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Asian Youth and Race-Making in an Urban School: The Institution and its Power

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Drawing from interview and participant observation data collected during an ethnographic study of Asian students and race in a multiracial urban school, I examine the school's role in the racial construction and academic and social positioning of Asian students vis-à-vis Black and Latino students. I analyze the subjective categories and racial paradigms through which adult members of the school community understood minority students as normatively differentiated racial subjects. I also examine the school's role in giving material structure to racial categories through formal and informal practices that reinforced racial stereotypes, social divisions, and academic disparities. Overwhelmingly, I found that teachers and staff simultaneously utilized a color-blind discourse that denied the significance of race in shaping school life and advanced dual tropes of the Asian model minority and Black and Brown oppositional and/or deficient minority. Despite purporting ideals of color-blind equality, teachers and staff generally gave expression to unequal notions of Asian-ness, Blackness, and Latino-ness and privileged Asian students who aligned with model minority expectations over Black and Latino students. While a minority of teachers and staff attempted to redress these dynamics, they were institutionally unsupported in their efforts. The implications for educational equity were significant, as the positive racialization of Asian students reinforced hierarchy and stratification among Asian and non-Asian youth as natural functions of a meritocratic system, ultimately masking the reality of low educational quality experienced by all students in a struggling school.

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Introduction

Education and race scholars have deconstructed the model minority myth, which imputes a cultural basis for Asian educational success, by tracing its historical formation and by highlighting class-based and ethnic cleavages among Asian Americans (Osajima 2007; Cheng & Yang 1996; Lee 1996; Louie 2004). They have rightly critiqued the myth's static and inaccurate characterization of group homogeneity, yet institutions such as schools continue to rely upon and reproduce the myth to racialize students of color in relation to one another. How and why the myth endures in light of demographic shifts and changing racial attitudes in the United States warrants further examination. One lacuna in the literatures on multiracial education and on Asian American racial positioning concerns how schools shape the relationship of Asians to other racial minorities, particularly in urban contexts. This paper expands theorizing on race and education by illuminating how a struggling urban school that purported to value diversity functioned as a race-making institution (Wacquant 2002) that racialized minority youth relative to one another. It will demonstrate that teachers and staff drew from a color-blind discourse and related paradigms of meritocracy and individualism to understand Asians as cultural rather than racial subjects, and consequently privileged Asian over Black and Latino students both socially and academically.

Education researchers have documented how race not only shapes academic outcomes, but textures the socio-cultural worlds of schools (Fordham & Ogbu 1986, Ferguson 2002, Lewis 2003), yet few focus directly on Asian students (exceptions include Lei 2003, Lew 2004, Lee 1996, and Lee 2000. Drawing on theories of education, color-blindness, and Asian American racial group positioning, this paper examines the institutional context of the dual construction of the Asian model minority as a deserving and engaged subject and of the stigmatizing tropes of

Black/Brown educational deficiency, resistance, and failure. Focusing on the role of teachers and staff in shaping racial perceptions in a multi-racial urban school where almost half of students were Asian or Asian American (together referred to in this paper as 'Asian'[1]), this research analyzes the role of teachers and staff in the stratification of Asian and non-Asian youth across school settings and clarifies how positive but conditional notions of Asian-ness were created through and against negative ideas of Blackness and Latino-ness.

As I will show below, I found that teachers and staff generally contrasted 'engaged' Asian students with 'resistant' Black and 'invisible' and educationally deficient Latino youth, despite two important educational realities. The first was the remarkable diversity of students' academic aspirations and performance. Although they outpaced their Black and Latino peers in formal indices of academic achievement, Asian students were well represented on every point of the school's academic and social status spectrums. Moreover, even those Asian students who were considered successful students according to the local cultural context of expectations regarding academic achievement did not, in objective terms, demonstrate academic strength and intellectual depth of learning.

The second notable reality of the educational setting was its environment of taken-for-granted inequality and school failure. Resigned acceptance of both urban inequality and low expectations shaped adult and youth's common-sense understandings of race at both the individual and organizational level. Ultimately, this exacerbated the severely compromised learning experience of *all* students. As I will argue through the course of this paper, the model

[1] I follow the terminology used at the school, where students were described and described themselves as Asian rather than Asian American. Most students belonged to immigrant and refugee families; their parents or grandparents were foreign-born, but they were not themselves first generation immigrants or refugees. The term Asian communicated meanings related to both civic-political identification (as not fully American) and race (Asian was used as an identity in parallel with Black). Faculty and staff used Black and African American interchangeably, while students preferred the identifier Black. Faculty, staff, and students referred to students as Latino, Hispanic, and Mexican. I use the terms Black and Latino as a part of my racial analysis of the construction of student categories, highlighting a racial paradigm rather than a culturally-based ethnicity paradigm (see Omi & Winant, 1994).

minority representation of Asian success was a distortion of students' actual learning experiences that diverted attention from school-level and societal-scale problems whose symptoms included inequality among minority groups and shallow learning and limited achievement across groups.

The racialized perceptions held by teachers and staff ultimately led to greater support for Asian students relative to Black and Latino students. The former group expressed a stronger sense of belonging to and ownership of the school than non-Asians. Despite their academic heterogeneity and educational difficulties, Asian youth were encountered and assessed through a re-inscription of the model minority myth that positioned Asian Americans as an exemplar group in what was popularly imagined as a Black/Brown urban ghetto (Leonardo & Hunter 2007). This paper highlights the costs of teacher and staff's privileging of Asian students and draws attention to the continued marginalization of Black and Latino students in urban schools. It reveals the power of the myth to shape how schools position all students in a racial hierarchy, thus giving insight into racialization itself.

In what follows, I situate my study of an urban school's racialization of Asian youth theoretically and methodologically, before demonstrating how teachers and staff, as part of a race-making institution, engaged in mechanisms and practices that stratified Asian and non-Asian students and constructed racial categories about them using interdependent and mutually influencing terms. These normative constructions were related, in different ways, to Whiteness. I close by arguing that they worked in conjunction to divert attention from structural limitations within and beyond the school that made both teaching and learning a struggle.

Theoretical Frame

Racialization and Color-Blindness in Schooling

Informed by a wide body of literature that challenges the notion that schools are neutral spaces where curricular content is an innocent expression of what students learn (Karabel & Halsey 1977; Giroux 1983), I analyze schools as race-making institutions (Wacquant 2002) where racial subjectivization is a salient element of the schooling experience. This paper posits that social reproduction in the realm of race does not only occur in school settings, but that it is *through* schools that the racial inequalities of the broader society become reproduced as educational inequality. Yet, ethnographers of education have shown, those on the ground do not readily recognize that they are participating in processes of racialization (Valenzuela 1999, Ferguson 2002, Lewis 2003). Instead, they invoke and draw from a color-blind perspective that asserts that racial equality is aided by the maneuver of refusing to "see race" (i.e. by refusing to recognize racial difference).

Ian Lopez (2006:6) describes contemporary color-blindness as a "set of understandings… that define how people comprehend, rationalize, and act on race." As a perspective, color-blindness minimizes the significance of race in shaping individual and group interactions, experiences, and outcomes. Color-blindness involves refusing to recognize racial categories and difference. Yet, while this perspective may invoke equality (by denying difference), it forecloses opportunities to redress racial inequity because it refuses to recognize inequity outside the process of categorization. Lopez contends:

> As applied, however much some people genuinely believe that the best way to get beyond racism is to get beyond race, colorblindness continues to retard racial progress. It does so for a simple reason: It focuses on the surface, on the bare fact of racial classification, rather than looking down into the nature of social practices (ibid).

The race-blindness of the color-blind perspective does not equate with blindness to cultural differences, but accords with a superficial emphasis on ethnic culture and multicultural values. Diverse cultural norms provide a more obvious, and less institutionally critical, explanation for racial inequality across social domains than does the "broad social practices" alluded to by Lopez.

At the school that served as the site of this study, some educators refused to recognize race altogether while preferring to discuss culture (e.g. "Asian culture," "Chinese culture," or "Black culture") in lieu of race. Teachers and staff tended to distance themselves from student outcomes that evinced racial inequality and instead championed the tenet of multiculturalism as an affirmation of the school's valuing of cultural diversity. Yet, as Leonardo and Hunter (2007: 263) note, "the very presence of multiculturalism is evidence of a reaction to a white normativity in school curricula, administrative structures and classroom interactions." In other words, a school's effort to raise the profile of a multicultural paradigm is generated by the need to recognize what is excluded by White dominance and privilege in the first place.

Education and race scholars Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995: 62) maintain that the increasingly popular multicultural paradigm is limited in its celebration of difference, because it fails to account for the intrinsically uneven nature of difference among groups:

> Less often discussed are the growing tensions that exist between and among various groups that gather under the umbrella of multiculturalism—that is, the interests of groups can be competing or their perspectives can be at odds. We assert that the ever-expanding multicultural paradigm follows the traditions of liberalism—allowing a proliferation of difference. Unfortunately, the tensions between and among these differences is rarely interrogated, presuming a 'unity of difference'—that is, that all difference is both analogous and equivalent.

In the schooling of predominantly Asian, Black, and Latino youth that is the object of this paper, the 'difference' of Asian-ness (attributes socially constructed as Asian) translated into educational opportunities and experiences that were denied to Black and Latino students, whose

racialized difference could not as readily be linked to Whiteness through the vehicle of the model minority ideal. I argue that Asian students were "racially made" (i.e. socially constructed as Asian racial subjects) not in a vacuum, but through and against the racialization of Black and Latino youth (and vice versa). This "making" occurred through the daily practices of teachers and staff, as well as students.

This focus on the mutually influencing nature of the social and educational construction of race is crucial, because 'Asian' is not simply a classification that describes a group of students, but is a *social relation* that arises from historical conditions. Analyzing 'Asian' as a social relation sheds light on the model minority myth's durability in a multiracial urban context (where the myth plainly does not provide a faithful account of Asian students' reality), a durability that is indexical of the tensions and tendencies of urban inequality in a liberal society. Understanding how institutions such as schools aid its reproduction makes it possible to extend a critique of powerful racial dynamics that shape schooling in urban communities and elsewhere.

Asian American Racial Positioning

Sociologists Omi and Winant (1994: 55-56) propound a theory of "racial formation," which they define as "the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed"; further, it involves "racial projects" that "connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are organized, based upon that meaning." As they draw the point, race is both ideological and material, linked to systems of cultural representation as well as institutionalized macro-structures and relations. Race is a terrain of contestation, upon which meanings compete to stabilize as "common sense." This paper is located in the intellectual current that the theory of racial formation set off, which emphasizes the power of race to

organize social relations. More specifically, this paper is concerned with the school and its institutional power to racially position Asian students in relation to Black and Latino students by representing them as normatively unequal types of racial subjects.

Asians are racially positioned subjects who are racialized vis-à-vis the ideological brackets of Whiteness and Blackness. Seeking to counter the model of the Black-White binary, Claire Jean Kim (1999) contends that Asian Americans have been uniquely "racially triangulated" relative to Whites and Blacks upon a "field of racial positions" for the past century and a half. Their triangulation involves cultural valorization relative to African Americans, but civic ostracism in relation to Whites. I borrow from Kim's theory of racial triangulation, particularly her theory of racial power, conceptualized as a distinct structure that differentially racializes Blacks and Asians, implicates all racial groups in a racial hierarchy, and shapes uneven relationships among them (Kim 1999, 2000). I found that school staff valorized urban Asian students in relation to Black and Latino students. In terms of their academic status and meaningful integration into school life, they appeared to be insiders. Yet, I will argue that this role was contingent upon their relationship to a contested racial order.

A growing sociology of race posits that Asians (and Latinos) are in the process of racially assimilating into Whiteness or Blackness. For example, George Yancey (2003) conceptualizes race relations in the contemporary and future U.S. society as governed not by a White/non-White dynamic but by a Black/non-Black paradigm whose concomitants are Black alienation and the racial assimilation of non-Black minorities. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2004) refigures these racial categories in his thesis of the Latin Americanization of racial stratification in the U.S., concluding that a "tri-racial system" is emerging that configures Whites at the top, honorary Whites as an expanding intermediary buffer, and a broad collective Black strata at the bottom.

As the aforementioned scholars have ascertained, in the U.S., Asians occupy a liminal position in the racial order at the thresholds of both Blackness and Whiteness. Because Asians have recently come to be seen as "model minorities," those who are culturally demonized, socio-economically disempowered, and politically disenfranchised—as many impoverished and urban Asian immigrants and refugees continue to be—reside in a space of even greater racial indeterminacy. Their cultural citizenship may be subject to a normalizing process that ties imputed cultural competence to dominant racial identities, as the anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2003) attests was the case for "ideologically blackened," impoverished Cambodian refugees in California.

The Black-White binary serves as a useful reference point for interpreting racial experience, because it crystallizes the polarizing tendencies of White racial supremacy and one of its most powerful constructs, Blackness, that find material expression in an American history of racial formation. It is useful in underlining the specificity of the Black-White tension. Crucially, however, the Black-White duality fails in the end to account for the unique specificity of non-White and non-Black modes of racialization, and more to the point of this project, it cannot explain fully or totally the racial positioning of Asians. Racialization involves more than race; the distinct history of Orientalism, diverse migration contexts, and the stunning complexity of the grouping of peoples constituted as Asian are a few of many reasons they cannot be lumped into provisional Whiteness or a capacious strata of Blackness.

Interpreting the literature on schools as racialized and racializing institutions through the lens of triangulated racial-formation that I highlighted above, I found that the discourses of color-blindness and of the model minority/oppositional minority converged in the perspectives and practices of teachers and staff. These discourses circulated and shaped the school's

commonsense understandings of inclusion and exclusion, academic engagement, success, discipline, race, 'urban' space and place, poverty, schooling, and youth. Ultimately, these discourses normalized stratification processes that positioned Asians in hierarchical relationship with other people of color, while preserving the racially inequitable status quo of low educational quality available in predominantly non-White schools.

Site and Participant Description, Data Collection and Analysis Methods

This paper draws on data collected in the context of a broader study of the racialization of Asian students in an urban school, conducted between February 2011 and May 2012. Standard ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing were employed. These include interviews with 50 students; three focus groups, each with approximately 15 students; interviews with 30 staff (including 15 teachers and other instructional staff, 3 administrators, 2 counselors, 2 security personnel, and 8 employees of an on-campus community-based agency); and documentary analysis of school publications and student-produced media. I coded this data to see how teachers and staff racially categorized Asian and other minority youth, to understand how they interpreted the racial dynamics at the school, to explore issues of belonging and discipline, and to get a sense of the learning and working conditions of an under-resourced school.

The study took place at a large comprehensive high school I call City High School (CHS), where students were predominantly Asian, Black, and Latino. The student composition was approximately 45% Asian, 32% African American, 18% Latino, 1% White, 1% Pacific Islander, and <1% Native American. 75% of students were described in district documents as Socioeconomically Disadvantaged and 38% were English Learners. Asian students I spoke with never reported seeing themselves as Asian American. Instead, they identified by their family's

nation of origin or as Asian. Asian students at CHS were primarily second and third generation Southeast Asian Americans whose families came to the United States as refugees, in the context of wars in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, or were first and second generation Chinese immigrants. All came from working class and poor backgrounds and very few had parents who were college graduates. Teachers and staff were cognizant of cultural and linguistic differences among Asian ethnic groups, and mentioned how these might affect educational attainment, but did not noticeably differentiate their interactions with students with regard to ethnicity.[2]

During a pilot study conducted from September 2007 to May 2009, data was collected through participant observation two times per week at CHS and at the offices of a nearby community-based organization, with whom I was employed as an after school tutor. From February 2011 to May 2012, I conducted full-time participant-observation at CHS, where I identified myself as a graduate student researcher. I participated in school life in as many ways as possible: I observed, shadowed staff and students, attended school events, conducted interviews, collected documentary materials, and volunteered one-on-one with students on homework, helped with job and financial aid applications and college decision-making, and judged senior capstone projects. I spent extensive time with youth and adults in a wide range of academic settings (in high to low level classes in every academic department, at school assemblies, and at staff meetings), in informal, non-academic contexts (like nearby restaurants and school dances), and at numerous after school programs, clubs, and community events.

[2] My initial research was focused on the school experiences and racial formation of Southeast Asian students, so I was particularly attuned to differentiation among ethnic groups within the umbrella category of Asian. I observed that teachers and staff noted cultural and educational differences among Chinese and Vietnamese students, on the one hand, and Cambodian and Mien students, on the other. Teachers noted the pro-school attitudes and academic attainment of the former group. However, the category of Asian as a racial signifier was far more pronounced and significant than ethnicity in influencing how teachers and staff identified, regarded and interacted with students.

Sometimes, I observed in the same classroom with a single teacher for multiple periods. At other times, I re-located in the middle of a class period or moved as students did from one classroom to the next when the bell rang. I spent roughly a third of my time observing in non-instructional settings like the cafeteria, the library, the outdoor courtyard, hallways, and stairwells. I approached staff and students individually to gauge interest in interviews, which were semi-structured and which I conducted primarily on campus but also at restaurants, parks, and students' homes. All but one individual (the Principal) agreed to an interview. Of interviewees, all but two individuals agreed to be recorded. All interviews were transcribed and coded, and every name was assigned a pseudonym. These methods allowed me to familiarize myself with the school community, to observe racial stratification across multiple settings, and to contextualize when and in which sites racialization was more or less salient.

In the remainder of the paper, I will explore the main themes that emerged regarding the role of teachers and staff in shaping racial dynamics at the school: 1) race-blindness, multiculturalism, and diversity; 2) institutional stratification, institutional exclusion, and invocations of invisibility; 3) student involvement and belonging; and 4) shared expectations and student resistance. In explicating these themes, I will show that the contexts in which teachers, counselors, security personnel, and administrators at CHS formed racial beliefs and employed racializing practices shaped their expression and behavior in nuanced ways. The binary relationship of model minority to oppositional and/or invisible minority was a primary feature of their understanding of racialized groups at the school, yet the racial representations, stereotypes, and attitudes adults held toward students was not *only* binary. The racialized ideas and expressions of teachers and staff reveal context-specific variation and difference. These contexts included their racial positioning, professional capacities, and the institutional factors that shaped

their interaction with students (e.g. routinely being assigned students whose skills and academic preparation were uniformly lacking).

Findings

Race-blindness and Teacher and Staff Perceptions of Race, Racism, and Minority Youth

While individual teachers and staff held a range of complex views, in broad terms, they expressed perceptions of the school and of students that conveyed a color-blind perspective of race and racism. In other words, the majority of teachers and staff purported to be race-blind in their view of individual students and inclusive of the diverse racial and cultural groups represented in the student population. British education and race theorist David Gilborn (2006:84) notes that 'multiculturalism' has been critiqued as a "liberal façade that deflects deeper criticism by attending to superficial matters of 'celebrating diversity' and making limited token (often patronizing) curricular changes." At CHS, where scores of colorful national flags adorned the walls of the central common space, the official rhetoric recognized "multiculturalism" and "diversity" but deflected deeper criticism related to race and racism.

Multiculturalism was celebrated through efforts like Multicultural Week (when student groups held a food fair featuring the cuisine of their ethnic heritages and organized similar events), the Latino recognition night, and the Lunar New Year Celebration dinner and performance. Remarkably, the racially homogeneous and stratified nature of those planning and attending these "multicultural" events was taken for granted. Similarly, when teachers and staff described their school as a "diverse" place, they used the term to mean that many "racial groups and cultures [were] represented" but not necessarily integrated. The lack of integration was reportedly unintentional; as one teacher remarked, "it just happens this way." As I alluded to

earlier, some teachers and staff pointed out that the racial dynamics at the school reflected (and some argued they were derived from) the segregation and conflicts of the broader community and city. They occasionally referred to the school as a "sanctuary" from neighborhood divisions and from violence.

Teachers and staff pointed out that students tended to self-segregate. They explained that this was the result of peer pressure and because "those are the groups who they communicate best with; they share common experiences." A mixed race teacher who was a native of the city suggested that "racial segregation [was] fine, because the co-existence" of the different racial groups at the school reflected "respect and appreciation" minority youth of color from different backgrounds had for one another. He added, "the culture around race is one of the things that's functional at the school." Another teacher claimed that the racial climate was not "as bad as it looks." While teachers and staff (as well as students) described the school as an "urban school," they said it was generally a "good school." They stated that the climate was "better" than at many other schools in the district, both as a place to work and as a place for students to learn.

Teachers and staff operationalized a limited definition of racism that distanced them from the racially differentiated academic outcomes and social worlds of their students. They described racism as a "dislike and distrust of another racial group," "a defense mechanism," and "a product of ignorance and negative interactions." It was understood by most, but not all, as taking place at an interpersonal rather than structural level. Yet when staff talked about increasing diversity, they essentially meant increasing the proportion of Black and Latino students relative to Asian students. Even though some teachers and staff made efforts to alter the racial composition of classes and activities by recruiting non-Asian students, their stated beliefs about racial stratification at the school conveyed a color-blind emphasis on individual motives and actions

that downplayed institutional influences. In fact, they sometimes invoked accusations of reverse discrimination against Whites or Asians.[3]

Many teachers and staff focused on what they saw as democratic, neutral processes and choices, even if the school formalized and supported the patterns of stratification that resulted. For example, in discussing the composition of AP classes, a Nigerian teacher said, "It is open enrollment to any, so telling me that the number in AP classes is very low in terms of Black students, that is by choice. It's not because anybody is stopping them from taking those classes… so I don't think race has to do with it." Overall, the number of teachers and staff who minimalized race as an animating force in school life and who operationalized a limited definition of racism far outnumbered the number of individuals who either identified institutional racism as a problem or asserted the significance of race in structuring academic experiences or shaping the socio-cultural world of the school.

Among the majority, race was perceived as a student issue. Teachers who said that race was "overplayed" interpreted racial stratification as a problem of student unwillingness to step up. A popular White teacher echoed a popular sentiment when she argued that if students attempted to become more "involved," they would subsequently not be "shut out." They minimized the lack of access Black and Latino youth had to teachers' and counselors' resources and time. Most of the staff believed that it was up to the students to change racial dynamics. A White science teacher used the metaphor of a Black or Latino student "becoming a seed" where she or he could change the status quo within higher-level Asian-dominated classroom settings.

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[3] Two examples of alleged reverse discrimination were student centered. One involved the perceived pre-eminence of the Chinese and Vietnamese-led Lunar New Year celebration over a Black History Month commemoration. The incident occurred after a member of the Latino student club was quoted in the student newspaper saying that Latinos felt "invisible" and "don't have a voice" on campus. A White teacher told me that he and several Asian students took offense at the complaint, because they felt that reverse discrimination was implied. I address this incident in greater detail below.

He told me that he explained this idea to a Latina student reluctant to stay in AP chemistry in the following way: "So this is what I am suggesting to you, if you stay here, you become a seed… if you don't stay and you are not brave, who is going to make that step to make it happen?"

An Asian-Jewish social studies teacher whose racially mixed classes were among the few instructional spaces where I observed Black, Latino, and Asian youth co-participate in deep learning, was critical of the focus on student responsibility for the school's racial trends. He explained:

> I think what happens here is what culturally has been the norm. And what goes on here, I blame on the adults. We have a culture here of Leadership and Link Crew. If you allow African American kids to wander around the hallway… if you have these low standards, of course they're not going to feel that they can take ownership… of the school, like leadership and being involved. We're leading them as adults… That type of leadership and that type of expectation – the kids know, "You're not expected to do these things." …That goes back to the institutional racism. …It's not the Asian kids' fault. They're doing what their friends are doing. It's the adults not taking the time to do that.

The themes of ownership, exclusion, and shared expectations for belonging were very tightly tied to socially constructed ideas of what it meant to be Asian, Black, Latino, or White in the school and in the wider community.

Racial issues arose frequently, but the actors who gave voice to them were usually students. Staff generally responded by deflecting these issues or re-coding them as cultural. For example, a White science teacher gave an example of a cultural interpretation of the "achievement gap" in Black and Latino students' standardized test scores, which he argued was used by the public to blame urban schoolteachers for Black and Latino students' problems:

> Mr. Posey: It's cultural… It is definitely cultural, it's definitely from the family and nobody wants to touch that because that is a political no-no. It's much easier to point at the teachers and leave the family out… For instance, in this school, [Chinese students] are successful but just as poor, and if you talked to them individually, they are just as pained. I mean, I know a girl in one of my classes whose father is schizophrenic and despite the horrible things that are going on in her life, she is still pulling A's. The culture is different in the Chinese community, I know, because my wife is Chinese, and I saw immediately the difference between the American culture, which is "C's are okay"—that is a broad generalization, but it's true—versus the Asian, not all Asians, but Chinese in particular, it's A's or nothing… I have my African American kids coming

> here, they see an Asian group doing the review session at lunch and they are intimidated. It kind of feels very uncomfortable. They are saying they have been squeezed out and there is probably some truth to that. It is just that the difference is they don't like the room full of Asians in there—they clearly know the material better, so they can't ask what they think is a dumb question.
>
> Yenhoa: So then how can adults increase access for Black and Latino students?
>
> Mr. Posey: The answer isn't simple… It is working slowly to try and change the culture of the people at home and the larger community.

Mr. Posey believed that Chinese students, in particular, shared a culture that demanded academic success ("it's A's or nothing") and that this cultural orientation compensated for other disadvantages ("Chinese students are just as poor, and… just as pained"). According to this reasoning, Asian students' cultural emphasis on academic achievement led to the scenario of a "room full of Asians" who "know the material better" participating in a review session during lunch. The discomfort Black students felt in confronting such a racially homogeneous academic space was framed *as a problem of the Black students*, who essentially disliked being outsmarted by the Asians. When I asked Mr. Posey how to increase access for non-Asian students, he located the locus of change squarely in students' families and communities, not at school.

When I queried a Black math teacher about the stereotypes that circulated at the school, she responded, "So here the Asians are smart, Black kids are lazy, the Latino kids are in gangs and all they do is tag (spray graffiti) all day." For those who held that the truth of these stereotypes was ingrained at the level of students' family and community cultures, it made sense that the solution was "working slowly to try and change the culture" of those domains. My exchange with Mr. Posey illustrates the centrality of culture in the race work (King-O'Riain 2006) that teachers and staff accomplished. Along with students and within the context of broader societal racialization tendencies, administrators, teachers and other school staff made an effort to point out that Asian students benefitted from a model minority culture.

Asian-ness was constructed in complex ways. Teachers and staff were cognizant of the variety of challenges faced by ethnic groups of different socio-economic statuses and migration contexts, especially the refugee context. As I discussed earlier, the model minority myth has been widely studied and problematized in Asian American studies scholarship. I was surprised to witness the extent to which teachers and staff brought the model minority subject to discursive and practical life at CHS. They told me about struggling Asian students who came from socio-economically struggling families and who lived in impoverished neighborhoods where they were often the targets of crime and violence. They then attributed the idealized students' academic success to a combination of individual effort and a cultural focus on family values and hard work. In these idealizations, the school was never imagined as an institution where race making impacted educational equity.

The stereotype of Asians as smart circulated widely. Teachers noted that Asian students were spread across the academic spectrum, but asserted that they were a "boon" to the school because they "came with a desire to learn." The leader of the Calculus Club, an enthusiastic, retired White teacher with decades of history at the school, told me that newly arrived Chinese students were his "saving grace, because their math is so good." Asian students' academic inclinations were often assumed. When I asked Mr. Walters, a White teacher, how he related to Asian students, he shared the following:

> Mr. Walters: Yeah I mean there is that kind of default association I think.
>
> Yenhoa: Yeah, so can you say more about that?
>
> Mr. Walters: Well, I think there is a predictable amount of associated or shared cultural norms that you have, just being, I think shared values of like, respect… I think there is a baseline of sharing cultural norms. And then, I mean on average, well like Asian students being a majority of the students and I mean yeah, mostly those are going to be like the most academically successful students I have. As far as intellectual curiosity, it's just a much larger percentage than with any other group of students I have. And so I think over time I'm just drawn to that. And so if like, I see an Asian kid that comes in to sign up for class, it's like "okay." But if it's a Black kid I'm

> sizing him up, I mean before I can even think better of doing it. Like it just… it happens automatically… And that is going back to what I have been saying about identifying most comfortably with Asian students, just the students that I've had the most success with.
>
> Yenhoa: Do you think an accumulation of experiences over time led to that tendency?
>
> Mr. Walters: Yeah. And I mean I think that's the thing, like, it's even hard to say that like out loud on the record, but it is so obvious.

This dialogue provides an example of the theme of a natural affinity and shared culture between White teachers and Asian students that I heard repeated several times. It also illustrates the privileging of Asian over Black youth ("if it's a Black kid I'm sizing him up") and the hesitancy some teachers and staff who were honest about that privilege felt in identifying their role in it. Although Mr. Walters recognized that he held different expectations for Asian and Black youth, he did not recognize the extent to which his expectations were self-fulfilling.

Teachers and staff were sometimes eager to point out that Asian CHS students were not the "Asian kids in the suburbs" whose parents were high earners or who held advanced degrees. They emphasized that these youth faced positive and negative pressures at home. Some teachers also pointed out that Asian students were far more concerned with receiving competitive grades than they were with truly learning the material in their classes. Yet, they tacitly contrasted these students with Black students and praised the former for being "quiet" instead of "loud and disruptive." They implicitly contrasted Asian students with Latino students and lauded the former for "stepping up to the plate."

It is important to note the ways in which staff also challenged model minority representations. Mr. Roth, the mixed race Asian-Jewish teacher, pointed out that the image of Asian students as model minorities was "more of an identity than an indication of achievement or skill." He said that students "owned the Asian overachiever identity," and that seeing themselves as such "went a long way" in terms of how involved and pro-school teachers saw

them and in terms of who ultimately became "involved." On the other hand, Ms. Jones, the Black math teacher, claimed, "the Asian kids are the Blackest kids." Other staff members pointed out that Asian youth dressed like the other youth of color and "use the N-word as part of a language and a code that says they've integrated." Finally, the Asian director of one of the youth-serving agencies on campus said that at this school more than at others, her organization was trying to show students that "there is a wide variety of ways to be Asian American."

Especially among teachers, administrators, and academic staff, Asian students were less frequently seen as occupying a privileged role in the school than as sharing a culture that fostered attitudes and habits that enabled them to be "successful." Students' performances of engagement and demonstration of "study skills" was stressed as a major characteristic of being a "successful student." As was demonstrated in the excerpted interview with Mr. Walters, some teachers also used these perceived traits as a litmus test for whether or not students deserved instructional attention.

Even though Latinos comprised the largest racial group in the district, I heard much less from teachers and staff about Latino youth than any of the other two major racial groups represented in the student body. They were described by teachers and staff as generally "cooperative," but less academically oriented than Asian youth and sometimes pulled down by family and gang life. Latinos as a group were described in terms invoking invisibility. Mr. Walters said, "often what you see is [Latinos have a stereotype of being] very quiet and hardworking and not a lot of value on academics." Teachers and staff referred to them as "a middle child" and described them as being "under the radar." A Latino teacher pointed out that like Black students, Latinos "don't always have a voice… They are not prioritized and have to fight for resources."

Black students were often discussed in denigrating terms. Teachers especially talked about how "loud, resistant, and destructive" they were as individuals or as a group. One teacher suggested, "Black students are loud because they want to be heard." Others claimed that they were more concerned than other groups about their presentation of self, because "they want to be seen." This was contrasted with the Asian English Learner students, who a White teacher perceived as "trying to be invisible" so they could avoid physically and verbally aggressive peers. Many teachers and staff pointed out that academically oriented Black students experienced resentment within their own communities, but said that it was more acceptable to be academically high-achieving at CHS than at other schools in the district.

Although some adults who were responsible for shaping the school structure at CHS claimed not to "see race," they held racially differentiated views about students. Through processes of accretion, these perceptions hardened into socially constructed racial representations, or racial categories, that guided how teachers, staff, and students understood and experienced youth as certain types of racial minorities. Teachers and staff generally positively valued the category occupied by Asian youth, to which they attributed cultural notions of Asian-ness (e.g. that they came from cultures where hard work and obedience were prized), while they tended to negatively value the category occupied by other youth of color, which was associated with racialized assumptions of Blackness and Latino-ness (e.g. that Black youth were behaviorally oppositional and Latino youth were academically unengaged). Teachers and staff used these normative categories to naturalize mechanisms (e.g. tracking, "dumping," and disciplining) that stratified Asian and non-Asian youth academically and socially.

The hierarchal configuration of Asians, Blacks, and Latinos was conditional upon their relationship to a contested racial order. A Black teacher commented, "It's not that many White

people around… Here at CHS [where Asians were the dominant group], we have the Black and Latino kids fighting to be number two." I asked her to clarify, "Number two in terms of what? Like reputation, grades, status?" She responded, "All of that, everything." Aside from a handful of students, the only White bodies present on campus belonged to teachers, administrators, and counselors. Nonetheless, White dominance influenced racial perceptions of youth, as symbols and signifiers of model minority status (such as the "shared values" Mr. Walters and others referred to) held value as cultural capital that linked Asian youth to Whiteness. However, identification with Whiteness required a trade-off. As a White math teacher remarked,

> I think that even the Asian students have to give up something… in the school. Even though the Asian students are the successful group on average, we are still steering them towards the White culture… I think that actually the Asian students give up more willingly, I think that they are giving up their identity more willingly. Like when I [say that], I'm not sure that's necessarily all bad.

Faculty perceptions about the racial dynamics of the school ranged; in the preceding quote, a teacher spoke in racially explicit terms. Broadly, they tended towards the negation of race. Although some teachers and staff commented on the racially hierarchal organization of the school, the majority of teachers expressed comments like, "race doesn't count for much," "I like to think I see students as individuals," and "it seems like everybody is getting along." The minority of teachers who drew from an anti-racist discourse to critique both administrators and other teachers regarding their role in the stratification of Asian and non-Asian youth, expressed feeling unsupported by the larger institution and the district. In discussing solutions to closing racial disparities between Asian and Black/Latino students, they often conveyed sentiments like, "Definitely, I think that everything at the school is left up to individual teachers."

When I probed about how race was discussed among adults at the school, I learned that it was observed but not talked about. Common responses included, "People don't want to go there" and "they don't want to get near it." One teacher said conversations about race "never happened

adequately." An administrator noted that it was difficult to interrupt broad racial trends that were set in daily routines which were already very demanding: "It typically happens that it ends up being, some people call it survival mode, some people call it just getting from one day to the next, just moving on, you are covering material. And so yeah, we can complain about this kid and that kid and attendance, behavior, but we just keep moving forward. We just keep moving forward."

Teachers particularly reported that they lacked the energy and resources to deal with racial issues with students, and felt ill equipped to address them with colleagues. Commenting on school-level responses to racial issues like the disparate academic performance of racial groups or their uneven sense of institutional belonging, the same White teacher who said "we are steering [Asian students] towards the White culture" also said, "I feel like the efforts are too little, too small in scope, and there's not enough energy or resources devoted to them."

In fact, I observed formerly idealistic teachers and staff members attempt to describe the almost ineffable sense of demoralization they felt as a result of participating in an educational system that reproduced disparities in the larger society, which they originally chose to work in urban schools in order to fight. A few teachers talked offhandedly about being discouraged by several interrelated issues at the classroom, school, and district level: the sense that "nothing changes" with regard to student behavioral issues and academic failure, the administrative and district-level support they felt was lacking, and the relatively dismal compensation they received for the demanding work they completed (this was especially true for newer teachers). In the year following the completion of my fieldwork, two of the school's most effective, committed, and beloved teachers left for these reasons, though they both returned to teaching in subsequent years (one at CHS). Others also left, sometimes in the middle of the school year.

As one math teacher explained, "It's not like the staff is fighting each other. It's more that all of us are working against constraining conditions." A social studies teacher put it more succinctly, "The school and the district, they're setting us up to fail." Recurring issues of unstable leadership, lack of support, and low remuneration as well as the discouraging, seemingly unrelenting reality of student hardship (manifested as struggle and/or as trouble-making), neither left space for an institutional impetus to disrupt the hierarchical racialization of Asian, Black, and Latino youth nor gave fuel to individual teachers who were inclined to take this work upon themselves.

Tracking Non-Asians: Spaces of Marginalization

The role of classroom tracking as a mechanism of racial stratification is notable, especially since teachers tend to naturalize the results of tracking (e.g., racially homogenous classrooms) within an explanatory framework that de-racializes school-level processes and student outcomes. As Oakes (1986:3) asserts, tracking publically identifies students' intellectual capabilities and separates students "into a hierarchical system of groups for instruction." These groups are "labeled quite openly and characterized in the minds of teachers and others as being of a certain type—high ability, low achieving, slow, average, and so on. Clearly these groups are not equally valued in the school..." Subsequently, "a student in a high-achieving group is seen as a high-achieving *person*."

At CHS, the tracking of students into Advanced Placement (AP), "regular," and Special Education classes, into academies (which I will discuss below), and into school-supported leadership positions (like Leadership class) contributed to racial hierarchy, because these racially stratified tracks were differently valued. Asian students vastly predominated in AP classes,

Leadership class, and the science-oriented academy, while non-Asians were much more likely to be enrolled in "regular" classes, to be given Special Education designation, and to participate in the arts academy or in no academy at all. These school spaces had unequal statuses. Students in different tracks developed unequal levels of entitlement and institutional belonging and they demonstrated unequal academic outcomes.

Moreover, the disproportionate placement of Black and Latino students in poorly functioning classrooms resulted in the academic isolation of those students. While the racially homogenous character of such classes was visibly apparent, administrators and teachers saw this as a natural outcome of student-related, rather than institutional decision-making. Poorly functioning classes were a reality in practically every department at the school. These were settings where students had more control of the classroom than did teachers and where academic rigor and deep learning characterized an exceptionally infrequent experience. Often, Asian students were the minority in these types of classrooms, even though they comprised almost half of the school's student body. Teachers and staff routinely expected little from students in these spaces, and alternately, students expected low quality instruction from their teachers. For example, a teacher I spoke with casually referred to his role in one of these classes as "baby-sitting." Security guards joked about how predictably they were called to break up fights in these classrooms, and substitute teachers dreaded being assigned to them.

Two consistent features of academically marginal spaces was the frequent assertion by Black students in particular that they were recipients of racism and the corresponding attempt by teachers and staff to counter these claims with de-racialized interpretations of classroom interactions and student outcomes. I observed a poorly functioning science class where assertions of racism and Black identity were countered by the teacher's color-blind stance. The following

excerpt from my field notes illustrates a commonplace scene in which teachers simultaneously expected and condemned poor behavior from students, whose failings were routinely highlighted. The class composition ranged by period, but was roughly 80% African American, 20% Asian, and 25% Latino.

> A substitute teacher taught the class the previous day, and Mr. Oparah said that she complained about the 5th period class. These comments addressed the whole class. "It's cause there's a lot of Black people in 5th period!" a chubby Black junior named Trey called out. Mr. Oparah curtly responded, "That's not what I'm talking about." Some students looked on while others lay with their heads on their desks or talked with their friends. Some wore headphones. One student sang along loudly to the lyrics of his music. Trey goofed off in his usual spectacular fashion. "Trey! Come sit here," Mr. Oparah directed. He removed him from the back of the room, pointing to an empty seat in the front. Trey resisted, pleading, "You're taking me from my people! See all these Black people back here? I need them!" Mr. Oparah retorted, "What color am I? Am I blue?"

While Trey claimed that race influenced the substitute's different, shorter report for his class ("It's cause there's a lot of Black people in 5th period!"), the teacher, a phenotypically Black man from Nigeria, refuted the significance of Blackness as an identity or social category warranting attention. In drawing on an understanding of race as something descriptive rather than normative ("What color am I? Am I blue?"), he failed to see how Black youth in his class experienced a shared reality of Blackness, that Black youth were possibly resources for each other ("I need them!"), or that they were educationally marginalized at the back of the room. Trey and Mr. Oparah perceived relocation to the front of the room, away from "all these Black people," as a disciplinary measure. Mr. Oparah's neglect meant that those at the back had the freedom to do as they pleased as long as they were not overly disruptive.

The following excerpt from my field notes describing the same classroom on a different day demonstrates how little was expected from students and also how little students expected from their teacher:

> A Black girl with false eyelashes spent Chemistry class working on a craft project that looked like a small dream catcher. Mr. Oparah taught at the white board, ignoring the chatter in the back third of the room. Over twenty minutes after the class officially began, about half of the students seemed engaged, although a constant, loud buzz of conversation persisted. A dark-skinned Black

> boy with a diamond stud earring and charming smile stood and announced to everyone: "I keep having dreams about this class. I'm sitting right there," he says, pointing to his chair, "and Oparah, you're up at the front teaching. There are people joking in the back of the room. For some reason, I can't turn around to see them in my dream. I can hear them though." Students laughed.
>
> Several minutes later, a Black junior who had been showing a friend something on his phone during the entire period observed Mr. Oparah tell a boisterous Black student to gather his things and leave. The boy with the phone said to his friend, "He usually don't ever do shit in this class, then she came [he gestured at me]. He's just trying to impress her. That's why he's kicking him out." The boy pounded rhythmically on his desk. When Mr. Oparah turned to quiet a Black girl with long orange-pink braids, who was seated near him in the front of the room, she responded with exasperation: "Damn, Oparah, we learning today! We're not talking today! We learning. We can't even *learn*!" Later on, I overheard two students discuss the prospect of working with another chemistry teacher. "You don't want to do chemistry with Posey. He do binder checks and all that."

In this example, a student claimed that the teacher was only gesturing at discipline because of my presence, while another student signaled that for them, the activity of *not* learning was more commonplace than was learning ("Damn, Oparah, we learning today! We're not talking today!").

When I asked students in the back of the room what class was generally like, one used the same phrase I quoted another student saying (above), "He usually don't do shit" and another said, "He usually just puts the lesson on the board, then we copy it, and he gives us credit." This assessment contrasts with the understanding students had of Mr. Posey's demands ("He do binder checks and all that."). Mr. Posey was a chemistry teacher in one of the three major academies at the school, the Environmental Sciences Academy, which (as I will discuss below) was known for being comprised mostly of Asian students. (He was the teacher who asserted that Black and Latino students could become "a seed" of change.) The students who participated in this conversation did not want to be required to do more. Instead, they aligned themselves with the minimal expectations they currently faced.

The student's dream about his chemistry class and the fact that he was compelled to announce it to his teacher and peers was particularly illustrative of the taken-for-granted nature of academic marginalization and its impact on students. The students in the back of the room

were, despite their efforts at getting attention and the high volume of their speech, invisible ("For some reason, I can't turn around to see them in my dream"). Often, the instances in which the teacher engaged these students were the same ones in which they were asked to leave the class, making their invisibility true for the rest of the period. In this and several other classes, I noticed the perpetual and consistent use of the door as a divider between those who were seen as willing to learn and those who were not. A Black math teacher explained, "If they don't want to be in the community and learn, then they need to get out, because then they see that when they're in here, they can't mess around."

Yet, the hallways were also host to a struggle for visibility, primarily for the Black students who wandered them, peeking into classrooms and banging on lockers. Peyton, one of the security guards (all the security guards and all but one of the custodians were Black), could often be heard roughly ushering students along by shouting, "If you don't have a class to go to, at least make yourself invisible!" Once I heard him say aloud, to himself and to the Black and Latino stragglers in the hallway, "If they don't want to go to class, why even come to school? I tell them to go home. *Go home*. Hang out on the block. Do something *productive*, at least make some money."

In fact, Mr. Oparah did notice the activity of students in the back of his room, but like many teachers, he said that he reserved his energy for those "who tried to learn." When I asked him to explain the dynamics in his classroom and in the school, he invoked the idea that those who fail to do well in school have nothing stopping them but their own choices. This was part of a perspective that tended to promote a de-racialized, individual-focused interpretation of classroom interactions, school dynamics, and academic outcomes. He stated:

> Some of them are so rude. Some of them call me racist. I tell them, 'Maybe I'm not black, I'm red.' They tell me, 'You don't want to help me because I'm black.' But we have the same black color, so why can you say that to me? I don't even bother myself when they say that, because it

> won't even matter. I hear it all the time. A teacher won't help them, they're racist... I tell my students, there is a certain level you get, both in education and life, people cannot prevent you from getting what you want... In terms of race here, we are all the same, you are just black, or white or blue or red, it's just physical but has nothing to do with the, the way we think or the way we behave… Race does not mean anything to me. But to the students it is a bigger problem. To tell you the truth, if you just interview one or two Black students, or Latino students, you get the impression that… I am being frank to you, you will see them say a lot of things. But to me, I don't think that it is race, maybe it's there but maybe because I don't care about it, that is why I don't feel it.

This passage demonstrates the narrator's color-blind belief that race plays no role in students' academic outcomes, but Mr. Oparah contradicted himself by highlighting racialized beliefs about culture when he described his desire to work with students of different racial groups. When asked to respond to the question, "Why did you decide to teach here?" he said, "To be frank, this school is something like 60% Asian, so that makes it easier." (This was an over-estimation of the percentage of Asians at the school, which was 45% Asian.)

Mr. Oparah was one of several teachers who spoke about administrators' tendency to place "problem students" into certain classes or with certain teachers. He told me that in one of his classes, out of 35 students, 17 had overall GPA's (not only in his class) ranging between 0 and 0.5 on a 4.0 scale. He blamed the administrators and counselors for overpopulating his class with failing students, but said they told him "the computer scheduled it that way." Unconvinced, Mr. Oparah said, "Everyone has to defend themselves. They will tell you they are not tracking students here, but there is no way a computer will put that kind of class together, because it is not possible. There is no way… They don't want to put them in other good classes, they want to put them together and pack them for one teacher to teach, which is very unfair."

Far from being exceptional, I observed many classrooms like this one. Mr. Oparah was a Black male teacher of African origin who contributed to the marginalization of mostly Black students by expecting little academically or behaviorally from his mostly Black students, but I also observed men and women of different racial backgrounds and ages who did a disservice to

the students they were meant to educate. The first time I introduced myself and my research interest in Asian youth to a White English teacher, she told me that she had many disruptive students, but hastened to tell me that I would not be interested in them "because they aren't Asian, anyway." She continued to say, "They perpetuate failure. Everything stops with them. I don't try to save souls… They just shouldn't be here."

Several teachers and staff reported that administrators often "dumped" students with behavioral issues and/or academic difficulties into specific classes (as was attested by Mr. Oparah in the previous vignette). This practice was part of a greater sorting mechanism that created a situation of racial stratification in which Asian students were more likely than Black or Latino students to be in higher functioning academic spaces. This mechanism included tracking by academic program ("Academies"), Advanced Placement (AP) classes, subject level tracking (needing to pass algebra before moving on to geometry), and restricted membership in resource-rich electives and activities that conferred exclusive social and cultural capital to students (e.g., Leadership class).

A corollary to "dumping" was student "manipulation" of class schedules. I observed that many students spent time near the guidance counselors' offices. They sat on the floor in the adjacent hallway when they had free periods, dropped by to turn in forms or request signatures, or just to chat. Considering the fact that high school guidance counselors are important academic gatekeepers (they process transcripts and are the locus of resources for college admissions and scholarship applications) whose time is very limited (each may be assigned a caseload of upwards of 500 students), it is significant that almost every single one of the students I observed in these rapport-building interactions was Asian. High-achieving Asian students, more than anyone else, displayed a sense of spatial ownership over the counseling area. It is unsurprising,

then, that these students also felt most entitled to "manipulate their schedules" (as a teacher put it) through the counselors.

The racialization of Black and Latino youth as disruptive and unengaged in "dumping ground" classes was part of the same process that created the Asian model minority subject in smoothly functioning classes where students were expected and supported to do well (though even these generally provided a minimally rigorous education) and in officially recognized student activities that fostered efficacy and institutional belonging among students. These sites were extremely racially homogenous and disproportionately Asian. Similar to the low-functioning classrooms, race was salient in these sites and was framed by teachers and staff (as well as some Asian students) by an emphasis on ethnic or racial culture and individual choice.

Spaces of Ownership: Academic Tracking and Extra-Curricular Activities

A guidance counselor at CHS told me that half the students belonged to an academy, an academic program whose tracked classes related to a content area theme. Students moved as cohorts through academy-specific classes from sophomore through senior year. Freshmen attended an annual assembly where academy directors (teachers who headed the programs) and student representatives "made their pitch." When queried, a counselor suggested that "network effects" helped determine who applied to and ultimately joined which program. When I sat in on one of these assemblies, I observed that students were asked to raise their hands to receive application forms, but many students looked around to see if their peers were raising their hands before they demonstrated interest. Academies were historically associated with different racial groups. Leaving academy enrollment up to students ultimately perpetuated their stratification.

The two oldest and most prominent academies related to environmental sciences (ESA) and the visual arts (VAAMP); these were known, respectively, as the "Asian academy" and the

"diverse academy." ESA was known as the "Asian Academy," the "fieldtrip Academy" (because students participated in so many excursions with their science classes) and the "smart Academy" (where smart students go). A non-ESA teacher remarked offhand that students claimed ESA was 99% Asian (while this number is not accurate, it signals how students saw the program). The overwhelming majority of students associated with Leadership, Delegates Assembly (a branch of student government), and Student Council were also part of the ESA.

I happened to observe in a math class when students were asked to nominate one another to Delegates Assembly. Four of the five students nominated were Asian and were nominated by other Asian students. The exception was a Mexican American student who was also one of only two non-Asians in his AP US History class. When I talked with the teacher, a young White male, about the nominations, he said, "the Leadership group has a lot of control. The things that parents do in other schools, they're in charge of." He added, "And most of the students in there are Asian." Similarly, student government was almost entirely comprised of Asian students (most of these youth were also in Leadership class). The faces of elected student officers were plastered in the main commons area (which was also the cafeteria). Walking past, teachers, staff, students, and visitors observed a collage of Asian faces. In fact, all ten officers in one of the academic years that I did my fieldwork were Asian girls.

At the first Delegates Meeting of the year, the principal (variably described by students and staff at the school as White or as Latina) stood on stage with Ms. Meier, a White teacher, to commend the exiting officers, all of whom were Asian girls. The principal gushed, "These girls that run everything, they're just, I mean, they could be CEO's." She then called on the incoming officers. Of between 35-40 positions, only one was held by a Black student and another by a mixed-race Black/Asian student. "These kids are going to mean so much to the school," the

principal told the audience before she led the officers in swearing their allegiance to the school. At the Senior Awards Night I attended, the principal, Ms. Meier, and a counselor handed out tribute after tribute to Asian students. The only ones they gave to a Black student went to a Black female softball player for her sportsmanship.

In her article introducing the term dysconscious racism, Joyce E. King (1991: 135) describes it as racism related to "an uncritical habit of mind… that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given." Teachers and staff largely took as a given the fact that the rich extracurricular world of the school was highly segregated. The principal's comments are especially revealing, because while Black and Latino youth were active in extracurricular activities such as football, basketball, soccer, and Beats Rhymes & Life (a "rap as therapy" segment of the school's comprehensive Wellness Center, run by an umbrella group of community agencies), these were not the spaces that conferred esteem in the eyes of administrators, teachers, and other staff, that then translated into academic access and privilege.

Many teachers and staff members were aware that different racial groups unevenly expressed institutional belonging. In one season of campaigning for student office, I observe 20 Asian compared to only 4 non-Asian students giving speeches and drumming up support for their election. When I commented on this to Ms. Meier, she described Asian students by comparing them to "the Republican voting bloc" because of their tendency to vote for those within their group. Notably, she held students, rather than administrators or teachers, responsible for the racially disproportionate character of student leadership.

Similarly, a White administrator shared the following anecdote regarding student leadership when I asked him to comment on the racial dynamics that he observed in his time as a vice principal:

> The other part that really struck me the other day, we were in a meeting and they were announcing all the student leadership on this campus and they listed 25 to 30 names and every single one but one were all Asian surnames… I thought wow, first of all that is not representative of the campus, the demographics in the campus, but it is representative of the kids who are involved in that. So when you go in to the Leadership group and you walk in and it's a sea of Asian faces. Where is everybody else? There's no Caucasian, there's no African-American. Where are they? So, it's almost like that world is operating totally separate from everybody else.
>
> And what I was wondering was, are they even aware? As we are listening to the names? Am I the only person in the campus that thought "Whoa! What is that about?" …I would be willing to wager that whether it's conscious or not, *that this school is viewed as an Asian school.* And that other kids, and that other ethnic groups, either they come here and they either are trying to figure out how they can be a part of that culture. Not necessarily Asian culture but the Asian school culture. Or just *co-existing and not being a part of it.* It's like, I don't know. I would ask, why really high performing Leadership-oriented African-American, Hispanic, Caucasian kids don't get involved. And maybe they did, and maybe the majority of people voted and they voted Asian. Maybe they were there, I didn't see that. So I think it's an effort of them trying to fit in to how this school is typically perceived. (Italics added.)

While the administrator reported being "troubled" by the asymmetrical cultural "representation" in Leadership and was sympathetic to how difficult it could be for non-Asian students to "fit in to how this school is typically perceived," he ultimately framed the situation in relation to the notion of choice. In the same interview, he commented, "What I find interesting is that there are racial divides when people *want* there to be racial divides… It is almost like at certain times it doesn't matter until somebody decides that it does matter and they make an issue out of it." In this statement, the recognition of difference or the fact of classification is asserted as a problem, while the significance of race as it is enmeshed in social practice is questioned.

This comment suggests that although he was a vice principal, he should not intervene in the troubling patterns he observed because that would "make an issue" of race. He did not perceive the "Asian school culture" that predominated at the school in structural terms. The fact that non-Asians, in his description, struggled to participate or simply "co-existed" separately from the "involved" students was seen as a student issue. The racial homogeneity of school spaces, especially in very high status settings and in stigmatized environments like his own

office—where students with disciplinary referrals were sent—was essentially understood as the by-product of individual, interpersonal level choices.

Teachers and other school staff exercised a considerable amount of influence not only over classroom stratification, but also over the degree to which certain types of students felt and displayed a sense of belonging to and ownership over the school and their educational experiences. Leadership class, Delegates Assembly, Student Council, and volunteer clubs like Kiwanis and Link Crew all orbited around Ms. Meier, the charismatic, blonde, middle-aged Leadership teacher who had clout, status, and a direct line to the principal. She saw her classroom as an anchor for students, saying, "This room is so important for kids. It's home base." Leadership and Psychology (which she taught) took place there. Students from the Leadership class read the daily announcements over the intercom in the main office. After school, Ms. Meier's room was a hub of activity. Practically every organized, school-wide activity related to student governance, the honor society and some volunteer organizations, school assemblies (like the Homecoming Assembly), and school dances was planned in her room. When one peered into this particular "home base," one saw a White teacher and students who were disproportionately Asian.

Constructing Stratification Through Culture and Student-Centered Choice

Teachers upheld a color-blind ideology even when they contradicted themselves by intervening in school processes in racially affirmative ways (e.g. by recruiting non-Asians to Leadership class and to AP classes). Ms. Meier made efforts to recruit Black, Latino and other non-Asian youth into Leadership, but said she had a "harder time roping in Black and Latino kids to Leadership, mainly because of the 2.0 GPA requirement" that many struggled to meet.

The participation of non-Asians in high-status spaces was a thorny issue, because teachers and staff either felt that their presence was insufficient or became defensive about any perceived criticism related to exclusivity or racial homogeneity.

Ms. Meier also coordinated the Advanced Placement program. She told me that the district "came down with the decision to increase African American and Latino presence in AP classes. We had already been thinking about who was taking AP. It was mostly Asian students, to be honest. So we had anecdotally already noticed, and last spring we talked about getting other kids in AP." Teachers tried to recruit more Black and Latino students into their AP classes by individually encouraging students to join. Teachers and staff also looked at standardized test scores, and targeted Black and Latino students who had promising scores and were getting B's or C's. A counselor called those students to his office and "most of them agreed" to join AP classes. "But the attrition was really high," Ms. Meier emphasized. "People were dropping out, and there were a lot of D's and F's... We realized it wasn't working, so it's still a work in progress. The most important thing about AP is study skills."

Several teachers confirmed that retention was a major issue in the inclusion of Black and Latino students in AP classes, but most framed retention in terms of students' study skills, effort, and desire rather than in terms of instruction, pedagogy, curricular content, and classroom dynamics or the structural neglect of urban schools and communities. Although the idea of the "urban" was at the forefront of teaching and learning at CHS, most teachers and administrators did not connect students' academic challenges and disciplinary difficulties or the school's racial stratification and hierarchy with the city's very visible and well-documented historical experience of structural racism. Instead, they connected them with deficit characterizations of students' home, ethnic, and community cultures.

There were two limited but notable exceptions where structural forces were discussed in conjunction with cultural ones: the first was in after-school spaces directed by a community-based agency located in the Wellness Center; the second was the all-male African American Leadership class (part of a district-wide program involving a targeted group of Black male Freshmen). During the course of my research, there were numerous incidents of police brutality against Black and Latino men in the region. Also during this time period, an unarmed Black teenager named Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by a White Florida man who was later acquitted through the state's "Stand Your Ground" law. These incidents raised public concern about the disposability of Black life.

When the African American Male Leadership class at CHS talked about these incidents, their discussion of Black vulnerability was in equal measure about racism and about the responsibility of Black youth to appear non-threatening. The class was led by Mr. Tilman, a well-liked Black male case manager who based his teaching on the "180 curriculum" (developed in another state) that emphasized "self-reflection, self-motivation, and manhood development." He pointed out the lack of options in the local labor market ("I mean how many jobs does the city have to offer when you don't have a high school diploma?"), but stopped short of criticizing the structural lack of access youth experienced in school, saying, "It's a city thing, not a school thing." He argued that CHS offered more holistic support to students than did other schools in the district, especially through its partnership with community agencies that operated the Wellness Center.

In an interview, Mr. Tilman connected racial disparities in education to the "crack epidemic" that ravaged Black communities in the 1970s and 1980s. He said that while CHS was seen as an Asian school, "a lot of [Black and Latino] kids take two buses to get here… because

they don't want to go to [other schools]… where there is more gang activity." He did not delineate the additional implications of this trek for the students. For instance, many students likely left their homes early in the morning and arrived home late, leaving little time (especially if students had jobs or familial obligations) for schoolwork. Others arrived throughout the day. Those who arrived after the bell sounded for the start of a period were usually locked outside the main, gated entry until the period ended.

While adults at CHS were aware of racial and ethnic differences among students, and although they attempted to "diversify" non-Asian academic spaces like Leadership and AP classes, they operationalized an institutional logic that denied the significance of race in differentially constraining Asian, Black, and Latino youth's opportunities for "involvement" and belonging. This contradiction was particularly evident in how teachers talked about a conflict regarding the Lunar New Year celebration and Black History month. The following passage is from my field notes:

> In the hallway, two Black girls asked Ms. Meier if they could "give a birthday shout-out" to someone over the intercom during the morning announcement. Ms. Meier flatly told them, "we don't do birthday shout-outs for anyone." They seemed hurt and angry. She explained to me that the girls "were mad" at her because there was a prominent banner for Lunar New Year but not for Black History Month (both occurred in February). She explained that the Cantonese club made the banner, but she said the girls believed that the Leadership class created it and thought that Ms. Meier and Leadership were "taking sides." "So," Ms. Meier said, "they think I'm racist."

When I spoke with a Black math teacher I call Ms. Jones about her interpretation of the conflict, I got a different sense of the role of race and racism for the stakeholders involved. Whereas Ms. Meier believed she was the victim of reverse racism, Ms. Jones argued that Black students were motivated by their lack of belonging to express anger and disappointment:

> A lot of African American students feel that they are not, how can I say this without being harsh, oh forget it—they feel like they are not a part of this school. So if you look in the Leadership class, oh my goodness, I think it is about maybe 50 kids, you probably see 5 Black kids in there. It is not representative of the school at all. Just a lot of aspects. They feel like they are not welcome here, you know. I don't know. That's just how it is, a lot of their ideas are not implemented… And it is the same thing with a lot of these AP classes. You know when you're in

> the AP classes you see nothing but Asians and of course you know you are going to feel out of place… I was the sponsor of the Black Student Union last year and we [did not have consistent participation]. They always felt like, 'Why get involved when we are outnumbered?' You know. 'I am out numbered, so what?,' you know, as far as like Black History Month and stuff like that. We did the Black history facts. We had a big old painting in the commons and it was a big battle with the, what's the Asian club here called? [Yenhoa: The Cantonese club.] Yeah, the Cantonese club, there was a big battle with that because Lunar New Year was at the same time as Black History Month. So it's like we were going back and forth on who is going to have the space and it's just like, we just felt that it is always a battle. It's always something. It is always like we're fighting… And so you are always like, damn, I mean, can we get a break?

Ms. Meier, many teachers and administrators, and many youth (most, but not all of whom, were Asian) expressed the opinion that non-Asian or non-Leadership students did not have a legitimate complaint against those who "took charge" at the school because they "chose" not to "be involved," but Ms. Jones offered a counter-narrative that contextualized the institutional rather than personal reasons why Black students might be unwilling to "step up." Another teacher similarly commented,

> I think that a lot of students look at student leadership and it is almost entirely Asian, and I think that they look at the top students in each of their classes and it's usually Asian, and I think that creates kind of this, "Oh, I can do that, too" for the Asians or "No, I can't do that because that is Asian" for the other races. And there may be even some sub-fractures within the Asian groups, like "Oh, that is Chinese"… I do think the African Americans feel like they are cut out of student leadership and student government, even like being the prom queen and king.

The themes of exclusion, ownership, and belonging surfaced repeatedly in my interviews with students, but seldom came up in conversations with adults until I introduced it. Often, teachers and staff seemed unaware of their power to formalize interactions and practices that could disrupt a dynamic of Asian insiders and Black/Latino outsiders.

One academy where teachers and staff purposefully tried to bring Black students, Latino students, and struggling Asian students in from the margins was the Visual Arts Academy (VAAMP). VAAMP was known to be racially diverse. It was described by youth and adults as the "academy for Blacks and Latinos and Asian kids that identify with Black people," "the easy Academy," and "like a family." I frequently overheard comments like the following (made by

one Black student to another who wanted to join the program): "Just tell Ms. Johnson there aren't enough Asian kids in VAAMP. There's mostly Black kids in there. She'll let you in." A well-liked White art teacher said the program "tries to target those students who would otherwise fall between the cracks and who are on the brink of being stronger students." When I spoke with three Latino boys in a VAAMP art class, they said, "In VAAMP, I feel like there's a family" and "if it weren't for VAAMP, I wouldn't feel comfortable."

Teachers in this academy made attempts to help students find a level of institutional belonging that they did not feel outside the program. Indeed, those students whom I interviewed who expressed the least institutional belonging were students who did not participate in any academy. Yet, because an academy like VAAMP had an informal status as the place where struggling students and Black and Latino students would be welcomed, administrators could repeat the practice of stratification through "dumping" lower-performing students (who were a more diverse group than higher-performing students) into those academies rather than restructure the Environmental Science Academy (ESA), which was mostly Asian, so that struggling students could be meaningfully integrated into it.

The following remarks exemplify what teachers thought of the administration's use of academies as a sorting mechanism:

> Mr. Posey: The new thing is to get into small schools and create these comfortable little enclaves where kids feel supported, so it basically took a bunch of kids, mostly African Americans with low skills, and say 'You are part of the Public Health Academy' [a new academy]. It's not a choice—though academies have always been a choice, just like the leaders, they choose themselves—
>
> Yenhoa: So why do they target those kids?
>
> Mr. Posey: Because there is nowhere to put them.
>
> Yenhoa: Because they just happen not to be in an academy?
>
> Mr. Posey: Yes, they are not in an academy and they are the ones everyone is hopefully trying to help, so this is their version of helping them, they are going to dump them in there.

Mr. Oparah, who did not teach academy classes, commented, "I told Mr. Posey one day, 'You know what? What they do is that they give you all the ESA students. Then whatever is left is what they put in my class, and that is why we are having problems here. Because when you pack students that are not doing well in the same class, you are not motivating them.'" Similarly, Mr. Roth, a VAAMP teacher said, "There were 40 students who were having problems and they just put them in VAAMP, because they know that we [the teachers in VAAMP] can manage them."

Race-Making in a Struggling School: The Difficult Position of Teachers and Staff

The role of individual administrators, teachers, and staff in the racialization of Asian youth (vis-à-vis Black and Latino youth) should be contextualized in light of their capacity within the school and in light of their relationship to the broader educational system. Through her structural analysis of the political economy of "ghetto schools," Anyon (1997) demonstrated that the conditions that limit the life chances of urban students and their families, such as poverty and racial and economic isolation, extend into the conditions of teachers' work. I found that the material conditions of surrounding communities impacted CHS teachers and students alike, putting the former into a difficult position regarding both pedagogy and race-making.

Besides a main building, CHS featured two brand new buildings, including one housing a comprehensive Wellness Center created to address the health, mental health, enrichment, and tutoring needs of students that were unmet in their homes and in the larger community. Nonetheless, the institutional and personal resources of teachers and staff could not meet the overwhelming demand for them. Mr. Roth, the history teacher, explained,

> This job is really hard. It's hard to do it well. And it can be shit. You get paid nothing. You get like $38,000 a year. You have to be organized. You have to be disciplined. You work long hours. And there are lots of reasons to get discouraged. So there's got to be something in it for me, too. What keeps me in the classroom is that I'm going to really do my job. I have my lessons, I

> prepare for them, I get students to learn… People come in to teaching for all these altruistic reasons. I did, too. But you can't spend all your energy on what's going on with students, in their lives. You know that students go home and there's no food. Everyone has responsibilities at home. Everyone knows someone who was shot. Everyone has a story… I have to separate out the stories from the teaching. It has to be about the teaching. Otherwise what the fuck good are you doing?

For this teacher, the key way to retain his own motivation and to improve students' life chances was to teach as effectively as possible. Yet the institutional constraints to effective teaching were challenging. Teachers at CHS were remunerated at a pay scale lower than those of any neighboring district, leading them to feel that they and their labor were undervalued. Work was time-consuming and isolating. When I asked competent, effective teachers if there was a structure of support that helped them develop their skills and expertise, I was often told, "I was on my own."

Teachers mediated constraints in the institutional environment along with challenges originating beyond school walls, which young people carried with them into their school lives. As Anyon (1997:28) notes, students' personal challenges often manifest behaviorally:

> Teachers face an extremely difficult pedagogical situation… In addition to the curricular and instructional mandates and conditions… teachers confront roomfuls of students whose home circumstances are often extremely stressful. Their desperate lives make many of them restless and confrontational.

At CHS, Black and Latino students were involved in disproportionately more physical altercations and received disproportionately more disciplinary referrals than non-Asian students. Undeniably, behavioral problems among Black and Latino youth impacted how teachers and staff constructed racial identities for these students. Similarly, Blacks and Latinos graduated at lower rates and consistently performed worse than their Asian peers on standardized tests of proficiency across subject matter (Executive Summary School Accountability Report Card, 2010–11). These formal indicators of "success" strongly influenced whom adults regarded as "good students."

However, I found that teachers and staff tended to value Asian students' academic success beyond their demonstrated competence. Because Asian students were doing well relative to non-Asians, they were perceived as successful even while they struggled academically. For example, although Asian students' standardized test scores surpassed those of Blacks and Latinos at CHS, their absolute rates of proficiency were unimpressive (shown alongside district and state proficiency rates in Table 1):

	Language Arts	Mathematics	Science	Social Science
Asian students, CHS	42%	29%	56%	30%
All students, district	45%	46%	46%	32%
All students, state	54%	50%	56%	48%

Table 1: Percent of Students Scoring at Proficient or Advanced (meeting or exceeding the state standards) on the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program, 2010-2011. Source: District data.

Similarly, the principal and several teachers praised the success of the senior class president and the valedictorian, but in interviews, both reported that they felt grossly underprepared for college and were fearful of college level work. Another example is found in Asian students' depth of learning in Advanced Placement (AP) classes, where they predominated. When I asked a guidance counselor about exam passing rates, he explained that only a handful of students earned a score high enough to receive AP credit in any given subject. The model minority image of Asian student success also belied their documented academic diversity. In fact, some Asian students simply fell through the cracks. I observed students with failing and near-failing grade point averages (GPAs of 1.0) who simply faded into the background as adults focused their attention elsewhere.

Teacher and staff perceptions were complex and wide-ranging, but the overwhelming majority held racially differentiated views about students that informed practices which deepened academic and social divisions between Asian and non-Asian students. Moreover, most adults did not consider that their relatively higher expectations for Asian students could have a self-fulfilling effect on students' efforts. Individuals often did not realize they were engaged in processes that perpetuated the formal and informal stratification of students by race, even though they were often aware of the racially stratified nature of settings within the larger institution. In fact, once mechanisms were set in place, individual staff could both actively and passively support a status quo wherein Asian youth, especially those who were seen as high-performing and engaged, were academically and socially distanced (and distanced themselves) from the diverse nature of the larger school community.

Teachers and staff drew from a color-blind framework to make sense of the racially stratified and hierarchal nature of the academic world of the school as well as to understand Asian, Black, and Latino students' informal self-segregation. The ideological resources that informed this framework related to superficial notions of multiculturalism and diversity, individual choice, cultural essentialism, and a definition of racism that limits it to an interpersonal scale. While some staff attempted to make academic and extra-curricular settings more racially integrated, it was very difficult for individual teachers to challenge institutionalized racial logics that supported stratification and segregation. Moreover, those teachers who saw themselves as fighting the tide, by either teaching with the intention of bringing Black and Latino students in from the academic margins or by teaching, leading, and working with students from an anti-racist position, felt demoralized by what appeared to them to be changeless dysfunction in a system that was larger than them.

Conclusion and Implications

The relational dynamics that constituted 'Asian' as both a social and educational construction and a social location gave Asian students some racial power at the expense of other minority youth, in the forms of privileged representations and positive adult attention. They were more likely than other students to be given the benefit of a doubt when walking down the hallways in the middle of class time. They had easier access to teachers', counselors', and administrators' resources and time. They had better educational experiences overall. Even in a city known for its energetic grass-roots racial politics and history of Black leadership and in a school district that is fairly racially progressive (relative to the rest of the nation), the model minority mythology was strongly reproduced. The stated ideals of CHS included the success of all students and a celebration of multiculturalism. Without apparent recognition of the tension inherent in the project, teachers and staff sought to "educate" students about both color-blind meritocracy and racial equity. The discourses and practices generated by teachers and staff (and those engaged in and emphasized by students themselves) led to a pattern of exclusion of non-Asian youth, as well as the exclusion of Asians who failed to conform to racialized expectations, from key opportunities and experiences.

Through the course of this paper, I have shown that administrators, teachers, and other staff institutionalized the high degree of racial stratification at the school through formal and informal sorting mechanisms and through instructional practices that marginalized Black and Latino youth. Further, the stratification between Asian and Black/Latino students was hierarchal. Although there was tremendous diversity of academic, social, and ethnic positionality among Asian students, this paper shows that as a group, they were privileged over Black and Latino students in teacher and staff representations of them, expectations for them, and interactions with

them. The racialization of minority youth was highly differentiated, with the tropes of the Asian model minority, oppositional Black youth, and struggling/unengaged Latino youth as meaning-making anchors. The creation of the racial categories of Asian, Black, and Latino was mutually co-constitutive; one was defined in relation to the other and these relationships were in turn related to the ideology of color-blindness.

This paper has shown that students' academic status and social competence were defined in differentiated racial terms. Staff tended to draw from a model minority trope to value Asian students' school efforts and interactions in positive terms, often beyond individuals' actual depth of learning or achievement on standardized tests. They tended to value Black and Latino students' behavior and performance in negative terms, often below their demonstrated competence. Black youth were routinely labeled "resistant" and Latino youth were characterized as "invisible." This process was often self-fulfilling, as many Black and Latino students became discouraged by the "achievement gap" between Asians and other racial minorities.

Black and Latino students consequently expressed a lower sense of belonging to and ownership of the school relative to Asians, who had better access to school resources and were disproportionately represented in leadership activities. Buoyed by perceptions of themselves as "smart" and "engaged," Asians often internalized this identity and saw themselves on upward trajectories, even when in practical terms, many struggled with the difficult content of higher level curricula. Asians who defied model minority expectations sometimes faced academic and social exclusions similar to those experienced by Black and Latino students, though they were not disciplined at the same high levels. Very often, "Asian" was understood by teachers and staff as a stand-in for White. Asian-ness and Blackness often served as racial foils, complicating the Black-White binary and the binary relationship of White supremacy/oppression of the racialized

'Other'. In this case, racial privilege was constrained. For example, the purchase on power that Asians had as a privileged group at this school was conditional upon certain demands for normalized behavior and came at the extraordinary expense of educational equity.

Seeing these constraints enables a greater view of intertwined contexts (of economic inequality, urban decay, and societal disregard for "ghetto schools") that shaped CHS as one institution among many. Moreover, the ability of the school to highlight Asian students' relative success created a distraction from the fundamentally low standards for teaching and learning that characterized this and other urban schools. The reproduction of the model minority myth in an urban school setting essentially functioned as a smokescreen for the profoundly constrained educational opportunity that was offered to poor students in a struggling school, in a larger marginalized community.

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