions and tensions in the Japanese community made clear during the San Francisco hearing, Japanese Americans advocating for the memorial prevailed and joined other Asian Americans in solidarity. Pan-ethnic Asian American solidarity emerged as a compassionate and empathetic response to support and build a “comfort women” memorial in San Francisco. Such pan-ethnic Asian American solidarity first emerged in the 1968 San Francisco State University (SFSU) student strike in which students of various Asian backgrounds came together alongside other students of color to demand the first college of Ethnic Studies at SFSU. After the 1968 student strike, many other social movements would emerge encouraging Asian Americans to organize across ethnic backgrounds around their shared experience. During the San Francisco hearing, Asian American pan-ethnicity focused on solidarity and finding a shared historical experience. Japanese Americans were key in leading efforts in remembering “comfort women.” During the public comment, Judy Hamaguchi of the San Francisco chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) spoke on record that the San Francisco chapter did not oppose a memorial to honor the “comfort women” and that the members of their board unanimously voted in support. She stated that her organization was made up of volunteer activists who believe in education and human rights for all. She also paralleled the “comfort women” experience to the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans. She remarked how in her son’s class at UC Santa Cruz how like the “comfort women,” the Japanese American incarceration was challenged and questioned:

In a class discussion about the concentration camp, several students challenged the idea that such a thing occurred here in America. “It never happened,” they said. On the other side of the other world, the people, the civilians, my stepfather, my uncle, and my mother saw destruction and death in a flash. It creates a world of nightmares—we cannot minimize the horrors that “comfort women” suffered. We cannot deny their unimaginable pain and suffering. We have stories to share as caution to the rest of the world. We are compelled to educate so future generations will read about the gruesomeness of war rather than experience it.

In this example, compassion and connection are key examples of solidarity as expressed by Professor Wesley Ueunten, a scholar of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University who teaches the Japanese American experience. After witnessing several Japanese nationalists in the public comment speak to defame, shame, and minimize the “comfort women” experience, he said:

Throughout these hearings, I’ve heard people call them [comfort women] liars and prostitutes and agents of propaganda. It seems as though people aren’t seeing them. We have a comfort woman here, but we’re not seeing her as a human, equal human. ... I’ve worked in the Japanese American community for twenty years trying to bring people together, but this is an opportune time. I’ve never seen...
opportunities like this to bridge the gaps between Japanese Americans from mainland and Hawaii, Shin Isse, and Nisei... This is a great time for us to open our hearts.

Professor Uenotent challenged those who chose to deny the “comfort women” experience to show compassion. Other Japanese Americans echoed similar support for the “comfort women.” Grace Shimizu, a Japanese American community activist, spoke up about her support for the “comfort women” memorial by reflecting on the experiences of her family members in Peru being kidnapped and imprisoned in an incarceration camp. She discussed how some individuals in the Japanese American community have voiced opposition to any attention to this history, and to the idea of a “comfort women” memorial itself. Although in the minority, some Japanese Americans expressed concern that a memorial could inflame Japan bashing and racist attacks on Japanese Americans by guilt of association. Shimizu urged in her speech to move past this fear and find courage in remembering these wartime tragedies so the next generation can learn.

Cathy Matsuoka of Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress stressed the importance of acknowledging and advocating for the truth of the “comfort women” experience just as the Japanese American community has spoken out for redress for those interned in camps during World War II, and others have advocated to stop the scapegoating of Arab and Muslim Americans in the aftermath of 9/11. She explained that Japanese Americans shared parallel experiences of inhumane treatment during World War II when they were incarcerated in camps and that their histories were denied until they spoke up after years of being silenced. She stated:

I am extremely proud of our community because we spoke up about the pain of the camps after forty years of silence. Similar to the “comfort women” who bravely broke their silence after 70 years, I am proud of how our community stood... The “comfort women” continued to speak the truth to those that say they were willing participants in this [and that] this never happened... As Japanese Americans we can educate others about our history and bring communities together by supporting the “comfort women”...

A key component of the care work that operated during the hearings to build the “comfort women” memorial is a sense of solidarity and a compassionate and empathetic understanding of historical context and experience. Throughout the hearings, Japanese denialists who opposed the building of the memorial suggested that by building this site, San Francisco would incite a negative image of Japanese people worldwide. Individuals who spoke against the building suggested that it divided the community and could create “Japan bashing.” They proposed that the installation of a memorial of the “comfort women” was an act of hate. Those Asian Americans who testified in favor of building the memorial worked to move the discussion from fear and hate directed at Japanese people to an inclusive compassionate solidarity about remembering the “comfort women” in order to promote healing.

BUILDING TO REMEMBER AND TEACH THE NEXT GENERATION

The Asian American movement to build the San Francisco memorial worked beyond just breaking silences around this historical trauma. A final theme that emerged in the transcript was the importance of remembrance for the history of “comfort women,” especially during a time when denialists were starting to encroach on efforts to memorialize and recognize “comfort women” in the U.S. Acknowledging that this happened is important as there has been a history of denying and silencing the voices of the “comfort women.” Phyllis Kim of the Korean American Forum brought up the importance of acknowledging the trauma and violence that “comfort women” experienced and putting an end to the struggle between victims and the “deniers.” She further emphasized that these deniers are “not the Japanese Americans who live in America, [but] the [Japanese] Prime Minister and the ultra-Nationalist who have been financed to fight the effort to remember.”

Miho Kim Lee, then CWJC Coordinator, condemned nationalism stirred by a Japanese government that sought to deny the “comfort women” experience. She shared;

It’s important to recognize the anti-memorial movement in the U.S. actually emboldened this historical revisionism. Whatever your reasons, if you don’t support this memorial, make no mistake it will be touted as a victory for the denialists up and down the political food chain...We’re advocating for [the] “comfort women” memorial as a vehicle for understanding and change that can unite all people for women’s human rights

Throughout the San Francisco Board of Supervisors meeting, many speakers advocated for women's rights and the need to continually recognize and address the violence that the Imperial Japanese Army committed against women during World War II. A large part of acknowledging this history is to honor the survival of “comfort women.” The memorial in San Francisco was also described by Asian American activists as a tool to teach the next generation about this injustice. In the hearing, members of the Jewish American community illustrated associations between “comfort women” memorials and Holocaust memorials. They recognized these memorials serve as a monument for reconciliation and “shine a light on unspeakable crimes against humanity, so that lessons could be learned for the future.” Kei Fischer, a Jewish American and at the time Lecturer in Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University, used personal examples to express the importance of breaking the silence of war. She was inspired by narratives of survivors and dedicated over a decade of her life to this work. Fischer continued on to note the importance of breaking silence and erecting this memorial to start the necessary work towards justice and peace as well as make an impact on younger generations by teaching the atrocities of war and never letting history repeat itself. Fischer said:

I was also inspired by the narratives of the courageous survivors of this atrocity... It sparked my interest in the anti-war and anti-oppression peace work that I’ve dedicated the last 15 years of my life to. This memorial is a symbol of this necessary work towards peace and justice that must happen both here locally in San Francisco and globally as well... I know firsthand the power these memorials have on the younger generation. This memorial commemorates the mass sexual enslavement of women from more than 10 different nationalities... teach our coming generations about the horrors of war so such atrocities cannot be repeated.
Asian American intergenerational care work has connected “comfort women” trauma to present day issues ranging from the #MeToo movement to human trafficking. The issue of “comfort women” brings up painful emotions regarding sexual violence that women in current generation have experienced. In part, the “comfort women” movement for Asian Americans in the twenty first century is fueled by the past but also serves as an example of breaking the silences of Asian American women in this current generation. The building of a “comfort women” memorial in San Francisco offered an opportunity to bring together Asian Americans to remember not only the past but also connect it today and to women’s issues. In the hearings, various Asian American speakers discussed the importance of connecting the past historical experiences of “comfort women” with issues of the current day. Grace Shimizu shared:

The comfort women memorial is an important opportunity to make connections with and among communities. Engaging in dialogue, deepening our understanding of our past and drawing lessons for the challenges we face today especially human trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children during times of war. We can open our minds, soften our hearts, be compassionate and hear and understand each other for the sake of all of our children. We can stand strong together.

A remembrance of “comfort women” in the city of San Francisco can also mean the recognition of ongoing issues of human trafficking and sexual violence. Finally, remembering the “comfort women” is a collective responsibility to make sure these horrors are not forgotten or repeated.

Asian Americans remembering the “comfort women” have also illustrated how movements can work across generations for voice, empowerment, and remembrance. In the Asian American community, care work across generations happens through empathy, connection, and the willingness to be a voice, a phenomenon which has been documented in movements such as the Japanese American redress movement. Intergenerational pan-Asian American movements, such as building the “comfort women” memorial in San Francisco, pave the way for future generations to break barriers and continue breaking silences across multiple issues. Like remembrance work to memorialize the “comfort women,” the #StopAAPIHate movement is an example of present-day pan-Asian American intergenerational community organizing in which the advocates and voices are those of the next generation. For example, Mina Fedor, a 12 year-old San Francisco Bay Area resident, organized an anti-hate rally in March of 2021 as an empathetic response to elderly Asian Americans who have faced the brunt of anti-Asian verbal harassment, shunning, and physical assault during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Asian Americans remembering the “comfort women” has become an opportunity to extend the possibilities of pan-ethnicity beyond U.S.-based racialized boundaries and identities to include transnational and gender rights issues. Asian Americans remembering the “comfort women” has allowed for discussion of sexual assault and violence that continues to be silenced in Asian American community. For Asian Americans, shame and stigma around sexual violence are rooted in misogyny and lead to underreporting. Indeed, remembering the “comfort women” offers healing for those affected by sexual violence today as the “comfort women” models encourage speaking about the violence done to them.

In the September 17, 2015 San Francisco Board of Supervisors public hearing, Halmoni Lee bravely spoke her truths. The bravery demonstrated by her and other “comfort women” in speaking up despite the stigma and shame has paved a way for future generations to speak up and seek justice and healing. As scholars and activists have demonstrated, the aim in truth telling is not only in disclosing historical facts, “but also to publicly acknowledge responsibility” Thanks to Halmoni Lee’s act, future generations as well as the Asian American community can claim space that fosters healing. Memorializing the “comfort women” is a way for future generations to resist and break silences around sexual violence and demand responsibility for injustices from the past. The message to future generations is that we no longer have to conceal our pain, abuse, and trauma. We will continue to take space, speak out, and advocate for one another.
About the Authors

**Grace J. Yoo**
Grace J. Yoo, Ph.D., MPH is a Professor and former Chair of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University. She is the co-editor of Encyclopedia of Asian Americans Today, and Koreans in America: History, Identity and Community and co-author of Caring across Generations: The Linked Lives of Korean American Families.

**Eunice Kim**
Eunice Kim, M.P.A. is a program manager at Stop AAPI Hate, a coalition that addresses anti-Asian racism and xenophobia. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Asian American Studies and Master of Public Administration from San Francisco State University. Ms. Kim also has been a Lecturer in Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University.

**Soojin Jeong**
Soojin Jeong, M.A. is a doctoral student in East Asian Studies at University of California Irvine. She received a Master degree from San Francisco State University in Asian American Studies. Her research is in social reproduction, political economy, Asian American literature and Korean Studies.

Endnotes

4. Kirmayer et al “Rethinking historical trauma;” Yoo, Teaching about “Comfort Women.”
7. “Comfort women” is in quotes as it is euphemism for militarized sexual slavery


20. Ibid


24. City & County of San Francisco Board of Supervisor Hearing, Public Safety & Neighborhood Services Committee., Urging the Establishment of a Memorial for “Comfort Women” | Sep 17, 2015) accessed March 1, 2019 https://sanfrancisco.granicus.com/player/clip/23681?view_id=178&redirect=true&h=36cd6de0e626205340073e5fcf3f7c71c


Ten Years After Oak Creek: Federal Policy Recommendations to Protect Communities Targeted by Hate

By Nimarta Narang

One decade on, it is essential to revisit the 2012 attack on the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin—and to reflect on what more we must do to better protect our communities from similar horrific violence.

2022 was a year marked with significant anniversaries of hate against the AAPI community both historic and recent, from the 40th anniversary of the hate-driven murder of Chinese American immigrant Vincent Chin to the one-year anniversary, of recent mass shootings in Atlanta and Indianapolis. These commemorations, moreover, came amidst a series of hate crimes targeting Sikh men in Richmond Hill, Queens, and a years-long spike in violence against Asian Americans—particularly Asian American women—ignited by the COVID-19 pandemic. One anniversary in 2022, however, is both important on its own right as a marker in the history of targeted violence and useful for contextualizing recent trends of hate in the United States: the 10-year remembrance of the shooting at a gurdwara, a Sikh house of worship, in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

On August 5, 2012, a white supremacist gunman stormed the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in Oak Creek. He opened fire on worshippers who were preparing for Sunday morning services; six people lost their lives that day, and a seventh was severely paralyzed before succumbing to his injuries in 2020. Others, including a responding police officer who was shot 15 times, survived the attack with severe medical complications. The entire Sikh community—both in Oak Creek and across the nation—was left in mourning and disbelief that a sacred space could be targeted with such horrific violence.

In some respects, Oak Creek was the culmination of a decade of anti-Sikh sentiment that had surged after 9/11. Ever since the beards and turbans of Sikh men were falsely conflated with terrorism in the American public conscience, the community had to persevere in the face of individual acts of hate and systemic discrimination. The most high profile example of the former was Balbir Singh Sodhi, a turbaned Sikh man living in Mesa, AZ, who was shot and killed in the first deadly post-9/11 hate crime on September 15, 2001. The attack in Oak Creek could also be viewed as an early indicator of the targeted violence against religious minorities, communities of color, and women that would grow over the next decade. This trend, driven by white supremacy, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and other noxious and overlapping ideologies, can be seen in subsequent acts of terror including those in Charleston, Pittsburgh, Poway, El Paso, Atlanta, Buffalo and others.

Despite both of these trends, ten years after the attack on Oak Creek, the Sikh community has not wavered from the spirit of chardi kala, the idea of relentless optimism in the face of struggle. This resilience has been particularly exemplified by the Oak Creek sangat, or congregation. On September 20, 2011, Harpreet Singh Saini, an 18-year-old Sikh man, testified before a Senate subcommittee to pay an emotional tribute to his mother, who had been murdered less than a month before. His testimony changed history: in 2013, U.S. Attorney General Eric H. Holder announced that the FBI would begin tracking hate crimes specifically against Sikhs. Pardeep Singh Kaleka, whose father was murdered in the attack, sought to understand the ideology that had driven this act of hate: he reached out to Arno Michaelis, a former white supremacist, and the two men went on to partner in a decade's worth of work to promote deradicalization and interfaith understanding. In August of 2022, the local sangat continued to step up, leading efforts to commemorate this solemn anniversary with a series of events involving different communities, elected officials, and national advocacy organizations.

It is undeniable that the Sikh community has done tremendous work commemorating and honoring the lives lost and impacted in the 2012 attack in Oak Creek. While their courage, resilience, and love displayed through 10 years of activism and compassion are powerful, the fact remains that communities across the United States continue to suffer under the pattern of targeted violence that has continued to ramp up in the last decade. Despite recent steps forward—including the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, the most significant federal hate crimes legislation passed in more than 12 years—the action taken by federal lawmakers has been disproportionately small in comparison to the urgent threat presented by violent hate. Accordingly, there are steps that Congress should take now to move all of us, in the AAPI community and beyond, towards a safer future.

First, in a direct answer to acts of violence against not just the Oak Creek gurdwara, but also synagogues, churches, mosques, and temples across the nation, Congress should do more to help marginalized communities secure our institutions. Passing the Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP) Improvement Act, will increase the grant funding from Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and state administrative agencies to help houses of worship and other community gathering points with “target hardening and other physical security enhancements.”
Second, it is important to effectively respond to acts of hate that affect individuals. Current U.S. law prohibits the Department of Justice (DOJ) from prosecuting hate crimes where bias is not the sole reason for a perpetrator’s actions—a difficult legal standard to meet. The Justice for Victims of Hate Crimes Act, however, would close this loophole and allow the DOJ to take a more active role in prosecuting hate crime cases. This is an essential reform to prevent cases from being neglected or lost by state and local authorities; we need look no further than the murder of Ahmad Aubery for a reminder of the extraordinary effort it takes to achieve any kind of justice or accountability in hate crime cases.

And third, the Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act must be re-introduced and passed. This comprehensive legislation would direct the DOJ, FBI, and Department of Homeland Security to “monitor, analyze, investigate, and prosecute” domestic terrorism, with a particular eye towards what the government already acknowledges as the top security threat: racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists. The legislation would also establish and fund related trainings, task forces, and investigations—and critically, would structure these components through a racial equity lens to ensure that its policies do not inadvertently target Black and brown communities like so many post-9/11 counterterrorism laws did.

On the eve of the ten year Oak Creek anniversary, more than 90 gurdwaras across the country signed a letter to President Biden urging him to use his executive authority to strengthen the security of marginalized communities’ houses of worship. The following day, the Biden-Harris Administration released a fact sheet offering a series of strong first steps, including expanding funding for securing places of worship and other nonprofit entities, creating a one-stop online clearing house of federal resources designed to counter terrorism and targeted violence, and making grant programs more accessible, amongst other initiatives. In 2023, as we swear in new members of Congress, we have a significant opportunity to build on commitments to keep all of our communities safe.

2022 showed us that commemorating hate violence anniversaries takes a toll on our communities. For too long, the onus has been on those impacted to not just provide support and remembrance, but to also push for change. Targeted communities have done their part, and will continue to do so—but the responsibility to act should also be shouldered by our elected officials. They, after all, are the ones who are charged with protecting our collective rights to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. These simple asks outlined above should be viewed as neither radical nor polarizing, but as common sense reforms in the interest of all. At the end of the day, we must come to view these attacks as preventable rather than inevitable. Only that change of mindset will determine if the safety of religious minorities, communities of color, and women will be prioritized, and whether our communities will be spared from having to bear further painful commemorations.

About the Author

Nimarta Narang

Nimarta Narang is a writer and journalist from Bangkok, Thailand. Currently based in New York, she is a graduate of Tufts University, the University of Oxford, and New York University. She has lived in Bangkok, London, Oxford, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and New York.

Endnotes


How will they hold us?

By Tony DelaRosa

On May 31, 2021, HB 376 also known as the TEAACH Act passed in IL mandating Asian American History to be taught across the state. This spurred other states to follow suit.

What separates a mandate from a movement are the shepherds who inherit the stories. What will shepherds do with us:
“fastest growing racial group”
48 countries deep
2300 languages and an ocean of dialects

Who will carry our stories?
Will they cradle us precious?
Like Yuri did Malcolm at his darkest of hours?
Like the Black Panthers did Yellow and Brown Power?
Like the Black Feminist Movement during the Philippine American War?
Or like Blasian March building Black, Blasian, and Asian radical rapport?

How loud will they teach this invisible race beyond the silence outside of October and May?

What if they drop one of us?
Will they pick us up like a fallen soldier or will they stumble over a minefield and fumble us forgotten?
Who entrusted them with our spices, jackfruit, and diamonds?

Will they style us windows and pick up a mirror?
Will they dance a revolution or wallflower reform?
Will they wade in the binary or swim ultraviolet upstream?
Do they know us beyond a hashtag?
Beyond San Francisco and Times Square?
Beyond the Black & white binary that flattens and binds us?

Can they name our mothers before our fathers?
Will they badge themselves “allies,” “co-conspirators,” “kinfolk,” after they discover our names in a book club that doesn’t smell of our vinegar, blood, salt, and dust?
Will they play our battle drums?
Will they steal or plant our Chrysanthemums?
About the Author

Tony DelaRosa (he/siya) is a Filipino American anti-bias and anti-racist educator, racial equity strategist, spoken word poet, and motivational speaker. He holds a Master’s in Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and is currently a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin Madison focused on Education Leadership & Policy Analysis. He is a forthcoming author of the book, Teaching the Invisible Race: How to Embody a Pro-Asian American Lens in Schools from Jossey-Bass Publishing. He is the 2023 recipient of The Asian American Foundation (TAAF)’s Community Trailblazer Award, and will be featured on the Hulu series “TAAF AAPI Heritage Heroes.” Follow him on Twitter and Instagram @TonyRosaSpeaks.
The fate of American democracy is intricately tied to whether Congress ever passes federal legislation to protect the voting rights that have been systematically targeted by Republican legislators across the country—from Texas, to Georgia, to Arizona. The stakes are high for our democracy, but they are even more pressing for the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community—and for that matter, all communities of color. If Congress is unable to pass sweeping voting rights protections before the next election, voters of color will be further silenced. And the great gains in voter turnout in 2022 and 2020 will be mere flukes, rather than a harbinger of greater democratic participation to come.

The strong turnout of AAPI voters in the South and Sunbelt states in 2020 is not surprising when considering AAPIs are the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the United States. The AAPI community is projected to be the largest minority group in the U.S. by 2055. These population trends mean more AAPI houses of worship, civic organizations, and community groups can be activated to turn out our vote.

High AAPI voter turnout made the difference in key swing states during the 2020 Presidential elections. In Georgia, the AAPI community increased their total votes cast by a record 84 percent in 2020 compared to 2016. Georgia’s AAPI voters flipped the 7th Congressional District blue, elected the state’s first Black and Jewish Senators, and delivered Democratic control of the United States Senate. Nationally, voters of color helped secure Democratic control of the White House by creating a path to victory for Joe Biden in battleground states.

Unfortunately, in retaliation to the growing power of voters of color, Republican legislatures and governors subsequently fast-tracked a flurry of bills to significantly hamper voting rights, one of which made it more difficult to receive an absentee ballot and another banned volunteers from providing food and water to voters waiting in long lines. One particularly egregious bill in Georgia even proposed banning Sunday voting in an attempt to curb the voting power of primarily Black voters who engage in “Souls to the Polls” voting drives. It was thankfully struck out of the final bill, in response to activists who made their voices heard. This wasn’t just an attack on voting—it was an attempt to destroy and suppress power in our communities of color.

Since Shelby v. Holder gutted the Voting Rights Act in 2013, new attacks on voting rights across the country that target voters of color “with surgical precision” are part of the onslaught against American democracy. Following the 2020 elections, we have seen an unfettered proliferation of bills aimed at suppressing voting rights—chipping away at our fragile democracy. In 2021, legislatures enacted nearly fifty bills in at least twenty-one states to suppress voting. On top of this, Republicans are taking advantage of every opportunity to gerrymander their electorate to ensure that they choose their voters—rather than the other way around.

Further, a 2020 election organizer from the Sunbelt region highlighted the challenges in identifying AAPI voters by sub-ethnicity, since voter rolls only distinguished whether a voter is white or Black. This could largely be attributed to administrative remnants in identifying AAPI voters by sub-ethnicity, since voter rolls only distinguished whether a voter is white or Black. This could largely be attributed to administrative remnants established during the Jim Crow period, aimed at restricting and monitoring Black voters. Since then, Secretaries of State have updated voter forms to be more inclusive and reflective of our nation’s ethnic and racial diversity.

The responsibility to save democracy rests with the millions of American voters who elect their representatives. The Voting Rights Act, for decades, was repeatedly passed with unanimous support from these elected leaders. However, Republicans have recently started saying the quiet part out loud—expressing their open disregard for democracy. If we hold onto the archaic procedural anomaly that is the filibuster, we’ll be saying loud and clear that we agree with them.

While AAPI voters have shown that we are a force to be reckoned with when we organize, our survival as a people in the United States counts on us being able to vote—free and unencumbered from restrictions that Republicans have laid across our path in places like Georgia, Texas, and Arizona. I hope our leaders in the Senate see this and take swift action.
Varun Nikore

Varun Nikore has served as founding Executive Director of the AAPI Victory Alliance, a national AAPI 501c4 organization, since its inception in 2017. Nikore also served as founding President of the AAPI Victory Fund from 2015 to 2021, a national SuperPAC focused on mobilizing AAPI voters. In his current role, he is responsible for managing political and legislative strategy, strategic planning, as well as leading the organization's newly launched think tank. Nikore holds a Bachelor’s degree from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in Aviation Business Administration and a Master’s Degree from George Mason University in International Commerce and Policy.

About the Authors

Endnotes


The Evolution of Our American Dream: A Conversation with David Siev

By Riva Han

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

AAPR: To start off, we would love for you to tell us about the film and your inspiration for making it.

SIEV: My name is David Siev and I’m a filmmaker. Most recently, I directed my directorial debut documentary feature called BAD AXE. BAD AXE is a very personal story. It all started when I moved from New York to my rural hometown of Bad Axe, Michigan during the pandemic to be with family. Like so many young adults did, we migrated back home to the nest.

For me, BAD AXE is a film that is about family. It’s about the American Dream, but it’s also about the American identity and what it means to be American. The basis of the film is my family — we’re Cambodian-Mexican-American. We live in this rural white community, and it’s us trying to keep our family restaurant alive and the American Dream alive during one of the most uncertain times in history amidst a pandemic, a racial reckoning, and everything else going on in our country in 2020. So it becomes a story that explores the question: how do you keep the American Dream alive today when it’s being challenged now more than ever?

AAPR: You’ve spoken in previous interviews about the evolution of the American Dream, and how for your parents’ generation, the dream was about survival — keeping food on the table and sending their kids to school. Compared to how for our generation, the Dream still entails the element of financial stability, but also this other element of having a voice and being viewed as just as American as anyone else. How did you come to understand the evolution of your American Dream? And how do you envision the future of the American Dream for the next generation?

SIEV: Making this film was so transformative for every individual in our family, including myself. So much of this film is about my family trying to find our place in America and trying to find and use our voice.
For me, that realization became much more clear after the film had come out and we realized that sharing our story truly did matter. It’s something we truly hoped for with this film—that people could see our perspective, but there’s no guarantee of that. So once the film was able to find an audience in this country and people began to tell us how thankful they were that we shared our experience, and they didn’t know that this was an experience that even existed in their own communities, that’s when I really began to realize that this film has so much to give in giving myself a voice and my family a voice.

In the film, we’re fighting to have that voice, and we’re not sure if it’s making the impact that we would like it to make. It was when the film came out that we realized that there is that true impact there, that our voices are being heard—and not just by people who agree with us but people everywhere—who don’t see eye to eye with us, who don’t agree with us politically, who come from different backgrounds. That’s what the point of having a voice is—for your experiences to matter and to resonate with other people who might not necessarily have heard you in the first place.

When we talk about the next generation to come, we just want that to keep getting better. I always say in a world for my nieces, I hope it’s something that they’re not fighting as much for when they’re my age. I hope it’s something that just becomes ingrained in American society, in who they are and the young women they will be, that their voices matter just as anyone else’s.

You’ve previously touched on this note of cross cultural intersectionality, and I think that’s especially powerful given the fragmentation of political discourse in recent years as you’ve noted. The film is about your family in the context of the BLM protests and this global pandemic, and it’s about unity, harmony and contextualizing your story in the American story. How do you think of your identity and this concept of cross cultural intersectionality, and how has that changed over the years?

Finding my own place and identity of how I feel as an American is something that has been a very long journey and one that I am still on. Growing up, you always know that you’re different and that you simply look and think differently than others in your community. And you really try to hide a lot of that part about yourself. So much of what my parents did is that they tried to blend in. And for myself, growing up as a little brown boy in Bad Axe, Michigan, I tried to do the same thing as well.

It wasn’t until I moved away from Bad Axe and went to school at the University of Michigan where I began to meet other people like me, other people who had similar experiences and who were also grappling with their own identity of being American. Having that perspective of moving away began to allow me to ask questions about myself and my place in my community, and that’s a journey that I’m still on.

With the making of BAD AXE and everything going on in 2020, where you see our family decide to use our voice for the first time, specifically my siblings and I, you see the consequences that come along with that—people telling you to go back to Cambodia, to go back to China, people telling you they’re no longer going to support your family business anymore because you support the Black Lives Matter movement, because you think differently than them.

“...The basis of the film is my family—we’re Cambodian–Mexican–American. We live in this rural white community, and it’s us trying to keep our family restaurant alive and the American Dream alive... it becomes a story that explores the question: how do you keep the American Dream alive today when it’s being challenged now more than ever?”

You begin to be put into this other box and being called “other,” and that’s a box that I’ve grappled with for so long to step outside of. My whole family has grappled with that. Being in that box—it makes you feel less American. With this film, it was like, we’re going to show that our experiences aren’t just limited to being in this box of being “other.” Rather, everything that we went through throughout this year of 2020 was what so many Americans went through during that time—not just API families, not just multicultural families, but families everywhere. This is an experience we all went through together as a country. Therefore, when our family is speaking about our experiences, that needs to be included when we talk about what the American experience is. This film has allowed me and my family in our own ways to cement ourselves in our identity and where we fit not only in our community of Bad Axe but also our country.

One of the many admirable aspects of the film is the fact that it’s the result of long conversations with your family and it shows the trust that your family had in you, to allow you to keep filming in tense moments. What was your experience like with you and your family in having those conversations and grappling with some of the tense emotions that came up during the film? How did you cultivate that trust with your family?

This film was made through our entire family and the difficult conversations we had to have with one another both on and off screen. When I started editing this film, I remember being in a very angry place, with everything our country was going through. I was mad about how we were dealing with the pandemic, something that shouldn’t have been political but was. I was angry about the BLM movement, how something that is supposed to be about supporting another marginalized community and a beautiful moment was also being politicized in a way that it shouldn’t have been. I brought a lot of that anger and frustration into early edits, losing grasp of why I was even making this film in the first place, which at the end of the day was to share my family’s story of our American Dream.
“We might not ever agree with one another politically, but can we have an understanding for one another’s experiences, and not just cohabitate but thrive together as a community to make Bad Axe a better place? The love letter concept is so complicated, but that’s the hope. You never stop fighting for anything you believe in, and Bad Axe is no exception.”

SIEV:
But it started to stray away from that, to become more about me trying to point out everything that was going wrong with our country. It was through a lot of conversations with my family, and them asking me why are you making this film in the first place. I realized that I was moving away from my original purpose. I was more so telling how our family was feeling and why we felt the way we felt and why everyone else was wrong versus just showing our experience and allowing audience members to be in our shoes and experience Bad Axe through our lens. It was through those difficult conversations with each other to just revelation that if I wanted to create real change and real dialogue, it had to come from a place where people could connect with us as fellow humans. Having said that, you see how reserved my parents are about the film within the film itself. My dad says, “you have to rewrite your love letter,” and my mom is telling me, “you don’t live here anymore,” and they’re both very much right in those circumstances. Because I get to go back to New York and live my life, and my family are the ones who have to put up with the consequences.

It’s the same with me trying to say, “it’s a love letter to Bad Axe” to my dad. I don’t think at the time I truly believed it when I said that. It was more of a knee-jerk reaction to being scolded by your parent and trying to justify your actions. I had to come back to this realization that it was a love letter to Bad Axe because when you love something, you love it unconditionally. I love Bad Axe unconditionally, and I’ll never stop fighting for it to get better. That took a lot of learning from these tough conversations I was having with my family.

What my parents learned from that was that you can’t stop fighting for something you believe in; in fact, that’s what they always taught us growing up, to stand up and do what you believe is right. That’s something we’re all grateful for, to have gone on the journey together.

There’s a greater message with this film. It’s a love letter to the community of Bad Axe. It’s also a love letter to family and community. If you can see that as different as our family is and how much we don’t agree with each other, we just want what’s best for us all at the end of the day. We still come together — and we don’t just find a way to cohabitate and be under the same roof — we find a way to thrive and excel as a family. I hope there’s a bigger message there with what I hope is in the future for Bad Axe. We might not ever agree with one another politically, but can we have an understanding for one another’s experiences, and not just cohabitate but thrive together as a community to make Bad Axe a better place? The love letter concept is so complicated, but that’s the hope. You never stop fighting for anything you believe in, and Bad Axe is no exception.

AAPR:
The courage that you and your family had in getting to that understanding shines through in the film. You’ve spoken about how in the weeks leading up to your world premiere at SXSW, this was a work of perseverance and passion for you: every sales agent and major distributor passed on the film, and you had $101.99 in your bank account. If a deal didn’t happen, you were preparing yourself for a reality where you would have to move back to Bad Axe and work at the restaurant again to get back on your feet. And it wasn’t until IFC made an offer that you realized you were able to have the film take off. I’d love to hear more about how you were able to overcome any fears you might have had, of failure or pushback, or letting down your family? What advice would you have for people who are still navigating how to share their stories or find their voice?

SIEV:
By the time we premiered at SXSW, there were a lot of personal fears and anxiety with my own financial situation. You pour everything into something that is so personal, and at the end of the day, you might not ever see the fruits of your labor pay off. That was really terrifying. But after that premiere, and seeing how people connected with our story and something that was so personal to me, it was almost like a lot of that anxiety and those fears lifted, and I was okay with the fact that if I had to get a job at a restaurant or move back home to get myself back on my feet, that’s just what I would have to do, because I knew I made something I was proud of and I poured every ounce of my soul into. Everything else faded into the background.

When IFC was in the room that day, and they ended up making an offer the next week and the sale went through quicker than any other sale my agent said he’s ever worked on, it was like this new breath of life — not because I had financial security but because there’s going to be more of these screenings and more conversations that would happen. From there, it just snowballed. We won a couple of awards at SXSW, then festivals started reaching out, and before you know it you’ve done over thirty festival screenings, and at each of these screenings, it’s these powerful conversations that happen afterwards, where people are coming up to you and telling you they feel changed and inspired and impacted for the better where they want to spread that message and pass it on. I think that’s why the film has had the momentum it has — not because we have big marketing dollars or any of that — but because people have truly resonated with our story and they feel so compelled to share it with ten of their friends. It’s become bigger than any of us could have ever imagined.

My point in saying this is that my advice to young filmmakers, which I know sounds cliché, is that when you’re deciding to pick up a camera and make your first film, make sure you do it with no other motivation other than that it’s a story that is so close and
important to your heart that you know you cannot sleep at the end of the day unless you share that story.

Scorsese said that the most personal is the most creative, and I think there's so much truth behind that. If you make something so personal and so close to your heart, it can't help but to find a way of connecting with other people. With all the awards talks now and making the Oscars shortlist, it's just knowing that this very personal story of my family has reached a bigger platform, many more people are going to discover our story, many more conversations about all the themes the film raises are going to have helped elevate it and allowed us to reach this point. It's like having a giant megaphone—the platform only gets that much larger and so many people will discover your film now.

AAPR: You've spoken about representation and having this platform, your hope is that in the future, other underrepresented and marginalized stories like yours will not just be limited to smaller, more passionate distributors like IFC but be seen by distributors like Netflix and HBO. How do you think we're going to reach that goal? Do you think there needs to be a radical transformation in the film industry or what do you think is the way forward?

SIEV: Change happens slowly, but I think this change is happening in the industry, though we always want change to happen much quicker. I think that ten years ago, even a film like BAD AXE probably wouldn't have had the momentum it's had. I recognize that I stand on the shoulders of so many other Asian filmmakers before me that helped pave the way for a film like BAD AXE to reach the audience it has. It makes me really optimistic for the future, and seeing our film listed on the shortlist of all the major studios makes me really proud. I hope it shakes those executives up there and tells them, hey listen, personal stories matter. Stories like my family's matter. Representation matters.

I think it's going to make more filmmakers like myself to continue breaking through and sharing their stories. Hopefully that creates a shift in the industry. There needs to be more representation on all levels, but especially at those who are the gatekeepers. The fact that I don't think I met with a single AAPR sales agent is crazy to me. The people who are running these major studios are basically all older white people. Can we imagine what the industry would look like if the gatekeepers and the people who made those decisions were BIPOC individuals or people from marginalized communities? I think the industry would be completely different.

Right now, we're at a point where we're working for people in marginalized communities to be able to reach a position where they are making real change and deciding what films get bought and made. We still have a ways to go to uplift people to be in those positions, but I am optimistic one day there will be a change. I hope BAD AXE is proof that people do care and there is an appetite for these stories.

AAPR: I think BAD AXE certainly is that proof. To close us out, do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share with our readership?

SIEV: I hope that my family's story inspires many others to share their personal stories because if we don't share our stories, who's going to? They could end up in the wrong hands or not be told at all, so I hope it inspires people to tell their personal stories because they truly matter.

About the Interview

David Siev
David Siev is a first-generation Cambodian-Mexican-American filmmaker born and raised in the Midwest. Before directing BAD AXE, his SXSW award-winning feature debut based on his family's restaurant in rural Michigan, David spent his early career learning guerrilla filmmaking under director Jeff Tremaine. This experience prepared David to make his directorial debut with his award-winning narrative short, YEAR ZERO, based on his father's experience of escaping Cambodia. David's work on BAD AXE has been celebrated with numerous accolades, including the Critic's Choice Award for Best First Feature Documentary. David now lives in NYC, focusing on developing narrative and documentary projects.

Riva Han
Riva Han is a JD/MPP Candidate at Harvard Law School and Harvard Kennedy School and serves as Co-Editor-in-Chief for the Asian American Policy Review. Born and raised in southern California, Riva graduated in 2018 from the University of Rochester, where she studied political science and economics. After college, she represented indigent asylum seekers through pro bono initiatives and worked alongside a litigation investment team that funded complex litigation. After graduate school, Riva plans to fight corporate misconduct through plaintiff-side litigation and advance equitable access to education through policy advocacy.

Endnotes


3. Id.


5. Siev, “It Was a Hotbed of Hate.”

6. Id.

Transformation and Liberation Through Diasporic Storytelling: A Conversation with Joseph Juhn

By Riva Han

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

AAPR: CHOSEN begins with a clip of “an old Korean man yelling about the importance of the 1992 LA riots in Korean American history.” In an interview with the Korea Herald, you remarked that you wanted to start the film with that clip “because that’s the very moment where [your] life was changed” and you began to see the LA riots as “a turning point in which ethnic Koreans living in the US started to identify themselves as Korean Americans.” What do you see as other turning points in your life? Other turning points in Korean American society?

JUHN: The genesis of Korean immigration to the US began in 1903 when the first group of Koreans arrived in Hawaii to work at sugarcane plantations. While many, but certainly not all, descendants of the original settlers retained a sense of Korean identity, the vast majority of who we refer to as “Korean immigrants” arrived in the US after the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Those who came to America from 1965 onwards set out to achieve “the American Dream,” the exact meaning of which could be debated but generally connoting economic freedom and good education for children with the goal of becoming a part of “mainstream America.”

This mentality persisted for a long time, until SAIGU, SAIGU, literally meaning April 29 in Korean, is a term used in reference to the 1992 LA Riots/Uprising, which broke out after the acquittal of policemen tried for brutally beating Rodney King. Leading to the verdict of Rodney King, major news outlets diverted issues of systemic racism and
JUHN: police brutality by playing up the murder of Latasha Harlins and disproportionately highlighting racial tensions between Koreans and Blacks in South LA. Many believe that such misused reporting fueled targeted anger towards Korean businesses during the riot/uprising. In fact, there is reasonable suspicion that the LAPD abandoned Koreatown despite repeated requests from merchants and community leaders, and instead using Koreatown as a shield to protect wealthier neighborhoods like Beverly Hills. As a result, over 2,300 stores owned by Korean merchants in South Central and Koreatown were attacked, looted, and burned down. Most were uninsured and few received adequate compensation. Overnight, the “American Dream,” or the fantasy of it, dissipated with the smoke.

SAIGU forever changed the psyche of Korean Americans. Many called it a moment of reckoning. In CHOSEN, Richard Choi of RadioKorea, who live-broadcasted events on the ground during the riots, states that before SAIGU, Koreans were just immigrants living in America. After SAIGU, Korean immigrants became Korean Americans. Hence, the definition of the American Dream fundamentally changed from one based on economic freedom to another based on community consciousness and political representation. This is the foundation upon which CHOSEN begins.

Personally, SAIGU was life-changing because prior to learning of the significance of SAIGU in connection with the formation of Korean American identity, I simply didn’t know what to make out of my identity as Korean in America. Although I was born in Minneapolis, my family left for Korea when I was three and I grew up there until I was 17.

When I returned to the US shortly before my 18th birthday, after renouncing my Korean nationality because dual citizenship is prohibited in Korea, my identity crisis began. I wondered whether I was supposed to renounce my “Koreanness,” just like my Korean nationality, and become as Americanized as possible. I then wondered what that Americanness was. Was being Korean or preserving Koreanness, whatever that means, a baggage—something I needed to shed or hide— or is this something to be celebrated and respected?

My long existential query ended when I learned of SAIGU. I realized, for the first time, that there can be a Korean American identity, one grounded on both Korean and American cultures and values, and one that calls for active participation in our society with a sense of community consciousness. Most importantly, the idea that our collective identity is one in the making and that we can all contribute to its evolution and formation truly inspired me. I felt like I was given a mission to help cultivate and refine it with my Korean American peers. All of this learning came from a workshop led by KW Lee, who opens the first scene of CHOSEN. I filmed his fierce speech as a college kid back in 2005, and I wanted to begin the film with him to acknowledge the very moment of my own enlightenment.

On whether there were other turning points in which the Korean American community or its identity was significantly impacted, I think we are living it now. 30 years have passed since SAIGU and yet we are living through another period in which the legitimacy of our belonging in America is being questioned. I think the recent rise of Asian hate crimes, the definition of the American Dream fundamentally changed from one based on economic freedom to another based on community consciousness and political representation. This is the foundation upon which CHOSEN begins.

The concept of AAPR identity certainly existed in the past, but the depth of solidarity between different Asian ethnic groups was rather tenuous. Without a doubt, spanning from the Chinese railroad indentured servitude to the Japanese internment camp, and from Free Chol Soo Lee movement to the death of Vincent Chin case, and from SAIGU to the recent Asian hate crimes, there has been consistent and pervasive anti Asian racist sentiments in America. But perhaps with the exception of the Free Chol Soo Lee movement, a large-scale, consciously pan-Asian solidarity was not frequently seen. However, shortly after the outbreak of COVID-19, we woke up to a series of news and graphic images of Asian elders and women being violently shoved and attacked in public. For months, by virtue of our Asian heritage, we were subjected to a group trauma and a sense of powerless victimhood, giving rise to urgent calls for a more unified and expansive AAPR identity as a force to be reckoned with.

I wonder whether a generation or two from now on, my offspring will regard themselves no longer as specifically Korean American but rather as members of the larger Asian America. I wonder whether that would be desirable, to lose an ethnic-specific identity by embracing a perhaps more bland yet continuously evolving and inclusive bloc of various identities that fall under “Asian.” I am value-neutral on this hypothetical but this is something I started actively deliberating as of late. Perhaps this is a topic for another day.

AAPR: You’ve noted that you drew inspiration for the film from a memoir by former US national security adviser John Bolton, which made you realize that “the fate of an entire country” could be dictated by a handful of US politicians, and made you wonder whether, if those positions were held by Korean Americans, they “might have rendered a more favorable policy toward peace.” How did your experience of making the film change or reinforce your perspective on that question?

JUHN: I don’t think I’d’ve arrived at that hypothesis — whether Korean American elected officials can render a more favorable decision for their motherland — had I not been interested in the US’ relationship with the Korean peninsula. I am emotionally invested in South Korea being neutral to our country, and I think that’s a responsibility of Korean American citizens.

“SAIGU forever changed the psyche of Korean Americans. Many called it a moment of reckoning. In CHOSEN... before SAIGU, Koreans were just immigrants living in America. After SAIGU, Korean immigrants became Korean Americans. Hence, the definition of the American Dream fundamentally changed from one based on economic freedom to another based on community consciousness and political representation. This is the foundation upon which CHOSEN begins.”
in what happens in the Korean peninsula—both North and South—not least because my parents and friends live there (in the South) but more importantly because I consider peace in Korea to be the zeitgeist of our generation.

While it is true that reading John Bolton’s book sowed a seed that later blossomed into CHosen, I realized as soon as I started shooting the film that the dominating spirit of CHosen would not be exploring US-Korea relations but rather getting to the depths of the complex realities of the Korean American community.

That said, to directly answer the question, my hypothesis was not entirely correct. Two of the four elected Korean American Congressmembers vehemently opposed a bill that would’ve declared the end of the Korean War. I wasn’t necessarily surprised at the direction of their decision, but the degree of the ferocity of their opposition was surprising. They didn’t just oppose the bill—they led a movement in the GOP to do so. This may be a ra sensitive claim, but I find it ironic that completely uninformed American politicians on Korean issues, i.e., Trump, could arrive at the same conclusion as well-versed Korean American politicians with a certain ideological leaning.

The rationale behind the decision to oppose the declaration to end the Korean War merits some explanation. Generally speaking, those who lean conservative in Korea and in the US tend to reject any reasonable attempt at peace talks with North Korea because North Korea is perceived to be evil with its cruel disregard for people and human rights violations.

To be clear, there is a lot of truth to this claim. North Korea is at fault for grossly mistreating its citizens. But what is perhaps equally problematic is the way in which the conservatives have uncritically adopted the anti-communist worldview to prevent any sensible approach to peace talks. Historically, such anti-communism was actively exploited by the military dictators in South Korea to quell more progressive disidents, who were often painted as North Korean sympathizers, if not outright spies. This history of violent abuses of power by the South and the corresponding anti-communism throughout the latter half of the 20th century continues to reverberate in South Korea; one could even argue that South Korea’s latest President Yoon was born out of such anti-communist rhetoric. As such, any Korean or Korean American politician in the position of power whose outlook is deeply grounded in anti-communist conservative ideology may render hostile policies towards the North, the rationale of which might differ from their uninformed American political counterparts but the outcome, unfortunately, the same.

I am not necessarily making a value judgment here but attempting to explain the rationale behind the split of the votes among Korean American House members on ending the Korean War. In sum, whether Korean American politicians can render a more peaceful approach and policy towards the Korean peninsula remains to be seen.

If learning of the 1992 SAIGU served as my enlightenment to the idea of a Korean American identity, a serendipitous encounter with Korean Cubans during my backpacking trip to Cuba exploded my interest in the idea of diaspora.

Prior to my trip to Cuba in 2015, I’d had frequent and wide exposures to various Korean communities around the world, whether it be Korean Chinese (Joseonjok), Korean Russian (Koryosaram), Korean German, Korean Brazilian, Korean Japanese, Korean Argentine, or even Korean South Africans. I’ve long wondered how to understand their existence in relation to mine, how their immigration history differs from mine, whether we could build solidarity with one another in times of crisis, and ultimately, how to perceive our relationship to the motherland. I felt incredible empathy and affinity towards other members of the Korean diaspora who have long struggled to make sense of their own existence and those who continue to survive and thrive as ethnic minorities and immigrants in their own respective host countries.

If my previous identity query was grounded on, and perhaps confined by, this dualistic tension between Korea and America, the idea of diaspora liberated me from a geographic grounding of identity. It was a membership not only in the Korean or Korean American community but also in these larger sojourner communities around the world who share, no matter how remote or accurate, collective memories of the homeland, heritage and history.

While one may perceive such a take on identity as too ethnocentric or nationalistic in nature, in truth it’s quite the contrary: it is a universal and expansive one. A healthy diasporic identity is constructed not at the expense of one’s membership and commitment to a home country but in addition to it. Not only am I Korean, I am Korean American, or even Asian American— I’m also a part of the larger Korean diaspora. A diasporic storyteller, therefore, has a perspective that transcends the confinement of one’s own community. It’s a perspective that allows for both participation and observation. It’s a perspective that is both empathetic and critical. It’s a perspective that is both local and transnational. It’s a perspective both particular and universal in nature. Or at least that’s the kind of perspective I aspire to attain.
AAPR: You’ve observed that whenever you travel back to Korea, you are often questioned as to “how authentic [you are] in terms of [your] ‘Koreanness,’” and that one question this experience raised for you was, “What kind of relationships should exist between the people from the home country and people who live outside (of it)?”. In the fall, you toured South Korea for the premiere of CHOSEN. What are your reflections on these questions in light of this most recent tour? How did South Korean audiences respond?

JUHN: According to the annual Best Countries Report carried out by the U.S. News and World Report in 2023, South Korea ranks as the 9th most “racist” country out of the 78 countries surveyed for the report. South Korea is also the only OECD developed country among the top 22 countries on the list. In the 2017-2022 World Values Survey, over 20% of residents surveyed in Korea responded that they don’t want non-Koreans as their neighbors.

Equally problematic is Koreans’ hostile or stigmatized view of members of their own Korean diaspora, in particular Korean Chinese, North Korean defectors, Korean Russians, Korean adoptees, Korean Japanese, and biracial Koreans, to name a few. Considering that over 7 million ethnic Koreans live overseas, which accounts for roughly 13% of South Korea’s population of 52 million, such “othering” of their own diaspora is quite troubling.

Perhaps this is a testament to Koreans’ narrow and rigid definition of who Koreans are. Fluency in the Korean language, pure-bloodedness, nationality, residency, or service in the military are some of the more important elements that “qualify” one as an “authentic” Korean.

In that regard, my case is an anomaly. Although I am a US-born American citizen, I speak fluent Korean, both of my parents continue to live in Korea, I spent close to half of my life there, and my knowledge of Korean history and culture is more or less up to par with average Koreans. My repeated appearance in Korea’s popular internet radio program, “News Factory,” also earned me special recognition and spotlight whenever I participated in public screening events. In short, what I experienced as a member of Korean diaspora was not the norm but an exception.

I shared CHOSEN with at least a couple of thousand audiences through dozens of public and private screenings. At almost all screening events, people commented how little they knew about the history and current state of Korean Americans and how surprised they were watching the footage of the 1992 LA Riots and Korean Americans’ continued struggles for political representation in light of the ongoing Asian hate crimes.

This goes on to prove a couple of important points. First, there’s a lack of education when it comes to diaspora and multiculturalism. Though there is some push by the government to foster multiculturalism in primary education in Korea, one of the main criticisms of this initiative is that it focuses too much on assimilation and too little on recognizing and celebrating differences among diverse ethnic members in the Korean society.

Second, similarly, there is a lack of fair portrayal of members of the Korean diaspora in news reporting and popular mediums such as film, drama, and TV programs. For example, Korean Chinese and North Korean defectors are frequently depicted as a threat to society, while Korean adoptees, biracial Koreans, labor migrants and South East Asian wives are painted with pitty or social stigma.

A great number of Koreans live overseas as immigrants, ethnic minorities, foreigners, and aliens whose livelihood and well being depends, in part, on the hospitality of host nations. Such hospitality is usually not reciprocated to those coming, or returning, to Korea. Of course, I am oversimplifying complicated matters that deserve more detailed research, but it is worth deliberating whether the notion of “authentic Korean identity” is real and morally legitimate, especially when it seems to largely function as a dividing mechanism.

AAPR: You’ve mentioned that the motivation for you to study film and law are the same: to share stories of social causes and be an agent of change. How does your background as a lawyer inform your perspective, your work, and the mark you want to leave on the world?

JUHN: The funny thing is I never made a conscious decision to leave law altogether to become a career filmmaker. JERONIMO, was a project I started by chance — a passion project, rather. But my life panned out differently. While there is no denying that making JERONIMO and CHOSEN changed the course of my life, largely positively but also with some financial difficulties, I still think about other career options, not because I dislike storytelling but because independent filmmaking is a pragmatically difficult career to sustain.

I don’t think my training in law necessarily had a meaningful effect on my perspective or my work as a documentary filmmaker. If it did, it would be only marginal at best. I say this because I never practiced the kind of law, such as human rights, civil rights, or immigration law, that could have enhanced my understanding of social justice, empathy, and compassion.

I would like to believe that what I am doing is worthy not only to my own sense of fulfillment and growth but also to those who seek identity grounded in humanity, hybridity, and hospitality, all of which I regard to be core tenants of a diasporic identity.

AAPR: One powerful aspect of the film is the unflinching portrayal of intense conflict among candidates across wide swaths of the political spectrum. You’ve mentioned that you are curious to see if CHOSEN will inspire other AAPIs to run for political office. “no matter which ideological spectrum they fall in.” How do you think of your role as filmmaker and Korean American in potentially emboldening voices you might disagree with?

JUHN: This is a difficult question to answer. As much as CHOSEN is about addressing a need for AAPI political representation, it is also about questioning what drives people to run for politics and why one fights for certain beliefs and values. Although David Kim in CHOSEN is far from being a perfect candidate, the film does present David’s journey as a case for hope. Whether or not I agree with David’s policy and political positions, I find something inspiring about his campaign, particularly his heart for the marginalized, the voiceless, and the community. This is not to say that I found other candidates’ intentions as disingenuous — I think all five candidates in CHOSEN, irrespective of their ideological leanings, have genuine convictions about their political ambitions.
With respect to future AAPI candidates whose political positions I may disagree with, I think the real issue may be questioning the source from which their convictions arise. If the conviction comes from universal values that we can generally all agree upon, the case is moot. However, if the conviction, or the direction of their policies, is triggered by hatred, fake news, racism, bias, propaganda, overt narcissism, or ill intended guidance, then I would openly address my concern and protest if necessary. The more difficult and relevant question might be questioning the extent to which we would espouse identity politics. I would absolutely love to see more Asian American political leaders, but what if our representation is achieved at the expense of other similarly vulnerable communities? How do we not succumb to tribalism but strive to uphold universality? These are difficult questions, yet we need to continue to wrestle with them.

You’ve quoted Korean philosopher Choi Jin-seok, who said: “The only time when a being exists, is when that person questions and not when he answers.” What questions are on your mind these days? What questions should young policymakers, lawyers, creatives, or other aspiring changemakers be asking?

One question that is at the core of CHOSEN was this: “How can we peacefully coexist amidst our differences?” One might remember that 2020 was not an ordinary year — COVID-19, racial tensions, economic turmoil, and a chaotic political environment led by Trump, all contributed to a feeling of doomsday.

The question is still valid, albeit to a lesser degree now, and I continue to struggle with it. What would be the moral and philosophical tools or ideas that could help bring a basic sense of camaraderie, unity, and hospitality in this world? Is that too lofty of an ideal? My hypothesis is to explore this idea of diasporic identity and consciousness through storytelling.

Any final thoughts you’d like to share with AAPR readers?

Continuing the theme of diasporic identity and ways of life, I would like to leave with a quote from Hugh of Saint Victor who was a 12th century French theologian, which I believe perfectly captures the essence of diasporic consciousness:

The person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong person has extended his love to all places; the perfect man extinguished his.

Joseph Juhn
Joseph Juhn is a lawyer-turned-filmmaker with a passion for diasporic narratives. His latest documentary, CHOSEN, which is about five Korean Americans who ran for US Congress in 2020, received critical acclaim in Korea and the US. Joseph’s first feature documentary, JERONIMO, opened in theaters in Korea in 2019 and sparked a nationwide discourse on the concept of Korean diaspora. Prior to JERONIMO, Joseph was in-house counsel at the Manhattan-based Korean government agency KOTRA, where he advised Korean companies on US intellectual property law. Joseph studied Film and Video at UC San Diego and earned his JD at Syracuse University College of Law.

Riva Han
Riva Han is a JD/MPP Candidate at Harvard Law School and Harvard Kennedy School and serves as Co-Editor-in-Chief for the Asian American Policy Review. Born and raised in southern California, Riva graduated in 2018 from the University of Rochester, where she studied political science and economics. After college, she represented indigent asylum seekers through pro bono initiatives and worked alongside a litigation investment team that funded complex litigation. After graduate school, Riva plans to fight corporate misconduct through plaintiff-side litigation and advance equitable access to education through policy advocacy.
Endnotes


9. Id.


11. Id.


18. MacDonald, “‘Chosen’ Follows 5 Korean American Candidates.”

19. Fung, “A #hyphenatedAsians POV.”

A Conversation with Asians for Mental Health Founder Dr. Jenny Wang

By Kevin Chen

This piece was published in the 33rd volume of the Asian American Policy Review. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**AAPR:** Can you tell us a bit about your book Permission to Come Home and the inspiration behind it?

**WANG:** The inspiration for my work came from the realization, through the @asiansformentalhealth Instagram account, that people wanted to explore how their cultural backgrounds and family stories informed mental health. When I started the Instagram account in late 2019, there were many mental health related accounts, but none that focused specifically on the unique immigrant experiences, children of color, and Asian Americans. Initially, my goal was to simply build a directory of Asian American therapists, but as I was posting and sharing my own internal thoughts and experiences, I realized that people were craving and hoping for a mental health book that centers the experiences of the Asian diaspora.

I recognize that any singular book has its limits, as the Asian American community is diverse and comprises so many different cultural backgrounds. Yet, at the same time, there were themes across my clients and corporate speaking engagements that resonated with people from different backgrounds. I believe that by providing people with a tool to ask themselves questions and challenge their own frameworks, they can start to break free from the patterns that keep them stuck.

**AAPR:** One of my favorite chapters in the book is on the Permission to Take Up Space. I love how you connect the concept of taking up space with limited political representation for people of color and immigrants — can you speak more to this?

**WANG:** I think representation has many psychological effects on a person. When you see someone in a position or in a place that is well regarded, it can influence or inspire us to believe that we are capable of similar things. On the one hand, representation not only helps us dream about what’s possible in one’s life, but also suggests that the person representing us may be invested in elevating the experiences and voice of people who might look like them or identify similarly.

“Representation not only helps us dream about what’s possible in one’s life, but also suggests that the person representing us may be invested in elevating the experiences and voice of people who might look like them or identify similarly.”

When I think about this idea of taking up space, I think about how it holds, in tension, fear and courage at the same time; I can try to take up space and still be scared about what that might cost me and how people might react, while also holding on to the courage and belief that I deserve to be seen and heard.

I think back to my own parents when they came to the United States, and I remember them feeling that sense of, “we don’t really belong here.” They had unique experiences that gave them that type of feedback — it be a racist remark or a discriminatory interaction at work. There were constant reminders that you were not safe, and that your environment was not invested in keeping you safe or protecting you. When we fail to see political representation at the higher levels, it makes us wonder: who will speak for us and who will take care of us and protect us? In response, when we feel psychologically unsafe, we will do what we can to protect and self-preserve — and one of those strategies is to stay under the radar.

I remember as a child, my parents saying, “Hey, don’t speak up. Don’t be too loud. Don’t make trouble. Exist under the radar so that you can get through schooling, get a job, and build stability.” With our parents’ experiences this made sense because some of our parents came [to America] with very little stability. So that was the goal: to be able to say, we perhaps own our home, and we perhaps have some financial resources that we can rely on. As the eldest daughter and child of immigrants, I internalized those messages as: stay small. Don’t take up too much space because people might react negatively to you in response. I think about the times where even my parents — in their anger — if they were discriminated against, couldn’t fight back because they didn’t have
mastery of the English language. Their silence—even if it was not what they wanted it to be, in some ways, protected them. It allowed them to stay in the shadows, or in the margins. I think that was a trauma response: a need to self-protect by making invisible walls.

In some ways, I feel like it’s not a surprise that Asian Americans have sometimes been described as the “invisible race,” where we are seen as not having been through the same atrocious histories of black and brown communities. But we also do not hold the privileges and rights of white communities. We are seen as somewhere in the in-between, where our race doesn’t seem to matter to society as much. And yet, post pandemic, we’ve seen that it matters a lot. Our race became a target of potential threat and harm from others. When I think about taking up space, and as we begin to see more representation of Asian Americans in politics, in media, in leadership, and in corporate spheres, I think it gives us a little bit more courage to take up some of that space in the places that we might have influence over.

I worry about my own parents and fear that as they age they will be more vulnerable to feelings of isolation and weakened connections. You talk a bit about the emotions of shame and the cultural value of saving face—and I think that’s what I’m grappling with when I think about my parents asking for help — this idea of stoicism when faced with inner turmoil — how have you navigated discussions around mental health around your own parents and what have you found to be the most helpful?

I think the work for our generation (those in their 20s, 30s, 40s) has a continuous journey in terms of relating to mental health and our parents, as it is still stigmatized within the older generation. I think it makes sense in the way that they frame mental health or how society has always framed mental health in their generation: as only the “extremes” such as schizophrenia or institutionalization. Mental health in their minds is not a normal human experience.

They view mental health as something that only occurs on the edges of human experience. Sometimes, I’ve had to work even with my own parents, on re framing the idea of what mental health is, and I often say, mental health is in the decisions that you make, in how you see your world, how you speak to and relate to another human being. All those facets are informed by your mental health state at that moment. It takes a lot of consistent discussion and education to reframe the idea that mental health is something that we all have whether or not we recognize it, whether or not we protect it, and whether or not we whisper about it. If we can help our parents realize that they too have mental health—and that in certain moments and times in their lives, they can be doing really well and feel strong, empowered, connected—and in other times in their life—where their mental health is not doing well—they might feel alone, scared, anxious, sad or depressed.

It’s this idea that mental health expands and contracts and moves over one’s lifetime. The hope is that it becomes something that they recognize they have, realize that they might have some sort of impact over, and that it’s something that they can build up or strengthen. One of the first steps is reworking the framework or idea of mental health.

The second thing I would say is that we forget that mental health is intimately related to physical health and relational health. Even asking your parents questions like, “how
are you eating lately?" or "How are you sleeping?" or "Are you doing your hobbies?" or "Are you going on your walk that you love to have in the mornings?" or "Are you meeting with friends?" Those questions inform us about their mental health. Because if those things have changed for the worse, then we start to say, "Oh, why?" or "What could be contributing to that change?" We don't have to jump into asking if they feel depressed or anxious right away, as that can be overwhelming and shut our parents down. So, could we start with something as simple as: "I noticed that you seem to have lost some weight recently, and you don't seem to be eating a normal amount that you do. Could you share with me what's been going on?" That can be the open door to these discussions.

Another thing we must keep in mind, especially when people are not comfortable sharing their inner world, which might be the case for some of our parents, is that our consistency matters. If we try to open the door and they don't step through it at that time — that attempt to connect still counts. The more we do it, the more we create a sense that their child cares about them and that their child is interested and might be a safe space in which they could explore. We build the scaffolding for our parents to connect with us regarding their mental health over time — and there is no rush. We don't have to rush people into feeling comfortable with mental health, instead it can be something that we can build into our normal conversations day to day.

**AAPR:** In your chapter entitled, Permission to Grieve, you talk about your own experiences with the loss of your grandpa and a subsequent feeling of disconnection from your history and cultural lineage — and as a child of immigrants I often wonder how can we continue to build a shared sense of history, culture and lineage for the generations that come after us — what has that process been like for you and your own children?

**WANG:** I think about how I was born in Taiwan and moved to the United States when I was two. Already it feels as though Taiwan is kind of a homeland but not a home. As immigrants, there is this idea of a homeland in our mind, of where our people are from and where our ancestors built their lives. Depending on which generation your family immigrated to another country, your connections to that idea of homeland, which has the cultural, ancestral, and familial roots start to get stretched out further and further.

For my own kids, who are ten and six, one of the things that we've been very deliberate about is building their sense of cultural pride and instilling this sense of pride in who they are, where they come from, and the people that they are descendants of. Pride in that facet of our identity was something that I never had growing up because coming to the United States meant that so much of my racial and ethnic framework was informed by white dominance and discrimination. In fact, my racial and ethnic identity was a deep source of shame for most of my childhood. It was a facet that I tried to hide and minimize in service of the systemic structural racism that inherently exists in the United States.

When I became a parent and was working through my own racial identity and trauma, I realized that I could set the stage from which my kids could interpret their own identity. But I couldn't do that unless I had a healthier sense of my own racial identity as well. We've been very deliberate at things like having a Taiwan booth at my child's International Day Festival and about working with the school to set up a Lunar New Year display. Because there's something about your parents showing you that this is a source of pride — not shame — that helps protect their children against the narratives about their identity informed by racism that they will invariably face in this world. Now, when we have conversations about their race or their identity, they're coming from a place of knowing that their identity is a cherished part of themselves.

It becomes much harder to let that be tarnished by comments like "go back to your country," or the comments about "kung flu" because they can see those in the backdrop of systemic racism and say, "this is more about you than it is about me" and preserve that identity from being harmed by these discriminatory encounters.

So much of our culture is informed by the food, the celebrations, the rituals, and the things we bring forward to the next generation. And even still, I will have to admit that there can be a loss in this connection from one generation to the next. Over the pandemic, we stopped Chinese school for my daughter. It was such a loss for me — even though I didn't enjoy Chinese school as a child myself — I can speak Mandarin and I can understand Taiwanese and have that semblance of connection to my culture that my kids will not have because we made the decision to stop Chinese school. There's a sense of grief there. Because I feel like sometimes, we can feel as though we're not doing enough to enhance their cultural identity. We think that we must do this — and it has to look this certain way. It's important to realize that our kids are going to grow up to be multicultural and that there is no rule or requirement for knowing certain cultural elements that would make them more or less of a certain part of their identity. Letting go of those expectations — letting my child be curious and explore on their own — has been one of the most powerful ways to help them lead a path towards cultural development.

**AAPR:** In your book you also discuss the importance of safety, belonging, authenticity, and compassion — can you speak to why these concepts might be important for future policymakers to consider and how we might go about creating these spaces?

**WANG:** I see these four components as building upon each other. At the most basic level, if we don't feel psychologically safe, it's difficult to feel like we belong and can be authentic, and then exercise compassion for others. Future policymakers need to ask themselves if the people they serve feel psychologically safe from a needs and self-actualization perspective, and if they have the tools to build that safety for themselves. These are
questions that I would love to explore, because policymakers are equipped with the systems and resources to build tools that people can then use for themselves—take safety for example. Do people have access to healthy foods, secure housing, and consistent jobs and transportation to get to those jobs? Those are those basic level needs that I think no amount of mental health treatment can replace. Humans have these basic needs that must be met in order for mental health to have a chance at flourishing.

Policymakers are also a part of creating a sense of belonging—in terms of the legislation that they enact and the types of laws and governing accountability that we place on the corporations and the larger systems that people live within. I think about legislation like the American Disabilities Act and how it was enacted to protect people living with disabilities. When you have safety and belonging, then that allows people to be authentic and truly show themselves. They might not feel the need to constantly code switch or wear a mask because they do not feel safe. How a policymaker models authenticity affects their constituents and the people that they serve. I truly believe that as policymakers, there needs to be compassion—a need to wonder if they are truly serving the people that they represent. Compassion is not the same as sympathy, which is a sense of feeling sorry that someone is going through this situation—and compassion is more than empathy because empathy is the sense that I am alongside you in your difficulties. Compassion is this idea that I see the difficulty and I may actually be inclined to carry some of that burden alongside you. I think there’s something powerful about that idea—if our future policymakers saw themselves as people who carry burdens alongside their constituents, how beautiful that would be in transforming the political landscape.

AAPR: Is there anything else you’d like to share with our readers?

WANG:

One final thought that I’d love to leave to your readers is this: we all have the ability to destigmatize mental health. I think one of the most tangible ways that we can do that is by simply breaking the silence around it. So much of our society is built around this idea that we must look as if we have everything figured out and under control. I hear this a lot from young adults who are in college or graduate school or young professionals. In many ways, this generation of young adults have lived their entire lives, looking at curated images of what life is. And I think that only feeds the stigma.

So, if I could ask your readership to do anything it would be to find spaces in which you