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Geographic Constructions of Racial Identity:

The Experiences of Asian American College Students in the Midwest

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Jason Chan

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Geographic Constructions of Racial Identity:

The Experiences of Asian American College Students in the Midwest

by

Jason Chan

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Mitchell J. Chang, Chair

Research in higher education has largely overlooked the role of geography in Asian American college students' experiences. Yet, studies from other academic disciplines have demonstrated that different areas of the U.S. exhibit unique social, cultural, and political dynamics related to race. Efforts to cultivate inclusive and supportive campus environments for Asian American students may therefore benefit from understanding the influence of geographic context on their racial identities. This is particularly relevant for Asian American students in the Midwest, a region where Asian Americans are often assumed to be absent but have actually been long present and are now rapidly growing in number. This study therefore sought to explore how the social, cultural, and political contexts of the Midwest influence how Asian American college students make meaning of racial identity.

Guided by theories of ecological systems, racial formation, and racial identity

construction, this qualitative single-site case study combined student interviews, observations, demographic analyses, and document reviews to illustrate the multilayered influences on Asian American students' racial identities. Findings suggest that Asian American identity is a contextualized phenomenon, shaped by interactions between external environmental forces and participants' internal meaning-making processes. Specifically, the distinct social, cultural, and political contexts of the Midwest create a unique set of environmental conditions within which participants actively construct their Asian American identity.

These environmental conditions are characterized by different points and degrees of access to race-related knowledge, including particular discourses regarding Asian American identity. Differences between the environmental conditions present in participants' hometowns and those that they encountered in college prompted participants to negotiate and eventually reconstruct their understanding of what it meant to be Asian American. This identity negotiation process varied by participant, informed by their differing experiences with race and racial identity prior to college. As participants' understandings of Asian American identity evolved, so too did their perspective on the role of race in their past, present, and future lives. Overall, this study demonstrates how adopting a geographic lens can enrich the higher education field's understanding of Asian American students, while also offering insights into how to better facilitate the success of this population.

The dissertation of Jason Chan is approved.

Cecilia Rios Aguilar

Jessica Christine Harris

Dina Maramba

Mitchell J. Chang, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

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VITA

Education and Experience

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Chan, J. (2017). Asian Pacific Islander Desi American college students and the complexities of identity development. In D. C. Maramba & C. M. Kodama (Eds.), *Bridging research and practice to support Asian American students* (pp. 11-24). New Directions for Student Services, no. 160. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Chan, J. (2017, November). *Geographic constructions of racial identity: Asian American college students in the Midwest*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Association of the Study of Higher Education, Houston, TX.

Chan, J. (2017). "Being Asian American is a lot different here": Influences of geography on racial identity. *Journal of College Student Development, 58*, 1001-1017.

Chan, J. (2017). Racial identity in online spaces: Social media's impact on students of color. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 54,* 163-174.

Chan, J. (2017). "Am I masculine enough?": Queer Filipino college men and masculinity. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 54*, 82-94.

Poon, O. Squire, D., Kodama, C. Byrd, A., Chan, J., Manzano, L., Furr, S., & Bishundat, D. (2016). A critical review of the model minority myth in selected literature on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in higher education. *Review of Educational Research, 86,* 469-502.

Chan, J., (2015, April). *Contextual influences of geography on Asian American college students' racial identities*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Association of Asian American Studies, Evanston, IL.

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Poon, O. A., Chan, J., Kodama, C., & Squire, D. (2013, November). *Partial portrayals: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in higher education literature*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Association of the Study of Higher Education, St. Louis, MO.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In early 2013, I facilitated a leadership training for Asian American students at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Exploring racial identity and its influence on one's expressions of leadership was the focus of the day's training. Students spent the morning reflecting on their experiences growing up by sharing anecdotes of feeling different, attempting to blend in with friends and classmates, and encountering incidents of racially motivated teasing or harassment. While a few students described being part of small ethnic communities in their hometowns, college was the first opportunity many had to interact with a relatively sizable peer group of other Asian Americans and explore their racial identity – what it meant to be "Asian American."

During a break between sessions, students logged on to YouTube in search of background music. A request was made for "626," a music video recently released by the Fung Brothers, two Asian American entertainers based in Southern California. A reference to the area code of the San Gabriel Valley, a suburban area east of Los Angeles with a large Asian American population, both the song and video are homages to the social and cultural lifestyle of young Asian Americans living in the "626." The video started to play, and students in the room began dancing and singing along to the music. Flashing across the screen were scenes of Asian American youth drinking boba, singing karaoke, and hanging out in outdoor shopping malls that cater to Asian food and pop culture. It was easy to see why the video had appeal; the tune was admittedly catchy, and the accompanying visuals projected fun and high energy. As I watched these images of Asian Americans in Southern California being projected behind these Asian American students in central Missouri, though, I could not help notice the striking juxtaposition of place occurring at that moment.

The University of Missouri-Columbia is the state's flagship university, so like much of the student body, the Asian American students attending this training hailed from the state and surrounding region. Many grew up in areas with small and isolated Asian American communities, which meant the activities portrayed in the "626" music video were largely inaccessible to the students by virtue of the racial demographics and the social and cultural contexts of their geographic location. What thoughts or feelings did the "626" (as a location or an idea) evoke for the Asian American students at the University of Missouri? What did the representations in the video convey about being "Asian American" to these students who have never had these experiences? How did they make meaning of their Asian American identities? More centrally, what is the Asian American experience in places like Missouri or the Midwest, where the historical, demographic, social, and cultural contexts sharply contrast those of California and other places that have traditionally narrated the Asian American experience?

This episode and the questions it raised have since continued to linger in my mind, and contributed to my interest in exploring the role of geography in shaping Asian American college students' experiences of race and racial identity. This study is a step in that direction.

Geographies of Asian America

Notions of geography and place are intimately connected to the Asian American experience. The story of Asian America is a story of migration and movement between places, with waves of Asian immigrants and refugees arriving and settling in the U.S. throughout the last several centuries (Lee, 2015; Takaki, 1998). These historical migration patterns have created concentrated communities of Asian Americans within certain geographic areas of the country, notably in Hawai'i and California. In fact, the West Coast has not only served as a literal home to many Asian Americans but also a figurative homeland from which dominant narratives about the

Asian American experience have emerged (Sumida, 1998). Accounts of Asian American history are replete with stories featuring California and the West as center stage: the immigration journeys through Angel Island; the prosperity of San Francisco's Chinatown; the emergence of Punjabi-Mexicans in Southern California; the removal and internment of Japanese Americans; the Filipino farmworker strikes of central California; the fight for ethnic studies at San Francisco State; and the racial unrest between Blacks and Koreans in early 1990s Los Angeles, among countless others (Lee, 2015; Takaki, 1998).

While it is important to acknowledge the rich history of Asian Americans in California and the West, there is also a need to recognize that the boundaries of Asian America have always extended beyond this region. Ever since the 1700s, when a group of Filipino sailors established a fishing village in southeast Louisiana (Lee, 2015), social, political, and economic forces have pushed and pulled Asian Americans to and across different areas of the U.S., from Ohio (Dhingra, 2012) to Texas (Tang, 2008), to the Mississippi Delta (Bow, 2010) and the Great Lakes (Wilkinson & Jew, 2015). Due to their relatively smaller numbers, however, the experiences of Asian American communities within regions like the Midwest and the South are often overlooked in research on Asian Americans, which more frequently focuses on the more populous communities of the West Coast (Lee, 2009). In fact, scholars have long advocated for expanding the borders of the study of Asian Americans beyond California (Sumida, 1998), and centering geography in research on Asian American identities and experiences. Doing so would not only enrich and deepen how the Asian American experience is understood but also reveal new insights into how race manifests and operates across different geographic locations. Recent demographic trends indicating rapid growth of Asian American populations in the Midwest and South (U.S. Census, 2012) further demonstrate the need to shift the lens "east of California"

(Sumida, 1998) and focus on geographic regions where the Asian American presence is growing.

Statement of the Problem

Research in higher education has largely overlooked geography in its studies of Asian American students. Over the last several decades, generations of Asian American students have transformed campus landscapes across the country through their physical presence and the creation of Asian American student organizations, resource centers, and academic programs (Gupta, 1998; Kibria, 1999; Tseng Putterman, 2016). A growing body of research has accompanied this phenomenon, particularly in relation to Asian American students' racial identities, as identity exploration and development is often a salient component of this population's college experience (Alvarez, 2002; Museus, 2014). However, while scholars have examined the ways in which ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, faith, generational status, immigrant status, and other social dimensions interact and intersect with race to shape how Asian American students make meaning of their racial identities (e.g., Accapadi, 2012; Buenavista & Chen, 2013; Lee, 1997; Maramba, 2008; Museus, Vue, Nguyen, & Yeung, 2013; Nakiboglu, 2005; Narui, 2011; Ngo, 2006; Ocampo, 2013; Park, Lew & Chiang, 2013; Tran & Chang, 2013), little attention has been focused on the influence of geography and the spatial environments in which students are immersed.

This oversight is particularly significant as the nation rapidly moves towards a majority-minority population (Takaki, 2008), which will simultaneously and inevitably shift the racial composition of college students accordingly. A substantial body of existing research on campus racial environments has been critical in guiding institutions to better understand and serve the evolving student of color populations on their campuses (see Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012). However, despite concerted, ongoing efforts of colleges and

universities to address campus racial climates (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008), racial incidents continue to occur with regular frequency (Garcia & Johnston-Guerrero, 2015), and have fueled a recent surge of race-related demonstrations and activism on college campuses (Brown & Mangan, 2015; Hartocollis & Bidgood, 2015). Thus while examining the institutional context is necessary to address issues of race on campus, it may not be sufficient.

Higher education institutions do not operate in a vacuum but are embedded within the broader societal contexts within which they are situated. Research in geography, psychology, political science, and other disciplines have examined such contexts at the scale of geographic region, and found that different areas of the country exhibit unique social, cultural, and political dynamics related to race (e.g., Berry & Henderson, 2002; Lieske, 2010; Rentfrow et al., 2013). As such, understanding the influence of geographic context on how students make meaning of race and racial identity could offer insight into why attempts to enhance campus racial climates – with their dominant focus on institutional context – have had limited success in preventing racial incidents.

Furthermore, students bring to college a set of values, beliefs, and attitudes regarding diversity and race that are shaped by prior experiences within their hometowns and high schools (Milem, Umbach, & Liang, 2004). Because the majority of students migrate within the same geographic region to attend college (Hillman & Weichman, 2016), the climate on most campuses likely reflects the social, cultural, and political contexts of the region. The student-led racial protests at the University of Missouri-Columbia during the fall of 2015 illustrate this well, as historian Colin Gordon postulated:

> You have a state in which the population is very segregated, race relations are on the nasty end of the spectrum – what happens when you lift a bunch of 18-year-olds and put

> them all in one place? … [E]veryone is coming to that campus with a certain experience or baggage having grown up in Missouri – black or white. (Marans & Stewart, 2015, para. 39)

Gordon makes a compelling case for considering geographic context in relation to college students' experiences with race. Yet, embedded in his quote is a telling assumption that only Black and White students attend the University of Missouri. What about the Asian American students on campus? How do their experiences with race growing up in Missouri and the Midwest inform their understandings of racial identity and their perceptions of the campus racial climate?

Such an oversight is not an isolated occurrence. Asian American students have been perpetually marginalized and rendered invisible within the racial discourse of higher education (Museus & Kiang, 2009), despite experiencing racial harassment, racial profiling, and other negative racial incidents during college (Museus & Park, 2015). These occurrences have not garnered substantial attention within public or academic arenas, contributing to a lack of understanding of the Asian American experience. This is concerning, in light of the implications of negative campus racial environments on students' sense of self and their psychological well-being (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Given that Asian American students tend to demonstrate distinct challenges and needs related to mental health (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Hwang & Goto, 2008), attention to their racialized experiences on campus takes on critical importance.

Efforts to cultivate more inclusive and supportive campus environments for Asian American students may therefore benefit from understanding the influence of geographic context on their racial identities. Existing scholarship on Asian Americans in the South (e.g., Joshi & Desai, 2013), the Upper Midwest (e.g., Wilkinson & Jew, 2015), and Southern California (e.g.,

Cheng, 2013) all point to a relationship between geography and race. For example, because the history of slavery and Jim Crow has entrenched a dualistic notion of race in the social and political institutions of the South, it has been theorized that Asian Americans in the region have been racialized as White, Black, neither, or somewhere in between at different periods in time (Bow, 2010; Desai & Joshi, 2013). Empirical research on the relationship between geographic context and how Asian Americans experience racial identity, however, is relatively scarce, including studies conducted on Asian American college students. With the Midwest and the South projected to see the highest rates of growth and diversification of the college-going population in the next ten years (WICHE, 2012), fueled in part by the rapid growth of the Asian American population in these regions (U.S. Census, 2012), studies that adopt a geographic and spatial perspective to understand this population's experiences are both timely and warranted.

Purpose and Scope of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of geographic context in shaping Asian American students' experiences of race and racial identity by examining the experiences of Asian American students at a large, public, research institution located in the Midwest. My approach to this study adopted an ecological perspective, in that I conceptualized Asian American students as residing within multiple contexts (e.g., institutional, local, regional), each exerting a set of influences that interact to shape students' understandings and experiences of race. Specifically, I sought to identify the factors within students' home, high school, and community environments that influence how students make meaning of race and racial identity, as well as how their college experiences strengthen or weaken, clarify or complicate, and reinforce or modify these understandings. By situating these processes within the broader social, cultural, and political dynamics of the state and larger region, I explicated the relationship

between geographic location, an institution's racial context, and Asian American students' understandings of racial identity. In doing so, I contribute a new perspective on college students and racial identity that is multidimensional and spatial in nature.

I chose to focus this study on the Midwest for several key reasons. First, Asian Americans in the Midwest are both conspicuously present in their physical environments due to their phenotypic differences and virtually absent in the public consciousness due to their low numbers, a liminal experience that likely exerts unique effects on how they develop a racial identity. Another potential influence on racial identity for Asian Americans is the higher degree of rurality that characterizes portions of the Midwest (U.S. Census, 2010). The high dispersion of the population in rural areas means racial and ethnic communities are likely separated by long distances, which may limit the access Asian Americans have to racial or ethnic peers and resources. The correlation between rurality and conservative sociopolitical attitudes (Pew Research Center, 2014) also means areas of the region with stronger conservative values, particularly around issues of race, may foster environments that are restrictive or marginalizing for Asian Americans.

In addition, the many higher education institutions located in the Midwest have enrolled dozens of cohorts of Asian American students over the years (Jew, 2003), yet the experiences of these students remain relatively unknown within the research literature. Anecdotes in popular media from and about Asian American college students in the Midwest suggest that their experiences may be distinct from their peers in other parts of the country (e.g., Lim, 2014a, 2014b; Tao, 2009; Zhao, 2012). Similarly, the founding and continued existence of the Midwest Asian American Student Union (MAASU; http://maasu.org), an annual conference attracting hundreds of Asian American students from dozens of Midwestern institutions for a weekend of

identity exploration and community building, points to an Asian American experience that may be shaped by regional influences. Lastly, by highlighting this growing but overlooked student population, I contribute to the project of de-centering the predominant West Coast narrative of the Asian American experience (Sumida, 1998).

Research Questions and Methodological Overview

The research question that guided this study was: How do the social, cultural, and political contexts of geographic location influence how Asian American students make meaning of their racial identity? To address this research question, I conducted a single-site qualitative case study at a Midwestern institution. According to Yin (2014), a case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 16). The phenomenon of interest in this study is Asian American college students' experiences of race, and the context is the social, cultural, and political dynamics of geographic location.

I collected data from multiple sources to capture the multidimensional contexts within which Asian American students are situated. I conducted individual interviews and a focus group with a diverse sample of Asian American students who grew up in the Midwest and are now enrolled at the institution. Individual interviews centered on students' experiences with race and racial identity in their hometowns and in college, while the focus group asked students to reflect on these experiences with regard to the social, cultural, and political contexts of the geographic region. Both components incorporated visual and spatial exercises (e.g., timelines and maps; Boschmann & Cubbon, 2014; Goodson & Sikes, 2001) to capture both the developmental and contextual dimensions of students' experiences. I also collected demographic data, performed document reviews, and conducted observations to glean additional insight into the social, cultural, and political contexts of students' hometowns, the institution, the state, and the

surrounding geographic region.

Data analysis procedures drew upon methods from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) to examine patterns in students' meaning-making processes around racial identity and facilitate analysis of their experiences of race within multiple geographic contexts. To provide an organizing and interpretive framework for this analysis, I also employed Clarke's (2005) situational analysis approach, which utilizes visual mapping strategies to identify latent patterns and themes within the data. Given the complexities inherent in studying contexts, which can be multiple and interconnected, this approach to data analysis was conducive to generating findings that adequately addressed the study's research question.

Definitions and Assumptions

Because the terms used in this proposal may be defined and utilized differently across disciplines, operational definitions for the purpose of this study are listed below:

- *Race* – A social construct that categorizes groups of people "according to perceived physical and behavioral human characteristics" and "associates differential value, power, and privilege with these characteristics" (Moya & Markus, 2010, p. 21). These categories are created through the interplay of sociohistorical and sociocultural forces over time and across contexts (Omi & Winant, 2015), and are thus fluid and perpetually evolving.
- *Ethnicity* – A social construct that refers to groups of people with "presumed, and usually claimed, commonalities, including … language, history, nation or region of origin, customs, religion, names, physical appearance, and/or ancestry group" (Moya & Markus, 2010, p. 22). These groups are subjectively defined, and membership is often consciously and readily claimed (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007).
- *Experiences with Race* – Experiences occurring in individuals' daily lives wherein the

construct of race is invoked or manifest. Such racialized experiences may be direct (i.e., experiences that affect individuals themselves) or indirect (i.e., experiences that affect others but which individuals witness or observe). Experiences with race have the potential to shape individuals' understanding of racial identity; however, the nature and degree of this impact are dependent on how individuals make meaning of – and the extent to which they internalize – these racialized experiences. Thus, while this study's central focus is on Asian American students' racial identities, it is important to explore and understand their experiences with race as well.

- *Racial Identity* – An individual's connection to and affiliation with their racial background, including the degree to which it is incorporated into their sense of self. Distinct from racial classification, racial identity refers to the "meaning individuals and groups ascribe to membership in racial categories" (Renn, 2012, p. 11) based on their everyday experiences with race. It is important to note, however, that Asian American students' understanding of racial identity may be closely connected, interchangeable, or even indistinguishable from their understanding of ethnic identity (Johnston-Guerrero & Pizzolato, 2016). As such, this study's usage of the term "racial identity" reflects this fluidity in definition.
- *Asian American* – According to the U.S. Census (2012), the population that encompasses individuals "having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam" (p. 2). I recognize that this definition is both socially constructed and politically contested (Kibria, 1998; Shankar & Srikanth, 1998), and that the U.S. Census has a problematic past with regard

to their collection and categorization of race-related data (Omi & Winant, 2015). However, because it remains the standard definition utilized by the U.S. government and therefore many educational institutions, I refer to it with the acknowledgment that it is an imperfect description of the population.

- *Midwest* – The geographic area of the U.S. comprised of the following 12 states: Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin (U.S. Census, 2012).
- *Region* – In general terms, a geographic area defined by distinct and shared social, cultural, economic, or political characteristics. Certain regions (e.g., Northeast, Midwest, South) have been formally designated through the Census, while others (e.g., Deep South, Great Plains, Pacific Northwest) have acquired names in U.S. vernacular.

It is important that I state a key assumption I am making in conducting this study, which is that despite the heterogeneity in what constitutes a Midwestern experience, the unique historical, social, cultural, and political forces that have and continue to shape the region (Cayton & Gray, 2001) also exert influences that are commonly experienced by the population residing within. In addition, because the geographic span of the Midwest is significantly large, any attempt to characterize a typical Midwestern Asian American experience would be misguided, if not futile. This study thus does not proclaim to identify a universal experience of racial identity for Asian American students who grow up and attend college in the Midwest, but rather to offer insight into the ways in which the contextual influences of a geographic region shape and inform how Asian American students negotiate their racial identities.

Researcher Positionality

Being Asian American has always been a salient dimension of my identity. While my

racial identity is inextricably tied to and informed by my experiences as a Taiwanese, gay, upper-middle class, able-bodied, cisgender man, the places and environments where I have lived have also exerted significant influences. To not acknowledge this is to overlook a key component in my identity development process, as Goodson and Sikes (2001) stated:

> "Everyone sees the world through frames of reference which are developed as a result of … being situated in particular social, historical, *geographical*, political, religious (or whatever) contexts which, consequently, lead to various and differing experiences." (p. 25, emphasis added)

These words not only capture my belief in the critical role of context in shaping individuals' experiences, including my own, but they also inform my approach to research with college students. I therefore offer an account of my personal experiences with geography and identity, to share my positionality in relation to the proposed study.

It was during my junior year at the University of Pennsylvania that I critically reflected on my Asian American identity for the first time. Two Asian American students approached me at a leadership retreat and asked, "We see you around campus all the time, but you're never at any of our events. Why don't you come?" This startled me. Not only did I not know these students, but no one had ever asked me such a question. Their inquiry was valid, though. Since arriving at college, I had intentionally avoided all racial and ethnic student organizations and actively spurned attempts to involve me in their activities. Why was I so resistant?

I was not unaware of my Asian American identity. Growing up in a predominantly White, suburban, New Jersey neighborhood, it was difficult not to be. While out in public – at the grocery store, at the shopping mall, at restaurants – I rarely saw anyone who was not White. The schools I attended also had few Asian Americans, with no more than a couple dozen faces

like mine appearing among the thousand or so students throughout middle and high school. Feeling unable to connect socially or personally with an overwhelmingly White peer group led to feelings of difference and isolation. I began to associate social desirability and popularity with Whiteness and blamed my racial identity for being a barrier to social acceptance. I dodged references to my race and tried my hardest to adopt what I perceived to be the attitudes and behaviors of a "normal" (i.e., White) teenager.

Although my hometown was predominantly White, the neighboring towns had slightly higher concentrations of people of color, including Black and other Asian communities. In fact, being located in the metropolitan New York City area meant that I had access to racial diversity, even if not in my immediate, everyday experience. Seasonal high school track meets, periodic school field trips around the state, and occasional excursions into New York City exposed me to people of diverse backgrounds, albeit with limited interaction. Thus while I recognized race existed, I did not have a strong understanding of its meaning beyond personal experience – and what I knew was being Asian American came with a social stigma I did not want. This rejection of my racial identity remained heavily entrenched in college, despite the moderately-sized Asian American campus population. As such, my immediate reaction to this “intervention” being staged by the two Asian American student leaders was to panic and flee. My inability to generate an adequate excuse to leave, however, left me with no choice but to engage in conversation.

This led to critical reflection on my identity, prompted by my classmates’ curiosity about my story and their willingness to share their own experiences of being Asian American. Particularly striking to me was that for both students, growing up in California and coming to college on the East Coast created unexpected dissonance around their racial identity. Not only did they find the Asian American campus population small in number, but they also perceived

many Asian American students to be somehow "different" than their Asian American peers back home. Listening to them discuss growing up alongside Asian American peers and surrounded by communities of color puzzled me, as if they were describing an alternate universe. I wondered how my life would have been had I grown up where they did: What role would race have played in my identity? Would it have a different meaning to me, and might I have identified more strongly as an Asian American? For that matter, what did being Asian American truly mean to me? Might there be value in embracing, rather than resisting, this identity?

These questions stayed with me long after that retreat. Since college, I have lived and worked in multiple geographic regions, from New England and the Mid-Atlantic to the Midwest and Southern California, and I have observed how my Asian American identity was perceived and acted upon in these different places. For example, people in the Washington D.C. area often mistook me for Filipino, a peculiar experience I have not had anywhere else, and I received questioning glances and uncomfortable stares most often while residing in and traveling through the Midwest. These moves have also prompted me to reflect on how my knowledge and experiences of race may be informed by growing up in New Jersey and the Northeast region. Being exposed to Southeast Asian communities for the first time while living in Massachusetts expanded and complicated my understanding of the term "Asian American," and despite seeing Asian Americans and people of color virtually everywhere I go in Los Angeles – a far cry from my childhood days – I still feel out of place at times. While these may be mere musings, I believe that geographic context and location mattered in defining these experiences.

My professional background in higher education and student affairs has also provided opportunities to reflect upon the relationship between geographic context and racial identity. As a former program director for a scholarship fund serving Asian American and Pacific Islander

students and a training facilitator for an Asian American and Pacific Islander college student leadership program, I had the opportunity to work with Asian American students at dozens of institutions in multiple geographic regions around the U.S. To effectively deliver culturally relevant advising and workshop experiences required me to learn about students' particular contexts and engage in conversations about their identities. This offered me insight into the varied and nuanced experiences of Asian American students in different parts of the country. Salience of racial and ethnic identity, access to cultural or ethnic resources, feelings of inclusion or isolation, quality of cross-racial interactions and relations – all seemed to be shaped not only by the environments within which students grew up and were attending college, but also the region of the country these places were located.

My personal experiences of developing a racial identity while migrating across geographic contexts, paired with my professional experiences working with Asian American students in multiple geographic locations, informed the perspective that I brought to this study. While this inevitably influenced how I conducted my research, I believe continually reflecting on my positionality enhanced my role of "researcher as instrument" and thereby contributed to a more robust study.

Significance of Study

This study makes a number of important contributions to research and practice in higher education. First, it adds to the growing yet still limited body of research on Asian American college students. It also comes at a time when concerns over racial equity and inclusion are increasing in volume on campuses around the country, initiated and driven by students of color (Brown & Mangan, 2015; Mangan, 2016). A richer understanding of how Asian American students experience and make meaning of race, as well as the environmental and contextual

factors that shape their understanding of racial identity, can assist institutions in effectively addressing and enhancing the racial dynamics on their campuses.

Second, this study's focus on regional context contributes a new lens through which to analyze and understand college students' experiences. Previous research utilizing geographic perspectives have largely focused on the barriers to college access and choice imposed by rurality, distance, and transportation (e.g., Cooke & Boyle, 2011; Dache-Gerbino, 2014; Hillman & Weichman, 2016), or the effect regional racial composition has on an institution's capacity to enroll a diverse student body (e.g., Franklin, 2013; Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). Little to no research on college students and identity has centered geography, though researchers' continual mention of geographic location as a limitation of their studies (e.g., Guardia & Evans, 2008; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Maramba, 2008; Sanchez, 2013; Sanchez & Carter, 2005; Stewart, 2009) signals a recognition that geographic context may play a role in students' identity development processes. By examining the social, cultural, and political contexts of a geographic region, this study highlights the multilayered influences on college students' racial identity formation and sheds light on how students may experience racial identity in different places and contexts. In doing so, the study incorporates a spatial dimension that offers perspectives not yet considered in many existing theories of race and racial identity. Equally significant is the study's theoretical contribution to research on college students, as it introduces new lines of inquiry related to geography in examining the identity development of this population.

Third, this study has practical significance for the student affairs field. As administrators with the most frequent and extensive contact with undergraduates, student affairs professionals serve a critical role in advising and supporting students as they navigate through college (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2010). Awareness of the unique needs and diverse experiences of Asian

American students is thus essential for facilitating their success, especially with their growing presence in areas of the country where they have not previously been concentrated (Teranishi, 2010). In addition, although this study is focused on Asian American students, the relationship between geographic context and identity is applicable to other student populations as well. Geographic location can shape how students of color, LGBTQ students, and students of faith make meaning of their identities, and influence how institutions approach issues of race, gender identity and sexual orientation, and religion. Lastly, given the mobile nature of the student affairs profession, which can encourage frequent migration across states and regions for career opportunities, introducing a geographic lens to the work of student affairs professionals may be a valuable step for enhancing their effectiveness in supporting the college student population.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The premise of this study resides at the intersection of several areas of scholarship, pulling together multiple lines of inquiry to pose a question that has been alluded to but not yet directly addressed in the research. This chapter provides a review of pertinent literature regarding geography, race, and college students from such disciplines as geography and demography, sociology and psychology, and history and education. My aim is to situate this study within existing knowledge in these areas and demonstrate how this study will build upon this knowledge to illuminate the experiences of Asian American college students in the Midwest.

First, I draw upon concepts from geography and spatial studies to discuss the importance of considering space and spatial perspectives in studies of identity development. I then review theories of racial formation, racial identity development, and racial identity construction as distinct lenses through which to understand race and racial identity. This is followed by an overview of ecological systems theory, which offers a conceptual framework that I use to integrate notions of space, race, and identity. I then transition into existing literature on geographic regions to explain how and why differences exist across areas of the country; given this study's focus on the Midwest, I also provide a brief portrait of the social and cultural context of the region. Next, I explore the relationship between geography and race generally, before focusing specifically on the Midwest and the experiences of Asian Americans in the region. Finally, I discuss the research on Asian American college students and racial identity. A brief summary of themes from the literature review and how they inform the proposed study concludes this chapter.

Theorizing Space

Traditional theories of identity assume a temporal orientation, in that the focus is on how

one's sense of self evolves over time. These developmental processes are often characterized by when they emerge, how long they last, and the sequence in which they occur. This approach has informed many models of identity development, including Erikson's (1968) classic psychosocial stages of development and the racial identity development models frequently utilized in studies of college students (e.g., Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995; Kim, 2001). Although these stage models have been instrumental in raising awareness about students' experiences with identity, they are limited by their emphasis on the temporal dimensions of identity development.

Just as the passage of time can shape and inform how individuals experience identity, so can the experience of space, or the environments and contexts in which individuals are immersed. The places where individuals are located have meanings that transcend simply being physical locations; they are also social spaces with particular social and cultural dynamics that exert formative influences on individuals' understanding of themselves and the world around them. This recognition that space "plays an active role in the construction and organization of social life" (Neely & Samura, 2011, p. 1936) has recently prompted scholars across multiple disciplines to begin thinking and theorizing through a spatial lens. According to Soja (2010), this "spatial turn" within academia can open up "new possibilities for discovering hidden insights, alternative theories, and revised modes of understanding" (p. 19).

Incorporating a spatial approach to research on college students and identity could therefore yield perspectives that traditional (i.e., temporal) approaches to identity development may obscure or overlook. For example, how does proximity, or lack thereof, to different racial communities influence the development of one's racial identity? How does migration across environments affect how one experiences race and racial identity? These questions are not to minimize or invalidate the influence of time, but rather encourage the consideration of space and

time as equally important and in relation to one other. Adopting both temporal and spatial perspectives in the study of race and racial identity has the potential to contribute new knowledge to the higher education field, specifically with regard to the impact that spaces and contexts have on how college students understand and experience their racial identities.

Theorizing Race

The concept of race has been the subject of extensive study and debate, with scholars theorizing at length about how it is defined, how it functions, and how it shapes people's experiences and identities (e.g., Back & Solomos, 2000; Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Feagin, 2013; Omi & Winant, 2015). This extends to the racial category of "Asian American" and its evolution throughout U.S. history and contemporary society (Lee, 2015; Takaki, 1998; Wu, 2002). The debate over which ethnic groups are included or excluded from the Asian American community (e.g., Ocampo, 2016; Shankar & Srikanth, 1998), as well as the ambivalent positioning of Asian Americans in relation to other racial groups (e.g., Kim, 1999), have complicated the notion of what it means to *be* Asian American. How do these dynamics affect how Asian Americans experience race? What influences do these tensions exert on how individuals relate to or identify with an Asian American racial identity? Looking to theories of race and racial identity can begin to address these questions.

Because a comprehensive review of existing theories of race and racial identity is beyond the scope of this chapter, I discuss a select few with direct relevance to this study: (1) racial formation theory, which emphasizes the role of social, cultural, and political forces in creating race; (2) racial identity development theories, which focus on how individuals see themselves in relation to race; and (3) racial identity construction, which combines elements of racial formation and racial identity development theories to explain how individuals make meaning of their racial

experiences in constructing their racial identities.

Racial Formation Theory

According to racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2015), definitions of race and racial categories are not fixed, but are constantly "created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed" (p. 109) through the interplay of sociohistorical and sociocultural dynamics over time and across contexts. Social interactions and relationships between groups of people are institutionalized and enforced by the state, which subsequently shapes the ways groups interact and relate to each other. This perpetual cycle, which produces – or socially constructs – the notion of race, is propelled by the interaction and convergence of three forces: racialization, racial projects, and racial politics (Omi & Winant, 2015).

Racialization is the assigning of particular attributes or behaviors to people based on physical appearance and phenotypic features. These characteristics acquire significance over time and become tools for differentiating groups of people and transforming them into symbols of racial ideas and meanings. The racialization of Arab, South Asian, Muslim, and Sikh Americans as dangerous, threatening, and anti-American after the events of September 11, 2001 (Iyer, 2015) provides an illustrative example, as does the racialization of Southeast Asian male youth as delinquents and gangsters, particularly within urban school environments (Chhuon, 2014). While racialization casts individuals and groups as racial actors, racial projects embed race into social structures such that race becomes a "common sense" way of "comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world" (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 127) and a mechanism to "organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines" (p. 125). The rendering of Asian Americans as "model minorities" against which other people of color are pitted is an example of a highly successful, deeply entrenched racial project that has

positioned Asian Americans as a wedge group in race relations, perhaps most notably in the discourse on affirmative action (Lee, 2006).

Finally, racial politics refers to the ways that race is deployed to organize and govern society. In U.S. history, this has included the enactment of strategies to privilege and invest power in one racial group (i.e., Whites) while disenfranchising others (i.e., people of color). From the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow demarcating the boundaries of the "color line" (Feagin, 2013), to Supreme Court rulings designating Asians as not White and thus ineligible for citizenship (Lee, 2015; Takaki, 1998), racial politics have contributed to the formation of race through state-sanctioned actions. Racial politics are not solely the domain of the state, however. They also include tactics that racial groups utilize to resist or oppose racial control, such as the creation of the pan-ethnic "Asian American" label to aggregate and amplify the voices of individual Asian ethnic groups (Espiritu, 1992) and the historical and ongoing negotiation and contestation of racial categories on the U.S. Census (Omi & Winant, 2015).

While racial formation theory and its constituent elements of racialization, racial projects, and racial politics provide a useful framework with which to understand how race has been and continues to be constructed in U.S. society, its primary emphasis is on group and societal level processes. How individual people experience race is not a central focus. For that, I turn to the counseling and education literature for their theories of racial identity development.

Racial Identity Development

Racial identity development concerns the internal processes by which individuals acquire a sense of identity as a racial being (Renn, 2012). Early models conceptualized racial identity development for people of color as progressing in a series of stages, starting from relative unawareness of one's racial identity and culminating in the integration of racial identity as part

of one's holistic self. In between, one experiences periods of dissonance upon recognizing the meaning of one's racial identity, exploration of and immersion in one's racial identity and community, and negotiation of one's racial identity vis-à-vis the norms of dominant White culture. Transitions between stages are propelled by changes in one's relationship or sense of belonging to one's racial group, resulting from the acquisition of new knowledge or experiences related to race.

Variations of this framework have been applied to the experiences of Blacks and African Americans (e.g., Cross, 1995), Asian Americans (e.g., Kim, 2001), Filipinx[1] Americans (Nadal, 2004), South Asian immigrants (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997), and racial and ethnic minorities in general (e.g., Phinney, 1989; Sue & Sue, 2003). A common critique of these stage models, however, is the underlying assumption that identity development is linear and follows a universal trajectory for all individuals. In response, some scholars replaced the stages of identity development with dimensions they named identity orientations (Gallegos & Ferdman, 2012), identity processes (Museus, Vue, Nguyen, & Yeung, 2013), or identity consciousness (Horse, 2012). Each of these models proposed that individuals could experience any number of dimensions, in any order and at any time, opening up the possibility that people could experience racial identity in different and multiple ways.

Other scholars have adopted multi-factor (Accapadi, 2012; Wijeyesinghe, 2001, 2012)

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[1] As inherently gendered terms, "Filipino," "Filipina," and "Filipina/o" can reinforce a gender binary that is not inclusive of all gender identities. I thus use the term "Filipinx" when referring to the general population or people whose gender identities are unknown, in acknowledgment of the broad spectrum of gender identities with which individuals may identify.

and ecological approaches (Renn, 2003; Root, 2002) that examine how an individual's environment influences the development of a racial identity. In doing so, these scholars acknowledged that development does not occur in isolation or a vacuum. Instead, they emphasized the interconnectedness of race with gender, class, faith, and other social identities, and the role of situational and environmental factors (e.g., family culture, political climate, community attitudes, geographic region) in affecting the salience of racial identity and how individuals experience race. These models not only offer more complex lenses through which to understand racial identity, but they also hint at the role of context and space in its development.

Racial Identity Construction

It is important to make a distinction between the concepts of racial formation and racial identity development and their respective approaches to describing individuals' relationships to race. Racial formation adopts a sociological perspective, centering on the broader social, cultural, and political forces that shape how groups of people experience race through the construction and enforcement of racial categories over time. Racial identity development adopts a psychological lens, focusing on the internal processes through which individuals perceive themselves as belonging to a particular racial group and acquire a positive relationship to this aspect of their identity. Although these two approaches each provide valuable insight, neither adequately captures how external (i.e., societal) and internal (i.e., personal) influences *interact* to shape individuals' experiences with race, and subsequently, their racial identity. Wong (2011, 2013) proposed a new framework to address this gap, which she termed *racial identity construction*. Building upon racial identity development and racial formation theories, Wong (2011, 2013)'s framework emphasized how individuals define and understand their racial identities (as opposed to simply affiliating with them), and how they interpret the racial

environments in which they are immersed (as opposed to simply being affected by them). As such, individuals actively construct their racial identities through the dynamic interaction between sociological and psychological processes.

Though a valuable perspective that advances the way higher education understands college students' racial identities, Wong's (2011, 2013) application of racial identity construction implied but did not directly address the multidimensional nature of context and the role it plays in shaping both students' experiences with race and their racial identities. In their discussion of race, however, Moya and Markus (2010) offered a more detailed exploration of this relationship between context and racial identity. The authors conceptualized racial identity as a social process defined by the interactions and relationships an individual has with other people, and shaped by the race-related "images, narratives, metaphors, conversations, policies, and everyday social routines" (Moya & Markus, 2010, p. 20) that are present within an individual's environment. As such, racial identity is both an individual and a collective construction; individuals do not define their racial identity solely on their own but in conjunction with how other people perceive and interact with them within particular contexts. These contexts, which evolve over time and differ across location, also vary in scale and scope. The spaces shared with peers, classmates, and family, the broader environments of a college campus or local community, and the macro-level contexts of a region or a nation, for example, all contribute to an individual's development of racial identity.

Understanding how Asian American college students make meaning of their racial identity thus requires a recognition that "identities are where the self meets society" (Markus, 2010, p. 361) and an examination of the multiple contexts in which they are immersed. Research on race, however, has yet to fully explicate the nature of these contexts and their role in

constructing racial identity. The next section describes one useful approach for conceptualizing this notion of multiple contexts, and one that also conceptually frames this study: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977, 1979, 1994/2004).

Ecological Systems: A Conceptual Framework

Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1994/2004) has been utilized in higher education research to better understand the influence of environment and context on college students' experiences (see Renn, 2003, 2004; Renn & Arnold, 2003). Originating in developmental psychology, this theory conceives of an individual's developmental process as shaped by reciprocal interactions with other people and the surrounding context. Context is not a singular environment, however, but an ecological system comprised of multiple nested contexts that each exert distinct influences on the individual. It is through the combination and interaction of these influences – which vary in type, frequency, and strength – that shape an individual's understanding of self and the world around them.

There are five ecological systems in Bronfenbrenner's (1994/2004) theory: four describe concepts related to space and the fifth addresses the notion of time. The spatial systems range from the contexts closest to individuals to those that are most distant. The immediate context is the *microsystem*, which encompasses the people with whom individuals have a direct or sustained relationship. For college students, this may include friends, family, classmates, teachers, peers, and members of their ethnic community. Interactions between microsystems, such as when individuals' different social circles meet and interact, create the *mesosystem*. The school climate created by classmates and teachers serves as one example, as does the cultural environment fostered by interactions between family and community members.

The next two spatial systems involve contexts further removed from but still surrounding

the individual. The *exosystem* comprises the educational, government, religious, community, and other social institutions whose policies and practices affect individuals, and yet are settings in which individuals are not present or over which they do not have direct influence. The interplay between the government and higher education institutions regarding affirmative action and college admissions offers one example. Enveloping all of these systems is the larger societal context, or the *macrosystem*, which encompasses the prevalent social norms, cultural values, and political beliefs of a society or culture. It should be noted, however, that Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 1994/2004) definition of the macrosystem does not specify scope, meaning it does not distinguish among contexts at regional, national, or global scales, which could differ in distinct ways (Toji, 1999). Attitudes towards race, for example, may vary considerably between regions of the U.S. and across countries of the world.

Together, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem constitute the entirety of an individual's ecological system. Interactions are constantly occurring between all elements, resulting in a dynamic system that shapes an individual's perceptions and experiences of their environment. The model described thus far, however, does not fully capture the process of development, which connotes change over time. The *chronosystem* thus represents the passage of time and its effect on individuals and environments. Students may develop new perspectives of the world as they age, for example, and environments may change as students migrate to new contexts or as societal conditions shift and evolve.

Prior applications of Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 1994/2004) ecological systems theory to college students demonstrate the value of this framework in understanding their experiences. Renn and Arnold (2003), for example, utilized the theory to explore the role of peer culture in shaping students' experiences. Conceptualizing peer culture as a mesosystem-level

influence in students' ecological systems provided the authors a lens through which to examine how interactions between campus microsystems (e.g., peer groups, classmates, faculty mentors) influenced both the identity development of multiracial students and the academic development of high-achieving students. Both cases highlighted the interactive processes with which students engaged with their environments, and through which said environments exerted influences on students. For example, many of the multiracial students participated in monoracial student groups to connect with peers who shared part of their racial identity and enrolled in courses on race to learn more about the multiracial experience. When the student groups did not acknowledge or welcome their multiracial identities, however, students drew upon the knowledge gained from their classes to either embrace a mixed-race identity or opt out of a racial identity altogether. In separate studies, Renn (2003, 2004) extended her analysis of multiracial student identities beyond the mesosystem and identified additional influences within students' exosystems (e.g., curricular content, demographic forms) and macrosystems (e.g., social and cultural messages from mass media) that shaped how they understood their racial identities.

Ecological systems theory's focus on multiple contexts makes it an apt framework for illuminating the complex and multifaceted processes of identity development for college students, including the impact of geographic context on their experiences of race and racial identity. To use the population of interest for this study as an example, Asian American students in the Midwest are situated within the distinct social, cultural, and political contexts of the region, which collectively comprise their *macrosystem*. These macrolevel influences interact with and affect students' other ecological systems: the educational institutions (e.g., K-12 school district, university system) within their *exosystem*, the *mesosystem* created by the social and cultural environments of their hometowns and schools, and the relationships they have with

family, peers, community members, and others in their *microsystem*. Identifying the ways in which the processes of racial formation (e.g., racialization, racial projects, racial politics) are manifest within and across these ecological systems can therefore provide insight into how the regional context of the Midwest influences the ways in which Asian American students develop, construct, and make meaning of their racial identities.

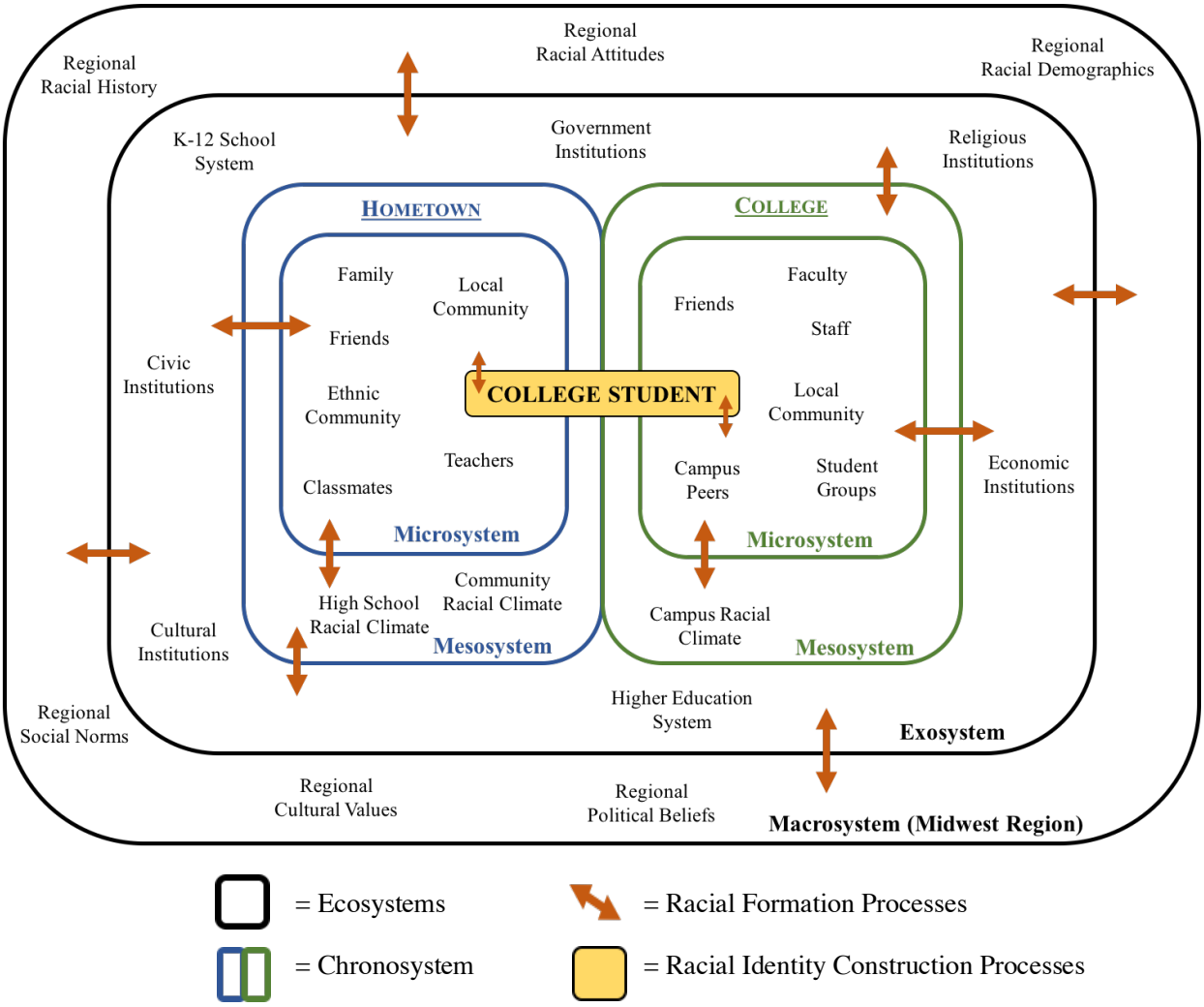
Figure 2.1 offers a visual model that illustrates how I integrate racial formation, racial identity construction, and ecological systems theories to describe how the multiple environmental influences of geographic context interact shape Asian American students' understanding of racial identity. At the center of the model is the student, and surrounding them are the nested ecological systems ranging from the microsystem to the macrosystem. Labeled within each of these ecosystems are people, institutions, social entities, and societal forces that have the potential to exert influences on how the student experiences race and racial identity within the geographic context of the Midwest.

There are two sets of microsystems and mesosystems in the model. One set (colored in blue) depicts the student's hometown environment, while the other (colored in green) depicts the student's college environment. Representing the chronosystem, the two sets together portray the passage of time from when the student graduates high school and enters college. The student remains positioned simultaneously in both sets of ecosystems to illustrate the formative influence of the hometown environment in shaping how the student makes meaning of Asian American identity during their time in college, as well as the student's experience of traversing between their home and college environments.

The arrows that span the different ecosystems and also connect with the individual student represent the processes underlying racial formation. These cross-system interactions are

constantly in flux and exert influences in multiple directions, from the macrosystem of the Midwest region down to the microsystem of the student's immediate environment, and vice versa. As the student makes meaning of the various race-related influences circulating around them, they actively construct an understanding of what it means to be Asian American and begin to develop a sense of racial identity.

Figure 2.1 Geographic Constructions of Racial Identity: An Ecological Framework



Now that I have reviewed the study's theoretical and conceptual foundations regarding space, race, and identity, I move to a discussion on the relationship between geography and race, with emphasis on the Midwest region. This is followed by an overview of the existing research on Asian American college students and contextual influences on their racial identity.

Regions and Regionalism

Popular notions of regional variation are embedded in the American consciousness as anecdotes of distinct cultures of "the South," "the Midwest," "the Northeast," or "the West Coast" (Ayers, Limerick, Nissenbaum, & Onuf, 1996). A distinction exists, however, between regional variations resulting from generalizations and stereotypes fueled by media and popular culture, and those emerging from actual cultural forces and sociopolitical conditions operating in American society. Scholars from multiple disciplines have studied the relationship between geographic spaces and social, political, and cultural phenomena, generating a growing body of research on this topic.

It is important to first briefly discuss the various ways in which research and scholarship have conceptualized the notion of "region." The U.S. Census offers a commonly referenced definition, which divides the country into four major regions: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. These regions are further split into nine divisions, each comprised of a cluster of anywhere from three to eight states (U.S. Census, n.d.). These regional and divisional designations have been utilized in descriptive and comparative analyses of population demographics, the results of which have informed social, economic, and other policies tailored to specific regional and state contexts (Bradshaw, 1988).

Studies in the fields of psychology and political science have investigated the impact that states' and regions' sociopolitical contexts have on their populations. For example, a statistical

comparison of psychological, physical, and social health measures between Census divisions found that the quality of well-being differs across divisions (Plaut, Markus, & Lachman, 2002). Similarly, analyses of data on various social, political, and economic indicators (e.g., income and wealth, educational attainment, employment rates, voting behavior and volunteerism, crime and mortality, physical and emotional health) have uncovered significant variations in state- and regional-level expressions of individualist-collectivist orientation (Vandello & Cohen, 1999), personality traits (Rentfrow, Gosling, & Potter, 2008), and political culture and ideology (Hero & Tolbert, 1996; McCann, 2014). Collectively, these studies lend empirical support for the existence of geographic differences in social and political phenomena.

While using Census-designated regions and divisions has pragmatic benefit, it may not be the only way to measure geographic variation in social and political phenomena. After all, the placement of many states' borders "owe[s] more to geometry than geography" (Paterson, as cited in Bradshaw, 1988), without intentional consideration of the social, cultural, or political values of the populations residing within. In fact, Zelinsky (1973) and Gastil (1975) were among the first to propose theoretical conceptualizations of "cultural regions" independent of state borders. Both scholars grounded their theories in historical ethnic group immigration, settlement, and migration patterns, suggesting that cultural regions emerged over time as different immigrant groups embedded cultural values within the social and political institutions of their local geographic areas. It should be noted, however, that both scholars focused heavily on immigrant populations from Europe; mentions of the influence of Latin American or Asian immigrant communities were absent or limited at best.

Building upon the ideas of Zelinsky (1973) and Gastil (1975), Bradshaw (1988) offered a conceptual framework for what he described as regionalism, or the processes by which

sociohistorical and sociopolitical forces produce regions and regional differences. According to Bradshaw (1998), regional differences in the U.S. have emerged due to geographic variations in physical environment and natural resources, distribution and mobility patterns of the population, and socioeconomic and political contexts. As the nation changes and develops, so do these elements, resulting in a dynamic process of regional formation. Bradshaw (1988) further proposed that "within each region there is an accumulation of relict features from the different regional geographies established over time" (p. 7). Regional differences between the Midwest and the West Coast, for example, result from the differing social, cultural, and political forces that have circulated within each region throughout U.S. history. Individuals residing in these regions are thus immersed in distinctly different social contexts, which suggests they are also likely to have varied experiences with social phenomena. For communities of color, including Asian Americans, this may result in differing experiences with race and racial identity.

Scholars have continued to build upon the premise that historical events have shaped the contemporary contexts of geographic regions, even extending their scope to the continent of North America (e.g., Woodard, 2012). In addition, Zelinsky (2011) has argued that regional variations continue to persist despite technological and globalizing forces that now facilitate the rapid transfer of cultural information and knowledge. Recent social science research provides evidence for this claim. Researchers have generated different typologies of geographic regions through factor and cluster analyses on a range of demographic, social, political, and cultural indicators. From "regional subcultures" (Lieske, 2010) to "community types" (Chinni & Gimpel, 2011) to "psychological regions" (Rentfrow et al., 2013), each of these typologies are structured under the premise that geographic areas are defined by unique sets of social and political values, which inform and shape the collective attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles of their populations.

Given this study's focus on the Midwest, what has the above literature said about this region? Residents in the Midwest have been found to exhibit high levels of self-satisfaction and self-acceptance and lower levels of personal growth (Plaut et al., 2002), which may contribute to the high levels of individualism present in the region (Lieske, 2010; Vandello & Cohen, 1999). Maintaining good social relations, particularly among family, is important (Fu, Plaut, Treadway, & Markus, 2014), as is engagement in civic and community-oriented activities (Rentfrow et al., 2013). Religious participation tends to be high (Lieske, 2010), and the region is relatively homogenous along racial (i.e., predominantly White) and socioeconomic (i.e., largely middle and working class) lines (Rentfrow et al., 2013). In addition, a substantial portion of the region contains populations that skew older in age (Chinni & Gimpel, 2011). Collectively, these findings depict the cultural context of the Midwest as one in which conservative values and social norms tend to be deeply embedded, tradition and convention are emphasized, and maintenance of the status quo is preferred.

Ample scholarly evidence thus supports the idea that geographic regions encompass unique historical, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts. Given that such contexts are also central to the formation of race and ethnicity (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Omi & Winant, 2015), one could argue that geographic context also plays a role in the construction of racial and ethnic identities. The conservative and conventional context of the Midwest referenced above, for example, may have significant implications for Asian American communities residing in the region. The population's rapid growth in recent decades, coupled with their perceived and actual cultural differences, may be met with resistance from the general population in ways similar to

what has been documented with Latinx[2] and other immigrant communities in the Midwest (Fennelly, 2008). In fact, Rentfrow et al. (2008) cited the strength of racial attitudes and the prevalence of racism as examples of phenomena that may be moderated by the contextual influences of geographic region. Collectively, these influences are likely to have an impact on how Asian Americans navigate the social and cultural environment of the Midwest and negotiate their racial identities in the process; one possibility, for example, could be a heightened propensity to minimize racial tension by assimilating to the mainstream. The following section will review research that has explored the relationship between geography and race in more depth.

Geographic Constructions of Race and Racial Identities

Data from the U.S. Census indicate that population distribution by race is not uniform across the country (Peake, 2012). Historical migration and settlement patterns have concentrated different racial and ethnic communities in particular regions of the country, including African Americans in the Deep South and urban centers of the Northeast and Midwest (Frazier, Anderson, & Hinojosa, 2011; Tettey-Fio, 2011), Asian Americans along the West Coast and Hawai‘i (Takaki, 1998; Lee, 2015), Hispanic and Latinx Americans in the Southwest and California (Arreola, 2007), and Native Americans in the Southwest and Oklahoma (Berry, Grossman, & Pawiki, 2007). These distributions are not static, however, as immigration trends and political and economic forces have resulted in recent racial demographic shifts that are regional in nature (Hirschman & Massey, 2008), such as the growing Latinx and Asian American

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[2] Similar to my use of “Filipinx,” I use the term “Latinx” as an alternative to “Latino,” “Latina,” and “Latina/o” as it is inclusive of individuals of all gender identities.

populations in the Midwest and the South (Asian American Center for Advancing Justice [AACAJ], 2012, 2014; Peake, 2012). Even the increasing multiracial population exhibits regional differences in where they are concentrated (Brunsma, 2006; Lopez, 2003).

What impact does the context of geographic region have on these existing and emerging racial populations? In their study of regional cultures, Fu et al. (2014) examined the interplay between a place, its products (i.e., social norms and practices, policies, artifacts), and its people. According to Fu et al. (2014), as people adopt the values and attitudes of a certain place, they create products that reflect those particular characteristics. Regular exposure to and consumption of those products then reinforces these values and attitudes among the population. Over time, this perpetual "culture cycle" creates a stable and durable regional culture.

In a place like the Midwest, for example, values of tradition, conservatism, and individualism are likely embedded within the social institutions and the general ethos of the region. Constant exposure to this culture cycle may thus socialize Asian Americans in the Midwest to either actively adopt or passively internalize these values, which may lead to beliefs around race that align with more traditional or conservative perspectives, such as colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). At the same time, this traditional and conservative nature of the Midwest's regional culture may also marginalize Asian American communities through the culture cycle's perpetuation of xenophobic sentiments and anti-immigration policies (Fennelly, 2008; Fu et al., 2014).

Other scholars have also theorized about this intersection of region, culture, and identity. In their discussion of American regions, Ayers et al. (1996) conceptualized U.S. regions as figurative "borderlands" within and across which racial and ethnic identities have been and continue to be constructed and contested. Berry and Henderson (2002) echoed this idea, stating

that "racial and ethnic identities do not exist in a vacuum; the places and space in which individuals and groups operate influence how race and ethnicity have come to be understood, expressed, and experienced" (p. 3). Geographic spaces are thus dynamic spaces; not only do they actively construct and define race, but they also determine individuals' ability to access certain racial identities. As Root (2003) described, "a geographical region's … history of race and ethnic relations provides a critical format for understanding what identity options are available" (p. 36). In other words, regional context can delimit individuals' perceived options for identifying or expressing themselves racially, with different regional contexts producing different sets of identity options.

Several theoretical models of racial identity have incorporated this idea of identity options into their frameworks. For example, Gallegos and Ferdman (2012) recognized that the different social and political climates across regions of the U.S. are likely to affect how Latinx individuals in these areas perceive, negotiate, and enact their ethnic and racial identities. Nadal (2004) made a similar claim, positing that geographic region may influence Filipinx Americans' propensity to identify with a pan-ethnic Asian American identity beyond just an ethnic Filipinx identity. Lastly, in a revision to the Factor Model of Multiracial Identity (FMMI), Wijeyesinghe (2012) added geographic and regional context to the array of factors that can inform the racial identity of multiracial individuals, an update that supported prior studies on the influence of geographic region on the racial identification of this population (e.g., Brunsma, 2006).

A larger body of qualitative research and scholarship provide further evidence for the relationship between geography and race. These studies have examined the histories and experiences of Asian Americans in the South (Joshi & Desai, 2013; Tang, 2008) and the Upper Midwest (Kim, 2001, 2015; Wilkinson & Jew, 2015), South Asians in the Pacific Northwest

(Bhatt & Iyer, 2014), Latinxs and Asian Americans in Southern California (Cheng, 2013), and Hispanic and Latinx populations in both rural and urban areas of the Midwest and the South (Arreola, 2004; Massey, 2008). Collectively, these works offer narratives of individuals and communities actively negotiating and constructing their racial and ethnic identities within distinct regional contexts.

In one particularly illustrative example, Cheng (2013) explored how the almost exclusively Latinx and Asian American communities of West San Gabriel Valley (West SGV), a middle class suburban area in Southern California, negotiated their experiences of race. Through interviews with community residents, Cheng (2013) discovered that the contextual influences of the local area produced racial experiences for Latinxs and Asian Americans that were regionally specific and distinct from the broad narratives typically understood within national discourses on race. Notably, individuals' expressions of racial identity were not formed in reaction or response to White people, who were largely absent in the local context, but instead constructed in relation to *each other*.

This was evident in the racial dynamics present within West SGV's schools and civic organizations. For example, Latinx students were perceived to be academic underperformers, and thus positioned as the "warped, reverse mirror image[s]" (Cheng, 2013, pp. 77-78) of their Asian American peers, who were considered to be academic high-achievers. Students from both groups were cognizant of these characterizations, which influenced how they made meaning of their racial identities and the ways in which they engaged with each other in the school environment. A similar relational dynamic also existed within the community context. At times, Latinxs in positions of civic influence or political power would adopt stances that ran counter to those of the Asian American community, while positioning themselves as representing the interests of the

general public. Latinxs were thus seen as "mainstream" community members in relation to Asian Americans, who were deemed as marginal outsiders.

Cheng (2013) utilized the term "nonwhite identity" (p. 17) to describe these relational experiences of racial identity among Latinxs and Asian Americans in the West SGV, to both recognize the absence (at least physically) of White people in the community, and to distinguish these experiences from those of the more typical "people of color" identity that tends to develop in opposition to Whiteness. Embedded in this conceptualization is the assertion that regional contexts, including *who* is present within in such contexts, matter in the formation of racial identity. By delimiting her scope of study to a specific place, Cheng (2013) demonstrated that the theoretical principles of racial formation can "jump scale" and become "situated in smaller-scale contexts (neighborhoods, localities, regions) … and intertwined with complex geographies of race" (p. 10). This notion of *regional racial formation* thus has the potential to offer additional insight into the relationships between race, identity, and context, and contribute to a fuller understanding of how Asian Americans experience race and racial identity in different regions of the country. Given this study's focus on the Midwest, I offer a portrait of this geographic region and its historical relationship with race in the next section.

Experiences of Race in the Midwest

According to the U.S. Census (n.d.), the Midwest includes the 12 states of Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Images of this geographic region have captured the imagination of the American psyche, associating the Midwest with the nation's literal and symbolic heartland – a place with a pastoral and pragmatic ethos that represents the country's independent and industrious spirit (Shortridge, 1989). Further conceptualizations of the Midwest as a "land of normalcy and

niceness" (Cayton, 2001) is widespread in literature, art, and film, leading scholars to posit that the region "epitomize[s] the nation" (Shortridge, 1989, p. 9) to the point where "much of what the world thinks of as 'American' is Midwestern" (Gastil, 1975, p. 219). This rendering of the Midwest and its people as generic representations of the U.S. suffers from a critical oversight, however, which is the near erasure of communities of color. In works that purport to offer a historical or cultural portrait of the Midwest (e.g., Madison, 1988; Shortridge, 1989), attention to populations of color is limited at best.

Though a historical overview of race and race relations in the Midwest would be too expansive for this chapter, it is important to recognize the centrality of race in the formation of the region, in order to better understand the historical racial context in which today's Asian Americans are situated. That history begins with the Northwest Ordinance of 1789, which established the territory that is now the eastern half of Midwest, and in doing so, also created significant racial implications for the region (Gray, 2001). First, it paved the way for the nation's westward expansion, which was inextricably linked to the removal of Native American populations and their continual marginalization through the present day. Second, the ordinance's prohibition of slavery within the territory – not for moral reasons, but rather to ensure the exclusion of African Americans – ironically caused the region to eventually become a logical destination for Blacks hoping to escape the South and its legacy of slavery and Jim Crow (Cayton, 2001).

This mass migration of African Americans into the Midwest during Reconstruction and throughout the early and mid-1900s substantially changed the racial dynamics of the region (Wilkerson, 2010). Companies in the burgeoning industrial sector actively recruited large numbers of the Black population to urban areas as a cheap source of labor, inciting racial

resentment and prejudice from the White population over perceived threats in housing and employment (Cayton & Gray, 2001). This relationship between labor and race extended to other communities of color who have since migrated to the Midwest; Latinxs and Asian Americans have been pulled to the region over the years by opportunities in the agriculture, automobile, manufacturing, meatpacking, and service industries (Jew, 2015; Saenz, 2011). Though their experiences are seldom acknowledged in narratives of the Midwest, communities of color have long been part of and central to the history and growth of the region.

Asian Americans in the Midwest. Today, the Midwest population is predominantly White (78%), with African Americans (11%) and Latinxs (7%) comprising the majority of the communities of color in the region; Asian Americans currently make up only 3% of the population (U.S. Census, 2012). These numbers are fluctuating, however, as migration patterns contribute to an increase in the Asian American population across the region; in fact, Southeast Asian and South Asian communities have driven much of the growth in the past decade and a half, a trend likely to continue (AACAJ, 2012; Lai & Arguelles, 2003). Nevertheless, the historically low number of Asian Americans in the Midwest is a commonly cited reason for the consistent lack of scholarly attention to this population's histories and experiences (Sumida, 1998). As Jew (2015) pointedly asks, however, "What is the threshold number that makes a community suddenly worthy to be included in a … historical narrative?" (para. 5).

In fact, the history of Asian Americans in the Midwest extends back over a century. Among the first Asian Americans to the region arrived in its major cities (e.g., Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee) during the 1870s, after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in the Western U.S. put thousands of Chinese laborers out of work. Seeking employment opportunities, these migrants opened up laundries, restaurants, and other services, thereby establishing the first ethnic

enclaves in the Midwest (Jew, 2015; Lee, 2015). The growth of the Asian American population in the following decades was catalyzed by the region's rapid industrial growth in the early 1900s, as Asian Americans migrated to the Midwest to fill labor demands in the automobile and other industries (Jew, 2015). While economic forces played an important role in pulling Asian Americans to the Midwest, government intervention was also responsible for placing Asian Americans in the region. After the closing of Japanese internment camps at the end of World War II, the government intentionally encouraged Japanese Americans to resettle across the country in a deliberate strategy to diffuse their numbers and facilitate their assimilation into the U.S. mainstream; many of these resettlement locations were in the Midwest (Jew, 2003; Lee, 2015). The region once again became a site of Asian American resettlement in the 1970s and 1980s, as the government funneled waves of Southeast Asian refugees to cities across the Upper Midwest (Jew, 2003). Finally, the many colleges and universities located in Midwest have enrolled thousands of Asian American students over the years (Jew, 2003), diversifying not only their campuses but also the region's population.

Clearly, Asian Americans have had a long-standing presence in the Midwest. Yet, a selective attention to history has resulted in a regional racial discourse consistently centered on a Black and White paradigm (Kim, 2015; Lee, 2009). This invisibility of Asian Americans is likely exacerbated by their small numbers and geographic dispersion across the region (AAJAC, 2012), which may present barriers, physically and socially, for Asian Americans to form racial and ethnic communities (Kim, 2001). Lack of critical mass may also encourage greater assimilation or acculturation to the dominant culture and hinder the development of a social or political consciousness of race and racial identity (Lee, 2009), a phenomenon that may be facilitated by the conservative sociopolitical climate of the region (Rentfrow et al., 2013).

These experiences may vary across the Midwestern Asian American population, however. Ethnic identity may have a greater salience for groups with higher populations or who are clustered in ethnic enclaves within the region. Indian Americans are the largest Asian ethnic group in the Midwest, and along with other South Asian groups, comprise the fastest-growing ethnic groups in the region (AACAJ, 2012). The Midwest, particularly the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin, is also home to substantial communities of Hmong and Southeast Asian communities, as well as a concentrated population of transracial adoptees (Lai & Arguelles, 2003; Lee, 2009). Given the particular nature of their surrounding regional environment, how these groups understand or identify with an Asian American racial identity is an interesting question, and one not yet addressed in the literature.

Asian American College Students and Identity

Asian American college students' experiences with race and racial identity have been topics of study for the better part of the last two decades of higher education research. Early research on identity development explored the processes by which students recognize and internalize (or resist and foreclose on) their identities as Asian Americans (Alvarez, 2002) and the ways in which they defined and affiliated with the idea of "Asian American" itself (Kibria, 1999). Scholars have since complicated their approaches to understanding racial identity for this student population by considering the influence of a constellation of factors, including family and home environments (e.g., Maramba, 2008; Chhuon et al., 2010), immigration history (e.g., Accapadi, 2012), gender identity (e.g., Shek & McEwen, 2012), ethnic group affiliation (e.g., Museus et al., 2013), and ethnic student organization membership (e.g., Inkelas, 2004; Rhoads, Lee, & Yamada, 2002). Collectively, these and other these studies have demonstrated that the trajectories of students' racial identity development are affected by the other identities they hold

and the experiences they have within different contexts. The identity development process can be complex for Asian American students.

The role of ethnic identity in how students negotiate an Asian American racial identity illustrates one example of this complexity, and is also an important consideration in the racial identity development for this population. Social convention tends to associate the term with a select set of East Asian ethnic groups (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean), despite the presence of many other Asian ethnic communities in the country (Espiritu, 1992). The reasons for this lie in the history and evolution of "Asian American" as a social and political construct, intricately tied to immigration patterns, Census classification, political advocacy, and identity politics (Espiritu, 1992; Lee, 2015).

These fluid and ambiguous boundaries of what constitutes "Asian American" has affected certain ethnic groups' relationships to the identity label. Southeast Asians (Museus et al., 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007), South Asians (Shankar & Srikanth, 1998; Iyer, 2015), and Filipinxs (Nadal, 2004; Ocampo, 2016), for example, have all experienced the paradox simultaneously asserting and rejecting an Asian American identity, while being simultaneously included and excluded by the larger Asian American community. Furthermore, recent studies have suggested that the distinction between racial identity and ethnic identity may be blurred for Asian American students, and that their understanding and subsequent use of these constructs may be interchangeable and dependent on context (Johnston-Guerrero & Pizzolato, 2016). Racial identity for Asian American students is thus always "in flux" (Wong, 2011), constructed through the constant negotiation of individual, group, and societal influences.

Yet, research on Asian American college students has not adequately addressed this heterogeneity in the population. Research on Asian American student identity development has

traditionally centered the experiences of East Asians (e.g., Alvarez, 2002; Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2002), with only a few representative studies that have examined other ethnic populations, such as Southeast Asians (e.g., Museus et al., 2013) and Filipinxs (e.g., Maramba, 2008; Wong, 2011, 2013). Research on the identity development of multiracial students (e.g., Renn, 2004; Renn & Shang, 2008) and transracial adoptee students (e.g., Hoffman & Peña, 2013) are emerging, though also remain limited. Studies like these are increasingly important for higher education, given the growing and diversifying Asian American population on many campuses.

Role of Geographic Region and Context

Another dimension of identity development in need of additional attention is the influence of environment and context. As Museus (2014) asserted, "It is important to underscore the role of space in Asian American identity development processes" (p. 77). Though his emphasis was specifically on campus spaces, the argument could be extended beyond institutional boundaries to include broader contextual spaces, including those related to geographic location. However, discussions of geographic region and the influence of its social, political, and cultural contexts on racial identity are strikingly absent from the vast majority of research on Asian American students. Geographic location is instead more frequently mentioned in reference to the schools from which student samples were drawn, usually as a general descriptor of an institutional characteristic (e.g., Midwestern university, college in the Southeast) rather than a signifier of larger sociopolitical or sociocultural contexts of the region. Some researchers have acknowledged geographic location as a potential limitation of their studies and an opportunity for future research (e.g., Maramba, 2008; Ocampo, 2013; Ruzicka, 2011), which implicitly suggests that the macrosystem context of geography may be a factor in college

students' experiences of race. However, studies that directly examine this relationship between geography and race have yet to be conducted.

A number of studies have examined the impact of environmental and contextual influences on Asian American students' racial identities, which may be the closest that the existing research literature is able to offer with respect to geographic region and context. For example, Ocampo (2013) explored how the educational contexts of high school and college were differently racialized for Filipinx American students in Southern California, and that these contexts influenced the degree to which the students adopted either an Asian American or a "pan-minority" (e.g., in solidarity with Blacks and Latinxs) racial identity. Similarly, in her study of Indian American college students at the University of Pennsylvania and their experiences of identity and hybridity, Nakiboglu (2005) situated participants' narratives within the family and community contexts of their hometowns, the academic and social contexts of campus, and the sociohistorical context of a post-9/11 society.

While both of these studies focused on students in one specific setting, others adopted a comparative approach with students from different contexts. Two separate studies explored the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem for undergraduate students in geographic locations with distinctly different racial demographics: one study examined African American, Asian American, Latinx, and European American students in the Midwest and in California (Umaña-Taylor & Shin, 2007), and the other focused on Asian American and European American undergraduates in Hawai'i and on the U.S. mainland (Xu, Farver, & Pauker, 2015). Findings from both studies indicated that geographic location moderated the salience and meaning of ethnic identity for all groups of students. Specifically in regards to Asian American students, feeling secure and positive about one's ethnic identity was positively associated with

self-esteem for students in the Midwest compared to California (Umaña-Taylor & Shin, 2007), and students on the U.S. mainland compared to Hawai'i (Xu et al., 2015). As quantitative inquiries, however, these studies were unable to fully account for the environmental processes through which geographic context students' identities, nor the internal processes by which students defined their identities.

Two studies utilizing qualitative approaches offered some insight into these areas. Wong (2011, 2013) interviewed Chinese and Filipinx American college students in Michigan and California to explore how students constructed racial identity. While all students described home, college, and community contexts as influences in how they understood and chose to affiliate with a Chinese/Filipinx American or an Asian American identity, the outcomes of these identity construction processes varied by geographic location. For example, Filipinx students in California demonstrated a stronger political orientation to their identity than their peers in Michigan, owing to the longer history and greater sociopolitical presence of Filipinxs on the West Coast. In fact, the absence of large ethnic communities in Michigan encouraged both Chinese and Filipinx students to unite under the broader pan-ethnic label of "Asian American," whereas exposure and access to populous Chinese and Filipinx communities cultivated a stronger ethnic identity among the students in California. Interactions between students and their broader social contexts were thus pivotal for how they made meaning of identity.

Vue (2013) also examined these larger contextual influences in her exploration of racial identity formation for Hmong American college students attending institutions in Minnesota and California. What distinguished her study from others on college student identities was Vue's (2013) emphasis on how the social and political contexts of the local area and the state uniquely shaped the institutional context (e.g., demographics, curricular and co-curricular resources,

campus culture and climate) for Hmong American students. While the institution in Minnesota was predominantly White, Hmong students represented a substantial percentage of the Asian American student population and were in close proximity to Hmong communities in the local area. In contrast, despite the large Asian American student population and majority-minority status of the institution in California, Hmong students were underrepresented on campus and did not have access to a nearby ethnic community. In each location, interactions between institutional, local, and state environments shaped Hmong students' experiences on campus in particular ways, resulting in distinct and contextually influenced ways of negotiating their racial identities.

While studies such as the ones just described have been conducted with Asian American students attending colleges in the Midwest, there has yet to be research that specifically focuses on this (or any) geographic location as the central subject of inquiry. In other words, little is known about how the Midwest, as a regional context, shapes the experiences of Asian American college students. The closest empirical examinations of this topic may be the studies conducted by Kim (2001, 2015) and Trieu (2016), both of whom interviewed Asian American adults about their perceptions of and affiliations with the Midwest and their understanding of their racial and ethnic identities. The key finding that emerged from both studies was that participants' negotiations and constructions of racial identity were contextually bound within the unique social and cultural dynamics of the Midwest region. Because these studies shared similar focus and findings, I discuss their findings together.

Playing a critical role in the construction of participants' identities in both studies was the size and distribution of the Asian American population in the Midwest. A small percentage of participants in both studies resided in places with a concentrated Asian American population,

which provided them with consistent and direct points of access to racial and ethnic communities, institutions, and resources. Unlike these "everyday ethnics," as Trieu (2016) described them, most participants instead resided in places where Asian Americans were much fewer in number. These small population sizes hindered the development of ethnic enclaves or ethnoburbs (Li, 1999), which meant that a critical mass of racial and ethnic peers was glaringly absent. For these "isolated ethnics" (Trieu, 2016), the points of access that were available for cultivating strong racial or ethnic identities were severely limited. This experience contributed to a sense that having a racial identity was not even a viable option, which led participants in Kim's (2001, 2015) study to question whether their experiences in the Midwest were authentically Asian American. As Kim (2015) noted, the pressure for participants to adopt a "black or white identity rather than an Asian American one … created a sense that their experience – in contrast to the West Coast/East Coast models — was a spatially distinctive one" (para. 48).

The works of Kim (2001, 2015) and Trieu (2016) remain among the only studies that have centered the "broader implications of American regions – as geographical spaces with demographic, cultural, and political implications – in the study of racial and ethnic identity formations" (Kim, 2001, p. 5). However, the transferability of these studies' findings to an Asian American college student population may be limited, or at best, imperfect. Although college students were represented in both studies, participants ranged from 18 to 70 years old; as such, the major findings from these studies represent a spectrum of generational cohorts' perspectives and experiences with race. A study on the relationship between region and race that specifically focuses on the contemporary Asian American college student experience is therefore needed.

This study addresses this gap in the literature and goes beyond a mere replication of Kim's (2001, 2015) and Trieu's (2016) studies. While this study shares a central focus on the

relationship between region and racial identity, the application of an ecological framework offers insight into the ways in which multilayered contexts *within* a geographic region interact to shape formations of Asian American identity how Asian American college students construct and make meaning of such a racial identity. This includes the influence of geographic context on a college's institutional context, a perspective that remains largely understudied in higher education research. Furthermore, this study's specific focus on college students provides additional depth to Kim's (2001, 2015) and Trieu's (2016) findings, as college students represent a unique population with which to understand the processes of identity development. Not only is identity development a salient component of their overall development during college (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016), but the differences between the environment of college and that of their hometowns and where they grew up is likely to bring their formative experiences of race and racial identity into sharper relief – and thus offer greater clarity on the regionally-specific processes of racial formation for this population.

Summary

Drawing from work in multiple disciplines, this chapter provided an overview of research and scholarship regarding geography, race, and racial identity, and in doing so, presented a case for examining the influence of geographic context on how Asian American students in the Midwest experience and make meaning of their racial identity. It is evident from the existing literature (e.g., Moya & Markus, 2010; Omi & Winant, 2015) that conceptions of race and racial identity are not constructed solely by individuals, but are formed through interactions that take place between people and within particular contexts. Although what constitutes "context" has varied in nature and scope within the literature, the implications of defining it in terms of geographic region have yet to be adequately explored for the Asian American population.

This chapter also highlighted the social, cultural, political, and demographic differences that exist across regions of the country and the impact that such regional variations have on the populations that reside within these regions. The Midwest, for example, with its unique racial history, relatively homogeneous racial demographics, and regional culture oriented towards tradition, conservatism, and individualism (Cayton & Gray, 2001; Rentfrow et al., 2013), may represent a distinct geographic context within which to negotiate and construct racial identity. A limited body of research suggests this may be true for the Asian American communities in the region (e.g., Kim, 2001, 2015; Lee, 2009; Wilkinson & Jew, 2015), though additional studies are needed to better explicate this phenomenon.

Lastly, and paralleling recent trends in research on college student identity development (Jones & Abes, 2013), this chapter's review of existing research on Asian American college students indicated a growing recognition of the diversity of experiences among the population and an increased attention to the impact of environments and contexts on students' experiences of identity. This study's focus on Asian American students in the Midwest thus contributes to these emerging areas of inquiry. More significantly, by centering the role of geography and geographic context in how students make meaning of what it means to be "Asian American," this study is among the first within the field of higher education to make the "spatial turn" in examining Asian American college students and their experiences of race and racial identity.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of geographic context in shaping Asian American students' racial identities by specifically examining the experiences of Asian American students at a Midwestern institution. The research question that guided this study was: How do the social, cultural, and political contexts of geographic location influence how Asian American students make meaning of their racial identity? In this chapter, I describe the research design and methodology I utilized for this study. First, I provide a rationale for my choice to conduct a case study, including a description of the unit of analysis and site for the study. I then share my epistemological orientation, as it informed the construction and implementation of my research design. After detailed descriptions of my methods and procedures for data collection and analysis, I share the strategies I used to ensure trustworthiness followed by a discussion of the study's limitations.

Methodological Approach

I utilized a qualitative, single-site case study design for this study. Qualitative approaches are well suited for research questions that seek to "understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Not only do qualitative inquiries consider the processes by which people derive meaning from experiences with particular phenomena, but they also acknowledge the broader contexts in which these phenomena occur (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, higher education scholars have specifically advocated using qualitative approaches to better understand the experiences of college students that are not yet well understood (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014).

According to Yin (2014), a case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a

contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 16). Given that the theoretical foundation for this study posited that the formation of race and racial identity (phenomenon) occurs within the particular social, cultural, and political dynamics of geographic location (context), a case study was suitable for examining the relationship between this phenomenon and its context.

Yin (2014) further described three conditions under which a case study is an appropriate method of choice. These are: (a) having research questions that seek to discern or explain the processes underlying certain phenomena (i.e., "how" or "why" something occurs); (b) when the behaviors or events associated with the phenomenon of interest are beyond the researcher's control; (c) examining the phenomenon of interest within present-day, as opposed to historical, contexts. As an exploration of how Asian American college students construct racial identity within the societal context of the contemporary Midwestern U.S., this study met all three conditions and thus lent itself to a case study approach.

Defining the Case

Because this study's primary focus was on Asian American college students and how they make meaning of race and racial identity, Asian American college students comprised the study's central unit of analysis, or the "case" of the case study. I utilized a set of criteria to bound the case, or delimit its "spatial, temporal, and other concrete boundaries" (Yin, 2014, p. 34), to make it both suitable and manageable for this study. First, the students needed to self-identify as Asian American (as opposed to being categorized as Asian American by the institution or the Census). The evolving definition of the label "Asian American" (Lee, 2015) and the possibility of regional variations in how individuals choose to identify racially (Brunsma, 2006) meant

participants who self-identify as Asian American were likely better able to speak to the study's interest in racial identity. Second, the students must have grown up in states that the Census classifies as part of the Midwest region (U.S. Census, n.d.) since before the age of ten, as this would maximally capture the formative influences of regional context in shaping their racial identity. Third, because this study was also interested in exploring how higher education institutions are influenced by geographic context and the subsequent impact that has on students' racial identity formation, I limited my study to students attending one Midwestern institution (rationale for selection of the site is provided below). Lastly, students must have been enrolled full-time for at least one academic year, to better ensure participants have had time to transition to college and reflect on their experiences with the racial environment on campus.

Site Selection

The site of the study was The Ohio State University (OSU), located in Columbus, Ohio. As the state flagship university, the institution draws a large percentage of its students from Ohio and the surrounding Midwest region. Asian American students comprised just 6% of the approximately 45,000 undergraduates enrolled in the fall of 2015. Though low, this population's numbers have grown steadily over the last several years (and have increased nearly 25% since 2010) after many years of relative stability. Asian Americans also represent 13.7% of the faculty and 6.6% of the staff at OSU, including one full-time student affairs professional dedicated to supporting the Asian American student community and their activities. OSU also offers a range of diversity and race-related resources for the campus community, notably an office for diversity and inclusion, a multicultural center, and various ethnic studies programs, including one in Asian American Studies. In addition, a couple dozen Asian American student organizations exist on campus, providing students with structured opportunities to connect and socialize with like peers.

The presence of these campus resources meant that access to knowledge about race and opportunities to engage in race-related activities were readily available to the Asian American students at OSU. This was likely to be a contrast from their experiences prior to college, given that Asian Americans are only 2.1% of the population in Ohio and just 3.0% of the entire Midwest region (U.S. Census, 2012). Places like these, with low numbers of Asian Americans, represent a particular racial context that can uniquely shape Asian Americans' experiences with race (Kim, 2001, 2015; Lee, 2009; Trieu, 2016). Furthermore, Ohio is frequently considered a "swing state" within political discourse, reflecting a distinct sociopolitical and cultural context within which students are immersed. For these reasons, OSU was as an interesting site within which to "bound" this case study.

Epistemological Orientation

It is important to discuss my epistemological orientation, as it informed the methodological choices I made in designing this study and guided the decisions I made in conducting the research. I subscribe to a constructivist approach, in which knowledge is constructed through the meanings that individuals make of their interactions with others and the world around them. Constructivism recognizes the existence of multiple realities, or that "different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon" (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Under this framework, participants' subjective experiences and researchers' interpretations of those experiences are equally considered; researchers and participants co-construct understandings of reality. A constructivist approach to this particular study meant honoring participants' authority to speak about their experiences of being Asian American in the Midwest, while acknowledging the validity of my researcher lens to synthesize and interpret their narratives.

Data Collection: Participant Sample and Data Sources

According to Charmaz (2006), "*how* you collect data affects *which* phenomena you will see, *how, where,* and *when* you will view them, and *what* sense you will make of them" (p. 15, emphasis in original). Because I was interested in discerning and theorizing about the processes underlying racial identity formation within layered ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), I chose data collection procedures that would allow me to address the nested systems (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem) within which the participants are situated. I collected data through four streams: individual student interviews and a focus group, on-site observations, demographic statistics, and document reviews. Having multiple data sources facilitated both the triangulation of evidence during data analysis and the creation of rich narrative descriptions that are hallmarks of case study research (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). As with many qualitative studies (Merriam, 2009), I collected and analyzed data concurrently, a "linear but iterative process" (Yin, 2014, p. xxii) that is also a central feature of conducting a case study.

Participant Recruitment and Demographics

I utilized purposeful sampling strategies to recruit study participants that could offer information-rich narratives (Patton, 2002) and substantial insight into the experience of being Asian American in the Midwest. I worked closely with the coordinator for Asian American student activities in OSU's multicultural center to publicize my study among the Asian American student leaders and organizations on campus via email and word-of-mouth referrals, and I also distributed recruitment materials to faculty and staff within the Asian American Studies and higher education graduate programs. In addition, I posted recruitment flyers on OSU student organizations' social media pages and enlisted the help of alumni and former staff who were

familiar with the OSU Asian American student community. Finally, I recruited participants in person during my site visit to OSU by talking with Asian American students at the multicultural center and an Asian American student organization meeting that I attended.

Students who were interested in participating in the study completed a participant interest form (Appendix A) that asked them to provide demographic (e.g., ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation) and other information (e.g., hometown, high school, academic major, co-curricular involvement). Based on this collected information, I selectively invited students to participate, intentionally assembling a sample that represented a diversity of backgrounds and experiences. My rationale for doing so was to capture a variety of perspectives and facilitate a richer and more complex understanding of how geographic context affects Asian American students' experiences of race and racial identity.

My final sample consisted of 16 students (see Table 1 for selected participant demographic information most pertinent to the study's findings). Half of the students were juniors, six were seniors or fifth-year students, and two were sophomores. With the exception of one student who was from Michigan, all of the students' hometowns were located in Ohio and all grew up in suburban environments, though one student spent his elementary school years in a rural town in southern Ohio. The ethnic breakdown of the sample included 10 East Asian students (seven Chinese, two Korean, and one Taiwanese), three Southeast Asian students (all Vietnamese), two South Asian (one Indian and one Indian/Pakistani), and one Filipino student. In terms of gender identity, ten students identified as female and six identified as male, and in terms of sexual orientation, five identified as gay or bisexual, one student chose not to disclose, and the remaining 10 identified as heterosexual. Two of the students identified as being from a lower middle class background, while everyone else identified as being from upper middle and

Table 3.1 Participant Demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Hometown	Metro Area	Ethnicity	Gender	Religion	Class Year
Alex Vu	Centreville, OH	Dayton, OH	Vietnamese	Female	None	Junior
Baymax Tran*	Holland, OH	Toledo, OH	Vietnamese	Female	Catholic	Senior
Cassandra Liu*	Cincinnati, OH	Cincinnati, OH	Taiwanese	Female	Christian	Senior
Hannah Lu	Olmsted Falls, OH	Cleveland, OH	Chinese	Female	Agnostic	Junior
Isaac Pang	Cincinnati, OH	Cincinnati, OH	Chinese	Male	Christian	Junior
Jack Smith	Dayton, OH	Dayton, OH	Chinese	Male	Catholic	Junior
John Han*	Proctorville, OH Upper Arlington, OH	Huntington, KY Columbus, OH	Korean	Male	Christian	5th Year
Kevin Wang*	Canton, MI	Ann Arbor, MI	Chinese	Male	None	Senior
Lily Zhang	Dublin, OH	Columbus, OH	Chinese	Female	Christian	Junior
Luna Nguyen	Gahanna, OH	Columbus, OH	Vietnamese	Female	Catholic	Junior
Mary Grace Kim	North Ridgeville, OH	Cleveland, OH	Korean	Female	Christian	Sophomore
Michael Lin*	Westlake, OH	Cleveland, OH	Filipino	Male	Catholic	5th Year
Noor Malik	Gahanna, OH	Columbus, OH	Indian/Pakistani	Female	Muslim	Senior
Paul Liu*	Worthington, OH	Columbus, OH	Chinese	Male	Christian	Sophomore
Rani Patel*	Ottawa Hills, OH	Toledo, OH	Indian	Female	Hindu	Junior
Samantha Kwan*	Westerville, OH	Columbus, OH	Chinese	Female	Christian	Junior

**Focus group participant*

middle class backgrounds.

Multiple faith backgrounds were also represented, including seven Christians, four Catholics, one Muslim, one Hindu, one Agnostic, and one student without a religious affiliation. With regard to academic major, seven were majoring in biological or health sciences, five in business, two in engineering, one in social sciences, and one in the arts. Lastly, while students participated in a wide range of activities on campus, seven were highly involved in Asian American-centered activities (defined as holding a leadership role or attending related programs and events on a regular basis), four were moderately involved, and five had little to no involvement at all.

Student Narratives

Given that students were the central unit of analysis of this study, access to their interpretations of their lived experiences was critical for addressing the study's research questions. My protocol for collecting student narratives was an adaptation of Seidman's (2013) framework for phenomenological interviewing, which is designed to center participants' voices, validate their perspectives, and emphasize the physical and temporal contexts in which their lived experiences occur. Seidman (2013) proposed a three-stage interview process that prompts participants to reflect on (a) their life history to date, (b) the details of their current lived experiences, and (c) the meaning of their lived experiences. Modifying this framework is permissible, provided "a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives" (Seidman, 2013, p. 25). As such, I collapsed the first two stages (e.g., life history and current lived experiences) into a single individual interview, and addressed the third stage (e.g., meaning-making of experiences) in a focus group format.

Individual interviews. I conducted one extended, semi-structured individual interview with each participant over the course of two weeks in early November 2016. All interviews were audio-recorded, and each lasted anywhere between 75 and 90 minutes, which allowed for adequate exploration of student's experiences with race and racial identity prior to and during college. Students were offered a $15 Amazon gift card as an incentive for their participation.

To facilitate conversation during the interview, I asked participants to construct two visuals prior to meeting with me. One was a life history timeline (Goodson & Sikes, 2001) indicating pivotal moments or experiences in their life that contributed to their understanding of race and their racial identity. The other was a mental map (Boschmann & Cubbon, 2014) illustrating the places throughout their lives where they developed their understanding of race and their racial identity, in recognition that people "are just as much spatial as temporal beings" and that spatial perspectives may offer "new possibilities for discovering hidden insights … and modes of understanding" (Soja, 2010, pp. 16-17). Students brought the timeline and mental map to their interview, which served as reference points and sources of potential follow-up prompts. I collected both visuals at the conclusion of the interview, to serve as data sources during the data analysis phase of the study. Detailed descriptions of both the timeline and mental map exercises are included in Appendix B.

Interview questions focused on how students developed awareness of their racial identity, the sources (e.g., the people, places, and events of their microsystems and mesosystems) that have contributed to that awareness, the explicit and implicit messages they have received about race, the feelings they have had regarding their racial identity, and their overall experiences as an Asian American growing up and while in college (see Appendix B for interview protocol). By asking participants to tell their stories through the dimensions of time and space, or "time-

geographic visual narratives" (Kwan & Ding, 2008), I was able to capture both the *developmental* and the *contextual* aspects of participants' racial identity construction processes. After each interview, I wrote up my observations and reflections as memos. This assisted me in capturing emerging thoughts and ideas related to my research questions, identifying points of interest to explore further with subsequent participants, and gauge for saturation, or when participants were no longer offering new information related to the research questions (Creswell, 2012). Intentionally taking the time to memo also prompted me to revisit and revise my assumptions about the regional and institutional contexts regarding race based on new insights I was gaining through the student interviews.

Focus group. After completing the individual interviews, I conducted a focus group in which eight of the participants collectively reflected on their experiences with race and racial identity through the lens of the social, cultural, and political contexts of the geographic region. I chose to utilize a focus group for this phase of phenomenological interviewing as the format was better suited to capture insights into macrosystem influences on students' experiences with race. For reasons of convenience, invitations were extended to all 16 participants, with those interested and available during a designated day and time welcome to participate. Students were offered a $15 Amazon gift card as an incentive for their participation.

The eight students who participated in the focus group (as indicated in Table 1) comprised a fairly representative cross-section of the full participant sample, from gender identity and ethnic background to hometown location and level of involvement in Asian American activities on campus. The focus group lasted 90 minutes and was audio-recorded. The session began with an interactive mapping activity modeled after the "sketch map" approach, which Boschmann and Cubbon (2014) described as "cartographic representations of individual

or group spatial experiences, commonly produced by placing locational markings onto geographically referenced base maps" (p. 237). This activity asked the students, as a group, to visually depict the social, cultural, and political contexts of Ohio and surrounding states on a map of the region. This map then served as a reference for a set of questions prompting students to reflect upon and share their experiences with race and racial identity within these contexts. In addition, I leveraged the opportunity offered by the focus group to explore a number of topics that emerged from the individual interviews. By having students hear and respond to each other's stories, I was able to gain deeper insight into their perspectives on race and the racial dynamics of Ohio and the surrounding region. (See Appendix C for the focus group protocol and description of the sketch map exercise).

Observations

Experiences with race and racial identity often occur through interpersonal interactions and within environmental contexts (Renn, 2010), which may be difficult to fully capture through participants' verbal narratives. As such, I also conducted non-participant observations on and around OSU's campus to gain a "firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest … in the setting where [it] naturally occurs" (Merriam, 2009, p. 117) and gather information on how race and racial identity are discussed or expressed in students' mesosystem- and exosystem-level contexts.

On campus, I spent time in the multicultural center, the student union, and the library, as these were places where participants mentioned Asian American students tended to congregate. I also walked around campus between interviews, intentionally placing myself in areas of high student traffic such as The Oval, a central quadrangle through which students traverse between classes, and the main residential areas where the undergraduate residence and dining halls are

located. During these observations, I tracked the racial composition of the students present and the nature of any cross-racial interactions taking place, particularly those involving Asian American students. I also noted any images of OSU students and snapshots of campus life on murals, flyers, or other visual displays and the degree to which they included Asian American students and other students of color. In addition, I attended two Asian American student-led programs to gain insight into the social dynamic among Asian American students at OSU.

During the evenings and weekends of my site visit, I explored places adjacent to campus where OSU students tend to hang out as well as several neighborhoods within Columbus to get a sense of the social and cultural environment of the local area. I also took advantage of a home football game taking place while I was in town and walked around the football stadium prior to the game to observe the crowds. Given that OSU's football program boasts a large and fervent fan base, from current students to alumni and residents across Ohio, immersing myself within the tailgating parties and pre-game festivities provided me additional insight into the social and cultural context of the region. I took detailed field notes and drafted memos for all observations, which supplemented and provided additional context for the data I collected from my participants' narratives and other sources.

Demographic Statistics and Maps

To gain an understanding of the demographic context of participants' ecological systems, I relied on demographic data from a number of sources. First, I utilized the online data visualization tools offered by Social Explorer (http://www.socialexplorer.com), Policy Map (http://www.policymap.com), and the American Values Atlas (http://ava.publicreligion.org) to generate a set of maps illustrating the geographic distribution of race, ethnicity, income, sexual orientation, religion, and political affiliation within Ohio and the surrounding region. The data

sources used to create these maps were available through the websites listed above, and included the most recent data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey, the Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, the U.S. Religion Census, and the Public Religion Research Institute's American Values Survey. (See Appendix D for a list of maps created.) Collectively, these maps illuminated the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which the study's participants are immersed. Furthermore, by comparing these demographic maps with the mental and sketch maps created by participants during my site visit, I was able to gain additional insight into how these contexts may influence participants' experiences with race.

I also collected data on race, ethnicity, income, educational attainment, and immigrant status for participants' hometown communities, as well as data on race and ethnicity for the student body of participants' high schools, to provide a richer context for students' experiences growing up. The sources for these data were the U.S. Census American Community Survey, the Ohio Department of Education, and the National Center for Education Statistics. In addition, data gathered from OSU's institutional research office on the race, ethnicity, and state residency of the undergraduate student body allowed me to better understand the social context of students' college environment.

Document Review

Documents can be valuable sources of information and thus are important to include in the data collection for case study research (Yin, 2014). The types of documents that I reviewed for this study included websites, news articles, and research reports, with documents specifically about Asian American- and race-related topics of particular interest. Collectively, the evidence acquired through this document review facilitated a holistic and comprehensive understanding of how multiple ecological systems exert influence on participants' experiences with race and racial

identity.

The primary institutional documents I reviewed were the websites, social media pages, and print materials produced by the Multicultural Center, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and a number of Asian American student organizations, as well as race-related news articles that have been published in OSU's student newspaper within the past five years. In addition, I searched the archives of the Columbus Dispatch (the local mainstream newspaper) and the Columbus Underground (the local alternative newspaper) for race-related news articles published within the last three years.

Due to constraints of time and resources, I did not conduct visits to locations beyond OSU and its surroundings in the city of Columbus. As such, I was intentional in seeking out documents that offered insight into the environmental contexts of participants' hometowns and the surrounding geographic region. In addition to the websites of participants' hometowns and high schools, I reviewed briefs and reports published by nonprofit, government, and research organizations on current social, cultural, and political issues affecting Ohio and the Midwest region. Lastly, I created a Google Alert to notify me of news articles containing the terms "Ohio" and "Asian American," "Ohio" and "racial," "Midwest" and "Asian American," or "Midwest" and "racial" as soon as they were published. While not a substitute for direct observations, the data from these documents assisted me in capturing a broad snapshot of the social, cultural, and political contexts in which the study's participants and OSU are immersed, thereby contributing to the rigor of this study. (See Appendix E for a list of documents reviewed.)

Data Analysis: Grounded Theory & Situational Analysis

Case study research does not come with prescribed data analysis methods (Merriam, 2009), providing the researcher with the flexibility to select methods best suited to the study's

purpose and design. Given that little is currently known about the processes through which geographic context affects the formation of college students' racial identities, I adopted grounded theory approaches for my data analysis. Grounded theory posits that explanations of phenomena are generated from constantly comparing multiple points of data in order to identify emergent concepts and themes (Charmaz, 2006). Such inductive approaches are not only ideal for exploring topics that are not yet well understood but are also among the recommended strategies for analyzing the volume and variety of data that are typical in case study research (Yin, 2014). Following Charmaz's (2006) assertion that "grounded theory methods [are] a set of principles and practices … [with] flexible guidelines, not methodological rules, recipes and requirements" (p. 9), my data analysis process combined the grounded theory methods of constant comparative coding (Charmaz, 2006) and situational analysis (Clarke, 2005).

Advocating a constructivist approach to grounded theory, which acknowledges the existence of multiple perspectives situated within broader contexts and situations, Charmaz (2006) proposed a constant comparative approach to coding that involves multiple, iterative phases. The first phase is initial coding, in which segments of data are each assigned a short, descriptive code. The second phase is focused coding, which uses the initial codes to compare and analyze data across all data sources, thereby generating a second set of codes, or categories, that are more focused and conceptual in nature. The third and final phase is theoretical coding, which establishes connections between the categories that emerged during the focused coding phase. Below, I detail the steps I took in each of these phases.

In my initial coding phase, I employed three different coding methods: provisional coding, in vivo coding, and process coding. The use of multiple and simultaneous coding methods, a strategy that Saldaña (2015) calls eclectic coding, is both appropriate and

recommended for "studies with a wide variety of data forms … [and] when a variety of processes or phenomena are to be discerned" (p. 213). For my first coding method, provisional coding, I utilized a set of *a priori* codes that I generated before beginning data analysis (Saldaña, 2015). These *a priori* codes were based off my research questions and theoretical framework, and included the ecosystems of Bronfenbrenner's model (e.g., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem), the processes of racial formation (e.g., racialization, racial projects, racial politics), and the contextual dimensions of interest to this study (e.g., social, cultural, and political context). I coded the individual interview and focus group transcripts, the timelines and mental maps created by the participants, the field notes from my site observations, and the documents I collected using provisional coding.

I then coded the interview transcripts a second time utilizing both in vivo coding and process coding. In vivo coding uses participants' own words and phrases to code segments of the data. This method is not only "appropriate for … studies that prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 105) but is easily compatible with other coding strategies. I thus chose to also employ process coding, which uses gerunds to describe "actions intertwined with the dynamics of time, such as those things that emerge, change, occur in particular sequences" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 111). Utilizing this coding method allowed me to capture the processes underlying participants' racial identity construction.

In the focused coding phase, I took the master list of in vivo and process codes and grouped those that referenced similar ideas into conceptual clusters. I then identified those clusters that contained a larger number of codes, captured the experiences of multiple participants, or directly addressed my research questions, and applied descriptive labels to them to generate a set of second-level codes. Next, I reviewed the transcript, field note, and document

excerpts that I had previously coded with provisional codes and coded them again using the list of second-level codes. Performing this additional round of coding on these excerpts ensured I was gleaning data and insights from those sources that otherwise may have remained hidden, as *a priori* codes (which I used for the provisional coding phase) are not intended to identify emergent themes or patterns.

At this point, having thoroughly coded all my textual data, I was ready to move into the theoretical coding phase. To facilitate this process, I drew upon the methods of situational analysis (Clarke, 2005). A postmodern take on grounded theory, situational analysis rests on the constructivist assumption that knowledge is situated within particular situational contexts involving interactions between both human (e.g., people, communities, organizations, institutions) and nonhuman (e.g., objects, concepts, issues, discourses) elements (Clarke, 2005). Conducting a situational analysis involves using the codes and categories derived from the constant comparative coding process to construct a set of three diagrams, or visual maps. These visual maps not only help organize the large volume of data that qualitative studies tend to generate, but they also serve as analytical tools for discerning latent patterns, connections, and relationships among the data. As such, it was an appropriate method for me to analyze the multi-layered, contextual processes of racial identity formation for the participants in this study and discover potential themes that may otherwise remain hidden.

The first visual map I created was a *situational map*, which laid out the human actors (e.g., individuals, groups, communities) and nonhuman elements (e.g., social, cultural, economic, political, temporal, and spatial contexts) that contributed to participants' understanding of race and racial identity. The second map was a *social worlds/arenas map*, which illustrated the multiple social spheres (e.g., family, friends, ethnic community, religious community, student

organizations) within which participants were situated in their hometowns and in college, and which exerted direct and indirect influences on their racial identity. The third map was a *positional map*, which identified the explicit and implicit discourses related to Asian American identity (e.g., being Asian American means being an outsider, being Asian American is valuable and important) that were embedded within students' narratives. (See Appendix F for the three visual maps I generated through the analysis.) Together, these three maps assisted me in identifying how the multiple, layered contexts in students' lives interacted to shape their experiences with race, and allowed me to generate a set of theoretical propositions describing the processes underlying Asian American college students' racial identity formation within geographic context.

Trustworthiness

A critical feature of qualitative research is assurance of trustworthiness, or the degree to which a study's findings are of sufficient quality to be deemed rigorous (Merriam, 2009). Strategies to strengthen the trustworthiness of a study typically addresses two aspects of the research process: inquiry competence, or the technical strength of research design and data analysis, and relational competence, or the adequacy of attention paid to the positionality of the researcher and the relationships between researcher and participants (Jones et al., 2014). In this section, I describe the strategies I employed in each area.

First, I made use of data triangulation, an audit trail, member checking, and peer reviews (Merriam, 2009) to ensure inquiry competence. The decision to collect multiple streams of data for this study was to collect sufficient evidence to perform data triangulation, or the convergence of evidence from multiple data sources (Stake, 1995). This enabled the rich, thick descriptions of phenomena that are characteristic of case study research (Yin, 2014). To manage the large

volume of data generated by this study, I utilized Dedoose, an online qualitative data analysis application, and Scrivener, a writing application and project management tool, to track and organize my documents, transcripts, field notes, memos, data files, maps, and other materials. I also maintained an audit trail, or a written account of the thoughts and questions that informed my decisions throughout the data collection and analysis process, and to which others can refer to follow and understand my study procedures. Lastly, I solicited comments and feedback on my preliminary findings through member checks with study participants and peer review with Asian American colleagues who grew up or are currently working at higher education institutions in the Midwest.

With regard to relational competence, I diligently engaged in ongoing reflection of my identity as a Taiwanese American, gay, upper middle class, able-bodied, cisgender man from the Northeastern U.S., as well as my motivations and intentions for conducting a study on geographic context and racial identity. This "autobiographical rendering" (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002, p. 455) allowed me to discern the influences that my background and experiences may exert on the research process. Similarly, I exercised reflexivity throughout the data collection process (Jones et al., 2014). This involved consideration of how my social identities (including that of a researcher) may have affected how participants related to me, and how my assumptions and views of the world may have influenced how I interacted with participants. As an example, my insider perspective as an Asian American may have facilitated rapport with participants, yet my outsider status as someone who did not grow up or attend college in the Midwest may have resulted in a disconnect. In addition, my personal experience of developing an Asian American racial identity while growing up, living in, and migrating across geographic contexts informed the lens I brought to this study. As these perspectives likely influenced how I conducted and

interpreted my research, it was important that I continually reflected upon and was mindful of my positionality throughout the research process. This helped to minimize bias and ground my analyses and interpretations in the data as much as possible, contributing to a more robust study.

Limitations

As with all research endeavors, limitations to this study exist. First, this study was constrained by practical limitations of time and resources, a common challenge of case study research (Yin, 2014). Most significant for this study is that I was unable to visit participants' hometowns and conduct first-hand observations of the environments in which they grew up. My understanding of these places thus relied heavily on participants' narratives and any relevant documents I was able to acquire.

In addition, because participants have resided in the same geographic region for most if not all of their lives, the extent to which they were able to articulate the contextual influences that the region has exerted on them may have been limited, as being constantly immersed in a particular context may render certain aspects of that environment invisible or imperceptible. While I incorporated questions and activities into my interview and focus group protocols that encouraged participants to reflect critically on the idea of regional context, I acknowledge that gaps in students' awareness may still exist.

Second, the nature of participant recruitment was such that only students who self-identified as Asian American and thus already possessed a degree of affiliation with the term "Asian American" were likely to participate. While this provided me with data-rich cases for the study, it also prevented me from capturing the experiences of Asian American students who may not have a strong connection to the "Asian American" label or identity. Their perspectives would have supplemented those of the students who did participate in the study, thus providing a more

holistic understanding of the Midwestern Asian American experience. Future studies should consider strategies for gathering the perspectives of these students.

Third, although the participant sample was fairly diverse with regard to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religious background, a couple exceptions do exist. For one, the absence of students who identified as multiracial is worth noting, given the relatively high and rapidly growing multiracial Asian American population in the Midwest (AAJAC, 2012; U.S. Census, 2012). In addition, despite Indian Americans comprising the largest Asian ethnic group in the Midwest in general (AAJAC, 2012) and in Ohio specifically (U.S. Census, 2012), they are underrepresented in my sample as only two of the 16 students identified as Indian American. Furthermore, nearly all of the students hailed from middle to upper middle class suburban neighborhoods that are located in close proximity to metropolitan areas. This, combined with the fact that all students were accepted by and are currently attending a selective flagship state university, suggests that the study's findings likely represent the experiences of Asian American students from a particular social class status. As such, any conclusions drawn from the findings should be mindful of this limitation.

Last, as a single-site case study, the findings are not intended to prescribe how the Midwest region shapes racial identity for all Asian American students. Instead, they serve as rich, illustrative descriptions of how one *particular* group of Asian American students experience race and racial identity within one *particular* geographic area of the Midwest. While this specificity of scale does not allow for generalizability (nor is that the purpose of qualitative research; see Merriam, 2009), the depth of analysis can offer insight into the role that geographic context can have on the racial identity formation of Asian American students. In other words, while the empirical findings of this study may stem from a specific location, the theoretical

assertion that geography can shape experiences of race and racial identity can be applied anywhere.

Summary

Through a qualitative case study of Asian American students who grew up and are currently attending a higher education institution in the Midwest, I explored how the social, cultural, and political contexts of geographic location influence how students make meaning of their racial identity. Limiting my focus to a single site allowed me to examine how these geographic contexts shape how a higher education institution engages with race and race-related issues, and the resulting impact on its students' experiences. Informed by a constructivist approach, I collected data through interviews and a focus group with students, on-site observations, demographic statistics and maps, and document reviews, and analyzed the data using methods drawn from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and situational analysis (Clarke, 2005).

The multiple methods utilized in this research design, along with strategies to ensure its rigor and trustworthiness, allowed me to address the study's research question. The next two chapters will describe the findings of my analysis. Chapter 4 focuses on the study participants' experiences with race and racial identity prior to college and describes the ways in which students' hometown and high school environments shaped their understandings of Asian American identity. Chapter 5 centers on students' experiences at OSU and explores the ways in which their prior experiences with race and racial identity influenced how they navigated the racial environment of campus, as well as the resulting impact of this new context on how they construct what it means to be Asian American.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRE-COLLEGE EXPERIENCES

This first chapter of findings describes students' experiences with race and racial identity in their home contexts, represented by the blue-colored ecosystems in the visual model depicted in Figure 2.1. To situate these pre-college narratives within the geographic context of Ohio and the Midwest, I first offer an overview of the area's social, cultural, and political dynamics, as shaped by the larger macro- and exosystem forces of the region. I follow this with a discussion of the experience of students' parents as they migrated to and settled in the Midwest, as an illustrative example of exosystem influences on students' experiences growing up. I then delve into students' experiences within their hometowns and high schools, from interactions with family, peers, and others in their microsystem to the explicit and implicit messages about race and racial identity circulating within their mesosystem. Lastly, I conclude this chapter by describing how students made meaning of their experiences and the resulting ways in which they understood what it meant to be Asian American. In doing so, I begin to illustrate how the processes of racial formation and racial identity construction operate in students' lives. The following chapter will then continue this examination by exploring the impact of students' college experiences on their racial identities.

A Portrait of Ohio and the Midwest

In this section, I describe how the social, cultural, and political contexts of Ohio and the Midwest emerge from interactions between macrosystem- and exosystem-level influences. Drawing upon the work of political scientists Coffey, Green, Cohen, and Brooks (2011) and Kondik (2016), I conceptualize social context as the demographics of the population within a particular area, cultural context as the values held by the population, and political context as the beliefs and attitudes that the population collectively endorse. While largely grounded in students'

perceptions and experiences of the region, the descriptions in this section also incorporate relevant demographic data, news articles and websites to provide additional depth and detail. Doing so allows me to construct a richer portrait of the environmental contexts in which the students were immersed for most of their lives.

Social Context: "Who is Around?"

Social context describes the demographics of the people within a particular area, and answers the question, "Who is around?" Overall, students' impressions of Ohio were that it was "a White state" with "Midwest demographics," meaning it was "just a lot of White people" in "a sea of White." This was not far from their reality, however, as all of the students hailed from upper middle class and racially homogeneous hometowns with populations ranging from 80% to 95% White. The communities of color that were present tended to be African American and Black or Asian American, though the percentages of both racial groups remained in the single digits across nearly all locations. Few students recalled seeing Latinx or Hispanic people in their home or school environments, an observation that is largely supported by data from the U.S. Census.

U.S. Census data also indicated that almost all of the students were from towns where Asian Americans comprised less than 10% of the population, with about half of them growing up in places where Asian Americans numbered less than 5% of the population. It was therefore not often that students saw other people who looked like them. Paul, for example, stated how he "was constantly the only Asian person," while Isaac commented: "I rarely ever noticed another Asian person in a grocery store when I'd go shopping with my family." In contrast, Kevin and Lily were each from towns that boasted an Asian American population of around 15%, which can be considered substantially high given that only 2% of Ohio and 3% of the Midwest are

Asian American (U.S. Census, 2012).

Lily grew up in Dublin, a town just outside of Columbus known to be a "very highly Asian populated" suburb. Lily was frequently around other Asian Americans while growing up, and recognized that her experience was unique for Asian Americans in the region:

> I think my experience is a lot different from other people's that you hear about. They talk about growing up as the only Asian people in their high school and just being ostracized for that. I didn't have that … It was easier [for me] because I had a community of people.

Dublin is among just a few towns in Ohio where Asian Americans are concentrated in relatively higher numbers. Asian American communities have been largely drawn to these locations due to economic factors, illustrating the influence of exosystem factors in shaping the racial context of the region. As an example, the opening of a Honda plant in Marysville, Ohio during the 1970s contributed to the emergence of a Japanese American community in central Ohio, of which Dublin's Asian American community today is a direct outcome (Ganzer, 2016). The large majority of Asian Americans in Ohio, however, reside in places where the percentage of Asian Americans remain in the single digits.

An additional consideration regarding the social context of the Midwest is the ethnic breakdown of the Asian American population. Although Indian and Chinese communities are the two most populous Asian ethnic groups in both Ohio and the Midwest in general, the Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese communities also have a presence in the region (U.S. Census, 2015). The distribution of these ethnic groups varies by location, however, resulting in students having different degrees of access to a local ethnic community depending on where they grew up.

For example, although 8% of Baymax's hometown was Asian American, the population

was largely comprised of Chinese and Filipino communities, with few other Vietnamese families with whom Baymax and her family could connect. Similarly, both Mary Grace and Michael grew up in towns where their ethnic groups (Korean and Filipino, respectively) constituted a mere 0.1% of the population, resulting in their experiencing extreme ethnic isolation. In some places, the presence of a local ethnic organization such as a Chinese or Korean church brought together ethnic communities from surrounding towns on a periodic basis, providing some students an occasional respite from this isolation. I discuss the role of these ethnic spaces in detail later in this chapter, but it is important to mention that not all students had convenient access to such spaces. In fact, about two-thirds of the students I interviewed did not have an ethnic organization that was local to their hometowns.

I conclude this section on social context with an excerpt from the focus group I conducted, during which I asked the students to identify on a map of the Midwest the areas where they would feel comfortable visiting or traveling through. Students responded by sharing experiences from road trips they had taken across Ohio and other Midwestern states:

John: From my experience, there's towns that you wouldn't know the name of … that are just a collection of five buildings and an intersection … [and] are significantly way more conservative.

Rani: Yeah, the ones with the five buildings, we used to drive through them to get to whatever city we're going to. Once, we had to stop for gas and I got so uncomfortable and I was like, "We got to go, right now."

Michael: Yeah, because when you stop and people – maybe I'm being oversensitive, but I swear there's this look where they're like, "Oh my god, an Asian," like they've never seen one, they're so curious.

Students' anticipated level of comfort in a place was directly related to the perceived presence of communities of color. In other words, the fewer people of color students perceived to be in a particular location, the less comfortable they believed they would feel there. In a way, social context thus captures more than just the type of people whom students are around, but also how these groups of people make students feel within their environments.

Cultural Context: "What Do People Value?"

Cultural context refers to the values held by the people within a particular area, and answers the question, "What do people value?" Insight into the specific cultural context of Ohio can be found in a recent State of the State address by Governor John Kasich. Narratives of the frontier spirit, family, community, and religion recur throughout the speech ("2016 State of the State Transcript," 2016), suggesting their importance and resonance among the state's residents. The following lines, for example, effectively weave together these narratives:

> The spirit of Ohio, just like the spirit of America, is in our families, in our neighborhoods and in our communities. You see, folks, it's where we live. It's where we work, where we go to school or teach, or where we worship, where we look after our neighbors and care for others around us … [T]he spirit of our state is in the people that sit next to us and the people we know at home. (paras. 55-57)

Not only does this excerpt serve as a snapshot of Ohio's cultural context, but as I discuss in this section, the ideas it presents also align with how the students described the cultural context of where they grew up.

In describing their hometown environments, students used terms like "small town," "cornfields," "White," and "conservative" – all characteristics reminiscent of what one student, Jack, deemed the "quintessential American experience." The picture that the students collectively

portrayed of their suburban hometowns was of places that valued family, community, comfort, and security - not unlike the narrative put forth by Governor Kasich in his address. In essence, both he and the students were evoking a "spatial imaginary" (Lipsitz, 2011) in which suburban life is the embodiment of what U.S. society has deemed the American Dream: the opportunity to earn a decent living, own a home, raise a family, and enjoy the benefits and privileges of a middle class lifestyle (Clark, 2003).

However, the American Dream and its "[suburban] lifestyle of white picket fences, two-car garages, [and] manicured lawns" (Pido, 2012, p. 77) is also rooted in a history of Whiteness and racial privilege, making it an ostensibly White construct (Lipsitz, 2011). For the students in the study, this White suburban imaginary was not just an abstract concept, but close to their reality. The websites of students' hometowns lent support this claim, with language describing these towns as ideal places to settle down, raise a family, and enjoy a positive quality of life. North Ridgeville, for example, billed itself as "a typical Middle American community with a 'hometown' feel, known for its families & churches" (City of North Ridgeville, n.d.), while the mayor of Olmsted Falls characterized the town as "a slice of Americana … [where] residents enjoy the safety and familiarity of small town values" (Olmsted Falls, n.d.). Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of students mentioned that their parents were drawn to and eventually chose their hometowns because of these purported qualities.

The notion of a White suburban imaginary was also conveyed through visual means. Many of the town websites displayed images of family homes with landscaped lawns, main streets of small shops and cafes, and local neighborhood schools and parks. Most striking, however, were the galleries of photos and videos featuring town officials and community residents, nearly all of whom I perceived to be White. People of color were even conspicuously

absent across much of the City of Dublin's website (http://dublinohiousa.gov), despite their comprising 20% of the town's population.

Students also described the dynamic of their hometowns as one in which social harmony was valued, in that everyone was nice, knew each other, and got along well. John speculated this may be due to the homogenous racial demographics of the region, wherein differences are minimized in favor of commonalities and shared experiences: "It's so much nicer here. I think a lot of Ohioan people are like that … I guess because there's so many people of the same demographic, it's like there's less conflict." This notion that everyone was nice and got along did not always extend to students and their families, however. In a particularly illustrative example, Paul described feeling marginalized and like an outsider while growing up in his hometown, despite the ironically welcoming nature of the town's slogan: "Worthington: The City That Says 'Hi Neighbor!'" Similarly, Hannah described growing up in an "environment that is so White and so small … [that] everyone knows each other, except for [me and my family]. We didn't know anyone, and nobody really knew us." While students were physically present within their hometown communities, they were not completely part of them.

Growing up Asian American in these environments resulted in students feeling both marginal in and disconnected from their supposedly comfortable and safe suburban communities. Isaac captured this experience best when describing the Cincinnati suburb where he grew up:

> It gives you a very high sense of security because everything seems fine. Nothing ever seems to be off … You're just in a Midwest suburban neighborhood and every day you watch people take a walk after dinner or go play in the park … [It's] almost perfect, utopian, but then as a person of a different skin color you don't feel like you completely belong there as well. There's still this almost subconscious feeling that I'm a little

different.

The distinction that Isaac made between a sense of security and a sense of belonging was subtle, yet it spoke to the experience of many other students in the study, who commented on feeling as though they were never fully integrated into their hometown environments. Isaac's quote also illustrates well how students' experiences with race (i.e., "I have a different skin color than others in this Midwest suburban neighborhood") subsequently shapes how they make meaning of their Asian American identity (i.e., "As an Asian American, I do not completely belong in this neighborhood").

Political Context: "What Do People Believe In?"

Political context encompasses the beliefs and attitudes that are collectively held by the people within a particular area, and answers the question, "What do people believe in?" The positions taken by Ohio's population on key social issues can provide insight into the political context in which students are immersed. For example, a poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI, 2014) found that Ohio residents are less likely than the U.S. general population to believe that immigrants help strengthen the country, and instead are more likely to see them as burdens. Such political beliefs are likely to foster environments in which negative sentiments towards immigrants are present, as evident from past attempts to introduce anti-immigration legislation within the state of Ohio (Cardenas & Kelley, 2012).

Another component of understanding the political context of a region is political ideology, or the degree to which people endorse conservative or liberal views. All of the students perceived Ohio and the Midwest as generally conservative areas, particularly in what they deemed the "rural" and "farmland" areas outside of major urban metropolitan areas. For example, when I asked the students in the focus group to identify conservative places on a map

of the Midwest, John remarked, “I think it would be easier if you marked the places that were liberal.” This elicited much laughter from the group, indicating that places they perceived to be liberal were few and far between within the geographic region.

Several additional factors contributed to a place feeling conservative or liberal to students. Some students, like Alex, described it as a feeling that stemmed from the comments people around them would make: “I just sort of knew the general ideals [people had] towards things because it was obvious, based on what other students or teachers would say.” Hannah offered a similar example regarding one of her high school teachers: “Everyone would complain about her, and the reason they would complain about her was, "She's too liberal." So that's how I knew they were conservative, because why else would you complain about that?”

Other students would rely on demographic characteristics such as race, income, and religion to make assessments of political ideology. For many students, being White, affluent, or Christian were common indicators of conservatism. In describing her high school environment, Hannah said, “This might be kind of stereotypical, but a lot of people were Christian [and] Christians usually identify as more conservative, especially White Christians” and that when “getting in arguments about whether being gay is okay or not, they would always reference the Bible.” Cassandra also discussed the relationship between Christianity and conservatism, referencing observations of her own church community:

> Through my parents and a lot of other people I grew up with in the Chinese church, I think there has always been a connection between conservatism and what it means to be a Christian … I’ve always seen my parents vote Republican, thinking that this is what God wants them to do.

Data on religion and politics within the state of Ohio support what Hannah and Cassandra

expressed, with the Pew Research Center's recent ranking of Ohio as the 17th most religious state in the country (Lipka & Wormald, 2016) and PRRI's (2014) finding that 38% of the state's Republicans are White Evangelical Protestants as examples.

Furthermore, students' perceptions of political ideology largely align with the actual composition of Ohio's electorate. Maps generated by Social Explorer of the last three presidential election results, for example, indicate that conservative voters are indeed prevalent outside the state's urban centers ("Election Competitiveness: U.S. Presidential Elections 2016," "Election Competitiveness: U.S. Presidential Elections 2012," "Election Competitiveness: U.S. Presidential Elections 2008," n.d.). Furthermore, statistics from a 2014 PRRI survey indicate that a large percentage of Ohio's electorate (43%) identify as conservative, with 34% identifying as moderate, and 19% as liberal. This breakdown parallels that of the U.S. population as a whole, a pattern that has remained consistent for decades and has contributed to Ohio's perennial status as a highly contested swing or battleground state during election years (Coffey et al., 2011; Kondik, 2016).

In fact, I happened to conduct this study during the peak and aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, which provided me a wealth of news commentary and analyses of Ohio's political landscape and insights into the macrosystem and exosystem influences of the region. While an in-depth review of these sources is beyond the scope of this chapter, I offer some highlights as a general portrayal of the political context within which students are immersed.

First, the economic challenges that have hit Ohio over the past few decades have generated feelings of frustration among the working class, particularly within the manufacturing sectors in and around the state's Rust Belt cities and the agricultural and coal mining industries of the state's rural and Appalachian regions (Horn & Fugelberg, 2016; Tavernise, 2016). Second,

some of these feelings acquired racist and nationalist undertones as the largely White working class projected their feelings of resentment onto Black, Latinx, and immigrant communities for being perceived as competition for jobs and other economic opportunities (Levy, 2016). As such, the campaign rhetoric of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, who political analyst Kyle Kondik called the "candidate of white, working-class solidarity, or you can even say white nationalism" (Gomez & Exner, 2016, para. 9), resonated strongly with this segment of the electorate, and contributed to his winning Ohio's electoral votes and the election overall.

Students were keenly aware of and affected by this political context, in part due to the ubiquitous presence of campaign propaganda in the year leading up to the election. Noor shared that the impact on her was strongest when "hearing the things that Trump says and then seeing people supporting that, actually seeing evidence of that," and provided the following example: "When you're driving through neighborhoods and you see people with Trump signs in their yards - I feel like I'm being targeted when I see that." Lily expressed similar feelings of marginalization from seeing campaign-related rhetoric: "The Trump supporters I know out of my Facebook friends who post about politics, I think most of them are White. Again, there's that sense of otherness … I mean that's us [people of color] that he's talking about." The presidential election also had a tangible effect on students through its impact on the campus climate at OSU, a phenomenon I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.

Examining the Exosystem: Parents' Experiences

To more fully understand students' experiences of living in the Midwest, one must first also understand the circumstances that led to their residing and growing up there. These include the reasons their parents decided to relocate to the U.S., the experiences their parents had in transitioning to life in the Midwest, and the choices their parents made regarding how and where

to raise children, as examples. Despite students' having limited to no involvement in these areas, these factors all had a direct impact on how students experienced race and racial identity while growing up. This section will examine these exosystem influences in more detail.

All of the students' parents migrated to the United States from overseas, eventually settling in Ohio or Michigan where students spent most of their childhood and teenage years. The timing of parents' migration varied, however, with some arriving in their youth and others as adults, as did the reasons for their migration, which ranged from the pursuit of educational and employment opportunities to seeking refuge from war. As for what led students' parents to settle in the Midwest, some chose to live in Ohio due to its perceived affordable cost of living and better quality of life, while others were brought there by factors related to U.S. immigration policy.

For example, the 1965 Immigration Act's preference for skilled professionals resulted in an influx of immigrants from Asia in the decades that followed (Lee, 2015). Included in this wave of migration were engineers like Lily's father and professors like John's father, both of whom found employment in the Midwest. This emphasis on educated workers also contributed to the recruitment of Asian international students to U.S. colleges and universities. Paul's and Hannah's parents came to the U.S. on student visas, for example, and after completing their graduate studies at universities in the Midwest, chose to remain in the region due to available career opportunities nearby. Similarly, for students like Rani and Michael, it was their fathers' medical residency and fellowship assignments that eventually brought their families to Ohio. Parents who were refugees arrived in the U.S. under different circumstances. Alex's parents, for example, migrated with the assistance of sponsor families located in the Midwest. These different patterns of migration created a particular set of conditions within which students grew

up and developed their understandings of race and racial identity.

Due to the sparse and scattered population of Asian Americans in the region, many of the students' parents did not have access to a local ethnic community when they moved to the area. For example, Alex's parents were children when they arrived in the U.S. in the mid-1970s, and attended schools that were almost entirely White. This led to formative experiences that shaped her parents' perceptions and attitudes towards race:

> When [my mom] was a kid growing up, kids would call her slurs and push her. At her school, there were all White people, except for her and her sister … That's when she developed a strong disliking for White people. She has a lot of horror stories from elementary and middle school growing up.

In response to feeling different and experiencing racism, Alex's parents opted to assimilate. This led to their dropping their ethnic language, cultural traditions, and other markers of difference: "My dad's side of the family really assimilated into American culture and stuff. [They] don't even really speak Vietnamese to each other. Some of them have forgotten how to speak Vietnamese." Because Alex's parents and family members had assimilated at a young age, they were not able to provide Alex with knowledge and opportunities for cultivating an ethnic or cultural identity.

This lack of access was compounded when her parents divorced, as the cultural stigma around divorce caused them to lose contact with the few ethnic peers they had in the area: "There's like a small Vietnamese community in Dayton. [My parents] are not really a part of it because they got divorced. They used to be in that social circle, but then that sort of stopped." This further contributed to the lack of exposure Alex had to cultural experiences, resulting in her feeling disconnected from her Vietnamese and Asian American identity:

> I didn't really grow up with the language and I don't have to follow a lot of the customs … I guess I don't really know a lot of the culture and stuff … I feel like I've sort of grown up being Asian, but I don't know what that means.

Alex's story illustrates how factors over which students have no control or in which they have little involvement can exert considerable influences on their understanding of identity.

Students shared additional stories about their parents' experiences and their impact on students' own experiences. For example, in addition to not being able to meet and befriend other Asians, many parents had few friends in general due to language barriers or cultural differences. John shared that although he was involved in the neighborhood Boy Scouts while he was in elementary school, his parents were disconnected from that community:

> Everyone was White. Troop leaders were all White. My mom didn't want to associate with that stuff. She would just drop me off. She'd be like, "Oh, you know I'm not really good at English and then when I have to associate with other people, I feel so awkward."

John went on to describe how his parents' absence from the Boy Scout community affected him when he was around his fellow Boy Scouts and their families at events: "They would just all live in the same area. There'd just be a group of 30 people … [and] it's just like, 'Oh. You know, I wish I had that.'" Seeing the connections among his peers and their families instilled in John a yearning for a similar sense of belonging, a feeling made elusive by his parents' not being connected to the community.

Cassandra's parents also "never did any community activities … [They] were always very to themselves and didn't want to interact. We never talked to any of our neighbors. We know them in passing, but we never would talk to them." Whether real or perceived, the social distance that students' parents felt in relation to the other neighborhood residents contributed to

their being socially isolated within the community. Baymax, whose parents were among the few Vietnamese people in her hometown of Holland, Ohio and the surrounding area, poignantly reflected: "I always wonder if my parents ever feel lonely because their friends are so far away. They've never hung out with friends in Toledo. I always wonder how they feel about that."

The impact of parents' social isolation extended beyond themselves, however, and affected their children as well. For example, Isaac described how his family's lack of community translated into his not having peers with whom he could interact: "Outside of school I nearly didn't have any friends because my family didn't socialize with many other families at all … We hung out with, like, one family, so I didn't really have friends to hang out with ever." The severely limited access that parents had to an Asian American community, as well as the social barriers that parents felt in relation to their White neighbors, resulted in many students having few opportunities to make social connections outside of school. A notable exception were students whose families were religious and resided in areas with access to an ethnic church. Not only did the ethnic church serve as a point of connection to peers and community for these students and their parents, it also played an important role in how students made meaning of their Asian American identity. I discuss the ethnic church as a site of identity formation in more detail later in this chapter.

In one last example of the impact that parents had on students' experiences with race, Paul shared how his family ended up living in Worthington, a suburb of Columbus with a population that is 94% White and less than 2% Asian American, instead of Dublin, where Asian Americans comprised 15% of the population:

> We were looking at houses in Dublin, but my mom later on told us that reason she chose Worthington was for the exact reason because there wasn't as many Asians. She felt like

> if we went to Dublin Jerome [High School], being around all those Asians, we wouldn't be exposed to the real world, which is not predominantly Asian people.

Later in the interview, Paul mentioned that his mother would occasionally talk to him and his siblings about her experiences with race and racism. This suggests that his parents' experiences with race may have informed their decision to expose their children to "real world" racial demographics and race relations by living in a town like Worthington. In doing so, Paul's parents also determined the conditions within which Paul would grow up and make meaning of his Asian American identity. The experiences that students' parents had with race, and the choices they made as a result, exerted a tangible impact in shaping the environments in which students had their formative experiences with race and racial identity.

Points of Access for Understanding Race and Racial Identity

The influences of the social, cultural, and political contexts of Ohio and the Midwest, combined with parents' experiences with race and the decisions they made regarding raising their children, created a particular set of conditions within which students developed their understandings of race, and subsequently, their racial identity. Specifically, these conditions determined the type and degree of access that students had to race-related knowledge and resources, including racial or ethnic community and support.

Students described three primary spaces in which they spent the majority of their time growing up, and which served as points of access to information or messages about race and racial identity: home, school, and ethnic spaces. As both salient and immediate contexts in students' lives, these spaces were sites of students' microsystems, or the people with whom students had direct and sustained relationships. Furthermore, the individual and group interactions within and across these spaces created distinct dynamics regarding race and Asian

American identity, which comprised the mesosystem of students' ecological contexts.

Home Environment: Influence of Parents

For all of the students, the home environment contributed to formative understandings of their racial and ethnic identities. While few students recalled having extensive conversations with their parents about race specifically, many students discussed receiving both explicit and implicit messages from their parents regarding being different. Several students, for example, described gaining exposure to the traditions, language, and culture of their family's ethnic background. Eating certain foods, observing certain holidays, and practicing certain customs were early indicators that students were different from other people in their hometowns.

Some parents were more intentional in teaching their children about this difference, however. When asked how she learned about her identity as an Indian/Pakistani Muslim, Noor shared:

> I would definitely say it started at home … Religion was a big part of our lives so we knew we were different in that way, and then we look different, so my parents always told us, "You're not like everyone here. We have different values. We believe in different things."

Other students' parents would share stories of their experiences of migrating to the U.S., which served as reminders to students like Baymax about their ethnic and racial identities: "Every time my parents would talk about my family history, and how they were refugees … that's where I would think more about my Vietnamese American identity." A number of parents also recounted experiences of racism in an effort to convey to students the realities of being racially different. Both Hannah's and Baymax's parents shared their experiences of racial discrimination in the workplace, and Noor's parents would "always tell me about how they had it harder when they

came here originally. People were openly hostile towards them and their English wasn't very good, so people would be like, 'Go back to your country.'"

In contrast, some students' parents adopted an ambivalent approach to identity, in that they did not actively encourage students to embrace their cultural or ethnic background. For some parents, this was the result of having assimilated when they were younger and no longer having cultural knowledge to impart to their children. Other parents, however, seemed to believe that living in a predominantly White environment and being immersed in American culture meant their children's connection to their cultural and ethnic background would inevitably weaken. Cassandra, for example, mentioned her parents did not enroll her in the local Chinese school and would often make pointed remarks about her identity:

> They'll be like "You're too American" or "You grew up in America, so you don't know these things" … I'm always trying to dig back a little bit into our history and ask them. They're like "Why are you so curious? You're American!"

While Cassandra's parents may have reluctantly accepted the fact that Cassandra would be influenced by American culture, other parents sought to protect their children from these external influences.

As part of the only Asian family in a small rural town on the Ohio-Kentucky border, John was keenly aware that he was different from his peers. This feeling of difference was exacerbated by the strict oversight his parents placed on him. While his classmates were free to roam around town or hang out at each other's houses after school, John had to go straight home. John's parents would also teach John how to read and write the Korean language, and supplement what he was learning in school with additional homework. This made home an undesirable environment for John:

> I would go to school and be like, "This is fun because I'm finally out of the house." Then I would come back and be like, "Okay. This is the worst thing ever." At that time, I had bad feelings towards being Korean just because everything Korean that I'd associate with was just like stress, or pain.

Being racially isolated without access to any racial or ethnic peers meant John did not have anyone who could relate to or share in his experiences, leading him to develop a singular association between his home environment, his Korean American identity, and academic stress.

Other students also described their home environment as an insular space in which they were fully immersed in their cultural and ethnic background, in contrast to public spaces where their expressions of identity were more likely to be muted. Rani, for example, tended to keep markers of her family's cultural background at home, seldom expressing her Indian American identity in more public spaces: "I didn't take the Indian music that I listened to, I didn't take the Indian foods or anything, I didn't take them outside. I kept that in my own little bubble at home." While Rani made it a point to emphasize during her interview that she was not deliberately hiding her identity at home, she discussed feeling self-conscious when non-Asian friends were over at her house: "When my friends would come over, I'd be like, 'Does my house smell weird? Is this weird to other people? Does my house look different?' or something like that." Rani's preoccupation with her peers' perceptions of her suggests a hesitancy to fully embrace her identity, even at home.

Lastly, students described varying degrees of support from parents regarding identity-related challenges they experienced. Some parents counseled their children to turn the other cheek and try to understand the perspective of their peers. Hannah mentioned, for example, that when she would vent to her mother about her classmates' antagonizing her in school, her mother

would say: "This is the environment you grow up in. People in Olmsted Falls, you can't just blame them, because this is how they grew up. How do you expect someone to understand you if they never had that basis?" Kevin's mother also conveyed a similar message, instilling in him the notion that "people may not give you the benefit of the doubt or understand where you're coming from, but you can always be the better person to understand where they come from." While well-intentioned, this emphasis on subjugating their feelings and needing to understand their White classmates may serve to normalize the racism that students encounter, or as some students expressed, cause them to question whether they were overreacting to or misreading their experiences.

Most parents, however, were either uncertain about how to best support their children or did not engage in these types of conversations with them. Students commented that conversations about racial identity were few in number and frequency, largely because it was challenging for their parents to relate to their experiences. As Isaac summed up: "It's very difficult to have a conversation with them about just Asian American identity, even, because I feel like they don't understand. It's very different to them." As a result, most students grew up not being able to process their experiences with racial identity at home, let alone in more public spaces like school, where students also spent a substantial amount of time. The school setting thus represents another formative and influential space for students' identity negotiation process, and it is to this space that I now turn.

School Environment: Influence of Peers

According to the Ohio Department of Education (http://reportcard.education.ohio.gov) and the National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov), most of the students attended schools that generally reflected the predominantly White demographics of their

hometowns. From classmates to teachers to administrators, most to nearly all of the people whom students saw and with whom they interacted were White. Several students' high schools had slightly more diverse demographics. Kevin and Lily each attended schools with Asian American populations that were over 15%, for example, while Luna and Samantha each attended schools where nearly 20% of the student body was African American or Black, due in large part to the large Somali immigrant population in the greater Columbus area (Dachenbach, 2015). Most students, however, attended schools where Asian Americans comprised 10% or less of the student body.

Because the school environment was where the majority of students' peer interactions took place, it was a primary site for their experiences with race and a key source of messages regarding the social meaning of their racial identities. In other words, students' interactions with classmates provided them insight into how others perceived them, including the assumptions about them due to their racial identity. Being racially different, for example, led some students to experience racial harassment and other racist behavior, from Hannah's experiences of being bullied and isolated from classmates because of her physical appearance to John hearing "Get out of my fucking parking spot, you chink" in his high school parking lot. Paul, who played on his middle and high schools' basketball and football teams, described experiencing racist taunts when competing against other schools:

> Opposing student sections would make pretty racist jokes about me … [I remember] the student section started chanting, "Jackie Chan," toward me, and just slanty eyes or … opposing players saying like, "Oh, ching-chong-chong," whenever I took the ball … It was pretty frequent, yeah. Especially in that sports atmosphere, you know?

Even though students were recounting these incidents from several years ago, the blatant

antagonism they experienced continued to have a lingering effect on their self-esteem and feelings about their racial identity.

Although other students described encountering subtler forms of racial marginalization from peers, these experiences still conveyed to them clear messages about their racial identities. Luna, whose high school was approximately 65% White and 20% Black, but only 3% Asian American, found that her identity as an Asian American was often ignored: "People were not understanding of the difference between being White and being Asian … Black people thought I was White [and] White people thought I was White." This conflation of Asian American identity with Whiteness served to erase students' identities, as Alex experienced in one memorable moment from high school:

> I spent a lot of time doing cheerleading. It's mainly White kids … [and] there was a girl that actually made a comment while we were practicing … She said, "Guys, I just realized we're all White." I was standing there wondering if she knew that I was there.

Regardless of whether Alex's teammate intentionally overlooked Alex's presence, her brief comment effectively rendered Alex and her identity invisible.

Despite the predominantly White student populations in their high schools, only about a third of the students reported having friendships with White classmates. Most of the students' friend groups were instead largely comprised of the few Asian American students or other students of color in their schools. Several students attributed this to their all being marginalized by peers within their predominantly White school environments. This was the case for Alex, who shared:

> In high school, I also became friends with a lot more Asian kids and Black kids, basically a lot of people of color … I feel like somehow we just gravitated toward each other …

> [and] sort of complained about how kids would say certain things or how teachers would say certain things.

Similarly, John "only hung out with Middle Eastern people" in high school because, like him, "all of them would just be completely secluded. They would all be called terrorists and stuff." In a way, students and their friend groups became friends by circumstance, brought together by shared experiences of social isolation due to racism.

Other students mentioned that, in addition to being racially diverse, their friend groups were comprised of students who were not part of the mainstream student culture within their school. Luna, whose two closest friends were Indian and Black, explained: "We were kind of outsiders. We weren't well known, we didn't participate in what is popular, in terms of high school - big parties like that, or whatever." Rani, who attended high school in a town that was over 90% White, described a similar experience:

> We had a really multicultural friend group for where we lived … but I don't think it was because we were racially different. I think everyone else was more into … partying and that kind of stuff whereas we just wanted to hang out … We weren't super nerdy and geeky, but we weren't popular. We were just in the middle, just there.

Though Rani was reluctant to attribute her experiences directly to dynamics of race, both her and Luna's quotes suggest the possibility that the dominant student culture at their high schools was largely shaped by their White classmates, who made up the large majority of the student population. Being Asian American thus meant being outside the mainstream, both in terms of racial background and student culture.

Lastly, students' schools also conveyed messages about race through structural means. Many students observed that the Asian American students in their school tended to be clustered

in Advanced Placement and honors classes, which led some to believe that Asian Americans were naturally academically gifted or prone to being academically competitive. Isaac described the pressure he and other students felt as a result:

> School seemed to be a very competitive environment where a lot of the Asian Americans try to climb to the very, very top and be the very best. I felt the need because I was within that group, to do the exact same thing and accomplish everything.

In addition, very few of the students' high schools appeared to address or engage with issues of racial diversity. Many of the schools' websites lacked any visible mention of diversity, and most students could not recall any substantive conversations about race or diversity, whether through school-wide assemblies, classroom discussions, or extracurricular activities. While school was a space where students' Asian American identities were often made salient, it was not a space where many students had opportunities to reflect upon or explore these identities, nor was it one in which these identities were explicitly affirmed.

Ethnic Spaces: Influence of Community

The third type of space was ethnic space, or the places where students were able to connect with an ethnic community. For Kevin and Lily, whose hometowns and high schools were anywhere from 10% to 20% Asian American, being immersed in an ethnic space was common. As Lily shared: "I could find a community of people who looked like me, and I guess came from the same background as me … I felt really safe in Dublin." Kevin, whose hometown of Canton, Michigan had an Asian American population of 15%, had a similar level of exposure to Asian American peers, which was facilitated by the Asian American student organization at his high school:

> It was one of the biggest clubs in my school, just lots of Asian kids. Especially when I

joined the club, there was a solid group of people, like friends that are Asian, that I hung out with all time.

In addition to introducing Kevin to a community of racial peers with whom he could socialize, his involvement with this student organization also provided him an opportunity to explore his Asian American identity:

> Sometimes we'd talk for an hour and a half, two hours after school ends … like, "Who am I?" The identity talk was a lot … "Are you even Asian?" "What does that mean?" … [We] would just talk and try to figure it out.

Kevin's experience was distinct in that none of the other students mentioned a comparable space within their high school environments. In fact, most were racially and ethnically isolated in their daily lives, with little to no points of connection to others with the same racial or ethnic background. As Jack stated, "A lot of people, especially in the Asian American community, have an extended church community or extended community … but I didn't have that." Although Jack's experience was unique as a transracial adoptee, his statement captured the experience of many students in the study. Only about a third of the students had access to ethnic spaces in the local area, which tended to be places of worship and weekend language schools, and for a few other students, access to ethnic spaces was limited to trips to ethnic enclaves in other cities and visits with relatives in other states.

For a number of students, these spaces functioned as oases, in that they were one of the few if not only places where the students were among others who looked like them and also where they could also be their authentic selves. In referring to the Chinese church he attended growing up, for example, Paul stated, "I can't think of any other environment growing up where I wasn't one of the only Asians." Church allowed students to connect with other Asian Americans,

an opportunity they rarely had otherwise, and an experience that Samantha found freeing:

> At church, I could be myself … I didn't feel like I always had to try and fit in with them. I felt like I could really just be open and honest and just be whoever I wanted to be, whereas at school I would try to tone down certain things or try and act the way they do, or talk the way they do, in order to fit in.

The ethnic church thus functioned as more than just a religious space in these students' lives, doubling as an important connection point for students' racial and ethnic identities as well.

Students' access to these oases, however, was often restricted by distance and time. Relatives often resided in states that could only be reached via long car rides or a flight across the country, resulting in students experiencing racial or ethnic immersion a couple times a year at most. Baymax, who visited extended family in Florida once a year, shared: "It was definitely comforting being able to be surrounded by people of my own culture … [but] I don't experience that any other time of the year, really."

Even racial and ethnic spaces that were more local were not always conveniently accessible. John and his parents, for example, would drive three hours "probably like once a month … back to Lotte (Korean market) [and] we would buy a crap ton of groceries." And as Mary Grace described, the prospect of meeting up with her Korean American church friends outside of the church setting was a difficult one: "The church was in the middle, so we'd travel 20 minutes, they'd travel 20 minutes. In that sense it was easy, but if you want to meet directly with them, it was 40 minutes away." The physical distance that some students had to traverse to be around an Asian American community thus created a real barrier to their feeling affirmed in their identities.

Furthermore, spaces that served as oases for some students represented the opposite for

others. For these students, these spaces were so different from their everyday experiences that they felt uncomfortable within them. These feelings of dissonance were further accentuated by reminders that students were not "Asian" enough. Alex shared the following experience from a trip to see relatives in California: "Whenever my mom introduced me to relatives that I'd never met, she would say my name and then say, 'She doesn't speak Vietnamese' … [It] was a weird feeling of disconnect from being Asian." In a seemingly paradoxical experience, being around others like her actually made Alex feel more distant to her racial identity. Rani, who grew up in a suburban neighborhood of Toledo, Ohio that was 90% White and only 3% Indian, described a similar feeling when she visited relatives in Vancouver, Canada:

> My extended family, they have - I call them brown parties, you know, family friends get-together. We didn't have any of that at our suburb [in Ohio] … I don't know, I was more comfortable when we didn't have them because there was none of that uncomfortable "you're not Indian enough" type of feeling. When I was in the suburbs [in Ohio], I felt almost more at home than I did when I was at one of those brown parties.

The fact that Rani preferred the comfort of her hometown environment not only illustrates how novel of an experience it was for her to be around other Asians, but also suggests how normative the predominantly White racial context was for students growing up in the suburbs of Ohio and the Midwest.

Ultimately, the constellation of different spaces in students' lives created different sets of access points (or lack thereof) to knowledge, community, and support related to racial and ethnic identity. Through their experiences across these points of access, students constructed certain ways of understanding what it meant to be Asian American, which guided how they navigated their social interactions with peers and their daily lives in their hometowns. The next section will

examine the various ways in which students made meaning of their Asian American identity.

Constructions of Asian American Identity

As students traversed different spaces while growing up, they encountered a range of discourses that conveyed distinct messages regarding what it meant to be Asian American. These discourses, which were created or perpetuated by the people and structures within their microsystem environments, were central in how students constructed their understandings of Asian American identity. In addition, students also developed various strategies to negotiate the varying, and at times competing, messages embedded within these racial discourses. These strategies served as a blueprint for navigating life in their hometown and high schools.

Four overarching discourses on Asian American identity emerged from the stories students shared about their experiences with race growing up: 1) being Asian American meant being different, 2), being Asian American meant being an outsider, 3) being Asian American meant being special, and 4) being Asian American meant being academically successful. In this section, I describe each of these discourses, the associated messages they conveyed to students, and the identity management strategies that students developed in response.

Being Asian American Meant Being Different

One of the most prevalent discourses on Asian American identity was that being Asian American meant being different. Nearly all students relayed that it was clear to them at an early age that they were different from those around them, given the racial demographics of their school and community environments. Teachers and adults in the community would remark on their supposedly unusual last names, while peers and classmates would comment on their physical appearance, some innocently and others maliciously.

For some students, their physical appearance was the primary distinguishing feature

between them and their peers. The lack of access to racial or ethnic resources to promote students' exploration of racial identity meant they had limited to no knowledge with which to understand Asian American identity beyond visible phenotypic differences. In other words, being "Asian" or "Asian American" was simply an objective descriptor of who they were. As Alex articulated:

> I feel like it didn't affect my life too much. I was definitely aware that I was different from other students, but it didn't drastically affect my everyday living … I wasn't continuously repeating that I'm Asian in my head throughout the day.

Complicating this objective understanding of Asian American identity, however, was a belief held by some students that despite their outward appearances, they were internally or psychologically just like their White peers. Cassandra, for example, shared, "In a way, I thought that I was White. Everything they had, I connected to. All the opportunities they had were also available to me." Mary Grace expressed a similar sentiment in describing herself and her Korean American church peers: "Since we grew up in the same kind of atmosphere and environment, we were naturally just like White, basically, except for our covers."

For a few students, the realization they were not "basically White" was a profound experience. Michael described an episode during his high school years when he looked into a mirror and suddenly recognized that he was "actually Asian":

> It was a very weird moment, but I had this revelation that I'm actually Asian … That was kind of mind-blowing. I didn't know how to explain it. It sounds so obvious, but the click moment happened. I was so confused.

In addition to being a moment of clarity regarding racial identity, this realization also helped Michael understand the nature of his interactions with peers:

> I always felt like people would look at me weird … [so] I was always put on the defensive when I interacted with people … [Realizing I was actually Asian] was somewhat cathartic because a lot more things made sense in that I understood why I felt divided between other people.

While Michael always knew he was physically and culturally different from his peers, it was at that moment that he realized others' behaviors were directed towards him as an Asian American; his different racial identity was not simply a marker of physical difference, but laden with social meaning as well.

This process of understanding one's different racial identity as a different social identity was also pronounced for Jack. As a transracial adoptee to White parents and without direct access to knowledge about his racial or ethnic identity at home or in the community, Jack struggled to make meaning of his identity. In addition to feeling "completely clueless" about being Asian American, Jack found it difficult to relate to the few Asian American peers in school:

> All of them had very similar experiences so it was easy for them to get along, but going into that space, I don't really have the same experience. I can't really share in these kinds of stories … They were like, "You look like me, so you should have a similar experience or understand," but I don't.

While challenging enough for Asian American students to find and connect with peers in environments where Asian Americans are few, it can be even more so for transracial adoptee students like Jack.

Lastly, given that their ethnic and cultural backgrounds were how students were first introduced to questions of identity and difference, the fact that many understood being Asian

American as being culturally different is not surprising. Half of the students described eating different foods, speaking different languages, and practicing different traditions as indicators of their Asian American identity while they were growing up. Notions of being bicultural were also common, in that coming to terms with being Asian American involved being able to embrace elements of both their ethnic culture and what they perceived to be a different American (i.e., White) culture.

Being Asian American Meant Being an Outsider

While all students experienced being different from most of their peers, a number of students also experienced social marginalization due to their Asian American identity. This discourse of Asian Americans as outsiders was particularly salient for students who grew up in places where they were racially isolated with few to no other Asian Americans around. Constant messages and reminders of difference, compounded by the disconnect they felt with their peers, prompted students to employ various strategies to navigate their social environment.

A number of students described minimizing the salience of their Asian American identity as much as possible in order to fit in with their peers. As Jack explained:

> I think if you have a diaspora to fall back on, it's easy to live as an Asian American … versus assimilating into America, which I think is what a lot of people do here in the Midwest. Because if there's not that community that can surround you, it's hard to continue celebrating your own culture … You feel a lot of pressure to conform.

These attempts to conform their behavior to that of their White peers were part of a process many students called "whitewashing." Hannah took this almost literally, desiring to alter her physical appearance to meet the standard of beauty she saw reflected among her peers: "I wanted blonde hair. I wanted lighter hair. I wanted contact lenses to make my eyes blue. I guess to make

myself more White, to make myself more beautiful." The rationale for most students' whitewashing behavior, though, was best articulated by Samantha, who said:

> I felt that if I can't look like them, at least I can act like them and then maybe they'll accept me then. If I did all that I could to be one of them, maybe they would finally see me as one of them or see me as equal.

This need to be perceived as equals to their White peers may have been driven by more than just a desire for acceptance. Michael, who was deliberate in "code switching from when I walk in through the front door and when I walk out the front door," explained that his choice to be "completely whitewashed in high school [was] because I think it was just a part of trying to survive. You're just trying to get through every day and not try to make too many waves." For Michael, whitewashing became a survival strategy in an alienating and potentially oppressive racial environment.

Efforts to ingratiate themselves with their White peers also led some students to crack racial jokes about Asian Americans or to deliberately invoke common stereotypes about Asians or Asian Americans. Mary Grace would do this to pre-empt the possibility of her peers making racist comments:

> For example, "Oh, I can't drive because I'm Asian." I'd say that when driving as a topic came up, kind of just to get a laugh out of it, because I'm pretty sure people were thinking it … I felt like it was maybe better for me to say it as a minority instead of them saying it, as in White people.

Similarly, Hannah admitted to laughing at Asian accents and making fun of Asian culture in front of her White classmates, which "gave them that opportunity to pull their eyelids back or use the Asian accents, or really look down on me and my friends and my family." Although this

behavior called attention to students' racial identities and further highlighted the fact they were different, the self-deprecating nature of their remarks helped students gain perceived social approval from peers. As Hannah reflected in her interview: "That's what I realize now, but back then, that's when I really started fitting in, making friends, so I would allow myself to be the butt of the joke." In their search for social acceptance, Hannah and other students often ended up compromising their racial identities in the process.

Incidentally, these experiences of feeling marginalized or disconnected from peers sometimes extended to interactions with other students of color as well. Michael described feeling unable to connect with his Black and Latino classmates in the multicultural club at his all-boys private high school:

> It felt weird because I would go and there would mostly be African-American and Hispanic [students] … I would be like, "Okay, well -" Sometimes, when you're Asian you're colored enough to not be White but you're not dark enough to chill with anyone else that's not Asian. Like you're not hard enough, I guess. I don't really know how else to say it. I just always felt uncomfortable … because people were talking across me and not to me … like I wasn't cool enough to understand what was going on.

Embedded in Michael's quote is an articulation of the interplay between race and gender, namely the dynamics of masculinity within communities of color. Not only did Michael lack a peer group of other Asian American young men with whom he could associate, but the relatively small Asian American population in his high school meant his Black and Latino classmates also had few opportunities to interact with Asian American men.

Growing up Asian American was thus a heavy burden for many students. The social stigma attached to being Asian American not only pushed students to downplay or make light of

their racial identities, but also contributed to experiences of microaggressions, harassment, and bullying committed by their peers. These incidents had a substantial impact on students' self-esteem and well-being, which was further compounded by the lack of support available to students in their hometown contexts. Parents were often limited in the degree of support they were able to provide, and many students shared they did not have access to Asian American teachers, guidance counselors, or school administrators to whom they could turn.

My review of high school websites largely confirmed the students' claims, as nearly every faculty or staff photo I saw was of someone who presented as White. While talking about not having anyone to whom she could turn about her experiences with racism, Hannah's frustration was evident:

> At school, you didn't really feel like you had that [support]. Who could you talk to? The school nurse? They give you Band-Aids. You don't talk to them about that. Your teachers? They can't identify with you. Your friends? They can't identify with you.

The absence of a support system contributed to feelings of isolation and helplessness. Comments by Cassandra, who said "I really felt it when it hurt me to be those things, to be Asian American," and Paul, in which he wondered if life would have been better had he not been Asian American, are particularly poignant and point to the pain students felt regarding their identities:

> [It was] almost a sense of being ashamed of being Asian American at times … when people constantly degrade you for your race, you begin to think about - I feel like it's inevitable that [there would be] the thought of, "Things would be so much different if I wasn't Asian American."

With little choice but to endure their experiences of racism while growing up, students risked potential negative implications for their mental health and well-being.

Being Asian American Meant Being Special

In contrast, several students shared that their Asian American identity had positive connotations for them while growing up, specifically that being different from their peers made them feel special or unique. As Isaac shared:

> [I can't] think of any time growing up when I wished I wasn't Asian because I feel like it's what sets me apart from the main portion of society here. It makes me different. It makes me feel special, almost.

Noor also discussed always having a positive relationship with her identity as an Asian American Muslim. Although she regularly fielded questions about her identity from peers and strangers, she said, "They're always like more curious type questions and usually [I] got positive vibes." When asked how these questions made her feel, Noor responded: "It wasn't ever weird. It was, I think, a cool opportunity for me to tell others about myself and to teach others about a different ethnicity, a different religion that they didn't really know anything about." For Noor and other students who also had experiences of teaching others about their culture and identity, having a set of knowledge that their non-Asian American peers did not provide them with a sense of satisfaction that further contributed to their feeling special.

This embrace of what made them different not only helped some students distinguish themselves from their peers but also instilled in them a sense of pride in being Asian American. This was most prevalent for Lily and Kevin, whose hometown and high school environments provided ample opportunities for them to see their Asian American identities reflected in positive ways. Lily, for example, described feeling a sense of pride in her identity upon seeing her Asian American peers succeed in school:

> I remember during graduation we'd all stand up for different honors and awards. I just

> remember noticing that most of us, or most of the people who stood up, were Asian American. That was a moment I really felt proud to be Asian American, like, "Look at us go."

Similarly, Kevin's involvement in his high school's Asian American student organization exposed him to historical and contemporary issues that Asian Americans have faced. This led him to declare: "I'm proud to be Asian American … I understand the disadvantages, but at the same time, it offers me a unique position, unique life experiences that can I bring to whatever I go into." Kevin's recognition that being Asian American provided him with a distinct and valuable worldview is a perspective that many of the students did not develop until college, likely because being different was more of a negative experience than a positive one for them while they were growing up. I explore how these other students came to embrace their Asian American identities in Chapter 5.

Being Asian American Meant Being Academically Successful

The stereotypical assumption that Asian Americans are prone to academic success was another common discourse, and one that was present across the different spaces in which students were immersed while growing up. While most prominent within students' school environments, this discourse also emerged at home with their parents and among their Asian American peers at church or Chinese school. Messages regarding Asian Americans and academic achievement were thus omnipresent in students' lives and exerted substantial influences on how many students understood their Asian American identities.

Students were generally aware of the expectations of them to be academically successful, though, for most, these expectations had a tangible negative effect on how they felt about who themselves. Baymax, for example, expressed frustration that the time and effort she invested into

her academics were often not recognized due to assumptions that academic success came naturally for her:

> It's never been attributed to hard work, or work ethic, or anything. It's just attributed to being Asian … I think it definitely affected my self-esteem because I always felt like I was working really hard to get these good grades … [but] I wasn't being recognized for hard work. I was just being recognized on how I look … It definitely didn't feel good.

This inability to escape being associated with academics also affected Hannah, whose struggles in the classroom were not just overlooked but even questioned by her two Asian American friends:

> My friends were really good at math and science … But for me that was different. For calculus, I really struggled … They would see my grades, and they would be like, "What's wrong with you? Why aren't you smart?" … In that sense, I felt really isolated because I didn't really fit into that dynamic.

For both of these students, high academic expectations translated into feelings of invalidation and isolation.

This discourse of academic achievement also contributed to what a number of students described as a competitive culture among Asian American youth, characterized by frequent comparisons of academic accomplishments and the resulting pressure to perform well academically. Isaac, for example, described feeling the need to keep up with his Asian American classmates in school:

> I think that initially, I made the connection [that] a lot of the smart people who are in these higher classes are Asian. I'm Asian, maybe I should be doing the same thing. Maybe I should be achieving as much as them.

The relatively small Asian American populations in students' home contexts likely amplified these messages of achievement and competition, with parents, peers, and community members mutually reinforcing each other's beliefs of Asian Americans as academically successful. This was how Paul described the environment at his church: "Being a Chinese church … academics is very focused on, so there's a lot of competition … There's a lot of pressure on kids to do well in school, from parents and stuff." Lily also described the effect of being around Asian American peers who were all academically focused: "I was surrounded by people who were really smart, and really driven, and they happened to be Chinese Americans. So I associated that, I guess motivation, ambition, whatever with being Chinese American." In this way, it was easy for the discourse of racial identity and academic achievement to become conflated in students' minds.

Illustrating the strength and saliency of this discourse were the stories that several students shared of time they failed to meet academic expectations. Cassandra, for example, felt confused and almost distraught when she realized being Asian American did not inherently lead to academic achievement:

> The identity that I created for myself as an Asian American was through stereotypes or what I'd heard about or what I assumed about Asian Americans. In a way, I felt entitled to do well on these tests because I am an Asian American. So when I wasn't getting a 2400 or getting a 36 on my ACT or when I didn't get the National Merit, it really felt like a little part of my life was shattered.

Instead of focusing on the difficulty of standardized tests or the selectivity of the National Merit award, Cassandra internalized her perceived failure, prompting her to question the authenticity of her racial identity: "I really didn't know what to do, like wait, who am I? I thought I was supposed to be good at these things … I felt like I wasn't supposed to be Asian." Furthermore,

the competitive culture among her peers discouraged Cassandra from seeking their support: "I really didn't know how to talk about it at church or with my church friends … [because] I didn't want to reveal that I wasn't doing as well as everyone else." Cassandra's perception that she was the only one not achieving academically led her to distance herself from her Asian American peers for fear of being exposed as a racial fraud or imposter, as though being both Asian American and not academically gifted was an impossible option.

Summary

As the student narratives in this chapter illustrated, the contexts and environments in which students were immersed while growing up had a significant impact on how they made meaning of their Asian American identities. Specifically, the distinct social, cultural, and political contexts of the state of Ohio and the Midwest region created a particular set of conditions under which students experienced race and racial identity. Racial demographics that ranged from predominantly to extremely White, for example, combined with suburban and rural landscapes that symbolized conservative values and traditional lifestyles, led most students to experience racial isolation and social marginalization within their hometown environments.

However, and for reasons related to their parents' history, their ethnic or religious identity, or their geographic location, students had different points and different degrees of access to knowledge and resources related to race and racial identity. Within these points of access – whether at home, at school, or in the local community – students encountered particular discourses regarding Asian American identity, prompting them to negotiate and eventually construct their own understandings of what it meant to be Asian American. Racial identity for these students was therefore a *contextualized* phenomenon, shaped by the interaction between external environmental forces and students' internal meaning-making processes.

What happens when students' contexts change? Do their constructions of Asian American identity shift, and if so, how? For the students in this study, leaving their hometowns for college resulted in their experiencing a new environment, albeit one still firmly within the larger context of Ohio and the Midwest. The ways in which students' experiences with race at Ohio State University affected their relationship to their racial identity, as well as how they understood what it meant to be Asian American, is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: COLLEGE EXPERIENCES

This second chapter of findings describes students' experiences with race in college and the impact of these experiences on their understandings of racial identity. The transition from their hometowns to college corresponded to a shift in students' immediate environments, a change represented by the green-colored ecosystems in the visual model depicted in Figure 2.1. I thus begin this chapter with an overview of the social, cultural, and political environment at OSU, including students' perceptions of and experiences with the campus culture and racial climate. In doing so, I not only describe the new mesosystem context in which students are immersed but also illustrate how larger forces within the exosystem and macrosystem affect the institutional context of OSU. Next, I detail the ways in which students navigated the racial landscape of campus, with a specific focus on their microsystem interactions, from relationships with same- and different-race peers to experiences in classrooms and student organizations. From there, I discuss how students negotiated what it meant to be Asian American vis-à-vis these college experiences, and how their constructions of racial identity shifted as a result. Finally, I conclude this chapter by sharing students' reflections on the impact of race, identity, and geography on their past, present, and future lives.

Institutional Context of The Ohio State University

As Ohio's flagship state university and one of the most highly ranked institutions in the Midwest region (U.S. News & World Report, 2017), OSU attracts and enrolls a large number of students from across Ohio and the Midwest: about 70% of undergraduates are from Ohio, with an additional 7% hailing from neighboring Midwestern states, Illinois and Michigan in particular (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). In terms of racial demographics, the majority of students are White (70%), with students of color (19%) and international students (8%)

comprising the bulk of the remaining population. Among students of color, 6% are Asian or Asian American, 6% are Black or African American, 4% are Hispanic or Latino, 3% are multiracial, 0.1% are American Indian or Alaska Native, and less than 0.1% are Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (The Ohio State University, 2016). Ohio's large agricultural and farming industry also means a substantial portion of the student body are from rural areas of the state; according to definitions derived by the U.S. Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP), Ohio's rural counties and census tracts are home to upwards of 33% of OSU's first-year in-state students (FOHRP, 2016).

Assuming that OSU students bring with them to college the beliefs and values they have acquired from their families, hometowns, and high schools, OSU in a way becomes, as Lily stated, "a reflection of the state as a whole." I thus prompted participants to consider what influence these demographics might have on the campus culture, which elicited a range of responses. Among the more common responses, and ones reflecting what I also observed during my site visit, were: 1) the role of athletics in shaping the identity and culture of OSU; 2) the socially and politically conservative leanings of the student body; and, 3) the heightened salience of racial tensions and racial activism on campus.

Campus Athletics and Fan Culture

First, students referenced the role that athletics, especially the school's football program, plays in shaping the identity and culture of OSU. OSU has a very active and fervent fan culture that permeates the campus, the city of Columbus, and the state of Ohio. This "Buckeye spirit" (named after the school mascot, Bucky the Buckeye) was not only evident in the look and feel of the campus bookstore and the student union, both of which are plastered with images and paraphernalia of OSU and its mascot, but also palpable on game days. This phenomenon is

common at many large, public state universities, where football programs have evolved into critical vehicles for cultivating institutional identities, campus communities, and capacity-building efforts (Toma, 2003).

Because my site visit happened to coincide with a scheduled home football game, I followed the suggestion of several participants and took the opportunity to wander around the stadium prior to kickoff and observe the crowds of tailgating fans. School spirit was high, with everyone proudly sporting Ohio State gear and surrounded by flags and tents in the school's colors. I had heard from OSU students and staff that people drive in from all across the state for home games, and that was evident from the snippets of conversations I overheard. There was a wide range of ages among the crowd, from kids and young adults to middle-aged and older folks, though nearly everyone I saw was White. Of the thousands of people present that evening, I only noticed about two dozen or so people of color, of whom fewer than ten appeared to be Asian or Asian American. While this was not all that surprising given the demographics of OSU and the state, the virtual absence of racial diversity was visually striking.

It was clear to me from that experience that OSU's fan culture not only permeates the campus and local region but also appears to be a predominantly White phenomenon. When Midwestern institutions like OSU draw their fan bases from student bodies, alumni ranks, local communities, and state populations that are predominantly White, fan culture can easily become racialized. This was affirmed by several of the students in the study. Referencing her high school classmates' decisions to attend OSU, for example, Hannah said: "All the White people went there for football. From my school, everyone was like, 'Oh my god, OSU football.'" Yet, few of the students I interviewed shared this level of enthusiasm for OSU's sports culture. This included Hannah, who stated, "I don't really associate with it. I don't go to football games, I don't have

that Buckeye spirit," as well as Isaac, whose sentiments were particularly pointed: "Okay, whatever. Yay Buckeyes. I didn't know anything about football [before college], and I still barely know anything."

Notably, one of the only students who considered themselves a Buckeye fan was Cassandra, who declared: "A lot of Asian Americans at Ohio State, [or] maybe it's just the ones that I hang out with, aren't that interested in Buckeye sports or Buckeye football, but I absolutely love it!" Cassandra's comment that not many Asian Americans students were sports fans reflects what I observed in my interviews with participants, many of whom did not express strong enthusiasm for OSU athletics. A few participants even shared that a common joke among the student body was that the only people in the library on game days were Asian and Asian American students. Thus, while the "Buckeye spirit" may be centrally embedded in the culture of OSU and what it means to be an OSU student, it may not be as integral to the experiences of Asian American students. This resulted in students' ending up on the fringe of a dominant aspect of campus culture, an experience similar to what they faced in their hometown environments

Social and Political Conservatism

Students also commented on what they felt was a general conservatism among the student body, again reflecting the political context of Ohio and the Midwest more broadly. Luna, who actively participated in racial advocacy and activism circles on campus, offered the following perspective: "It's just not progressive. OSU is not progressive … It's hard to be in this space when you're seen as radical … you know? I don't want to be around people who think I'm insane." This tension between conservative and liberal perspectives was highlighted and made starker by the presidential election campaigns that were under full swing at the time of my interviews with the students. This political dynamic had a direct impact on the campus culture at

OSU, which Isaac described as "very divisive because of all the things that are going on." He continued by citing a recent event on campus: "When [Democratic candidate] Hillary Clinton came … there were a bunch of students who had Trump signs outside and there was definitely some yelling back and forth and a lot of stuff like that."

Noor also referenced Clinton's visit and how witnessing that incident demonstrated to her that "there are people that hold different views from you on this campus, and maybe are against you because of your race or religion." In fact, heightened awareness of these antagonistic sentiments seemed inescapable on OSU's campus. Students mentioned noticing Confederate flags around the residence halls, reading inflammatory posts on social media, and overhearing offensive comments on a fairly frequent basis. As Alex shared, "A lot of people have been saying stuff like, 'Build that wall', and a lot of racist statements and stuff in support of Trump."

In addition, a number of students discussed periodically seeing xenophobic statements chalked on the walkways of The Oval and around campus. I happened to see some of these chalkings first-hand during my site visit, and many did indeed pointedly invoke the divisive rhetoric of the election campaign. While I was taken aback by these messages, I also noticed they did not appear to faze the majority of students who walked by. According to my study participants and news articles from The Lantern, OSU's student newspaper, these chalking incidents had been recurring for months (Huson, 2016), suggesting that students may have grown accustomed to their presence on campus. Political tension thus appeared to have been embedded within the climate of the institution for some time.

Racial Tensions and Racial Activism

A number of participants discussed the campus culture as it pertained to issues of race and racism, with specific reference to the experiences of African American and Black students.

Between demonstrations in solidarity with #ConcernedStudent1850 and #BlackLivesMatter to protests against institutionally racist systems and practices, African American and Black students have been visible and vocal in calling attention to their racialized experiences on campus. These efforts did not go unnoticed by most of the students, including Baymax, who stated:

> I think particularly during the whole Mizzou time period was where things started getting really racially tense on campus because that's where a lot of the protest and the movement started. That definitely changed the climate.

This visibility of race-related activism on campus was reflected in the student newspaper. A search of The Lantern's online archives for articles on student-initiated racial activism that have been published between 2012 and 2017 yielded over a dozen articles. These pieces covered a range of events, including the OSU Stand Your Ground Movement formed in response to hate-motivated vandalism committed in the wake of the murder of Black teenager Trayvon Martin (Essig, 2013) and the #OSU2MIZZOU protest rally and sit-in against racial discrimination (Powell, 2015). Additional articles reported on a community demonstration against police brutality and systemic racism (Roll & Bruster, 2016) and a student-led counter response to divisive and exclusionary chalk messages written on The Oval (Huson, 2016).

With such a public and prominent presence on OSU's campus, it was not difficult for many study participants to become aware of these racial issues. However, a few students commented on what they perceived to be a lack of interest in racial matters from many of the White students on campus. Luna, for example, remarked:

> It seems like a lot of White students don't really care about certain things … During protests and action, people will walk by and take videos and be like, "This is inconvenient," or "this is funny," and things like that, brushing it under the rug.

Alex echoed this perception of her peers' ignorance and dismissiveness of Black students and their concerns, while also implicating the university administration in not adequately addressing the needs of the Black student population:

> I feel like a lot of the racism is definitely directed towards the Black students and the BLM [Black Lives Matter] movement … They feel unsafe on campus. Students are trying to do things about these issues but then administration is not really helping at all.

A couple other students were also critical of what they believed to be insufficient or unsatisfactory responses from the administration regarding issues of race and diversity, a perception that appears to be shared among many of the student activists on campus (Mikati, 2016). Between experiences of racial tension among the student body and feelings of frustration with university leadership, the campus culture at OSU with regard to race appears to be less than ideal.

Lastly, a number of students discussed participating in some of the racial activism efforts on campus themselves, either independently or through their involvement in student organizations. Their experiences not only deepened their understanding of the challenges facing students of color but also prompted them to critically reflect on their own racial identities as Asian Americans. I delve into these students' stories in detail later in this chapter, but in the next section, I first discuss how students described the racial climate at OSU. In addition to providing background and context on how students perceive the racial environment on campus, this overview of the campus racial climate demonstrates how students' perceptions are not only shaped by their experiences prior to college but also inform how they then choose to navigate the campus racial landscape.

Racial Climate on Campus

Although OSU is a predominantly White institution, many of the students described being surprised by what they perceived to be high racial diversity among the OSU student body. Rani shared her initial reaction upon arriving on campus: "I was just like, 'Wow, there's a lot of people of color here. Whoa. Okay.' Then you get used to it and you're like, 'This is nice. Seeing different people.' … You're still a minority but there's more diversity." Coming from predominantly or nearly all White environments prior to college, the number of students of color and international students on campus was noticeably present. When I asked students what they believed the percentage breakdown of racial groups to be, many of them grossly overestimated the percentages for all student of color populations. A couple students, including Michael, cited the overall size of OSU's student population as a contributing factor: "I thought that we were really diverse but when I looked at the demographics … it was very typically Midwestern. The fact we had so many individuals that were diverse was just purely the volume of people that [OSU] enrolls."

Referencing the size of the Asian American student population specifically, students used the terms "a lot," "so many," "tons," and "humongous," despite Asian Americans comprising only 6% of all undergraduates. This was a substantially higher percentage than what many students had grown accustomed to in their hometowns or high schools, though, and thereby contributed to assumptions of a large Asian American community on campus. Actual numbers aside, students' perceptions of the Asian American community still had a tangible effect on them, as Baymax shared: "It's really shocking how many Vietnamese people are here. I'm like, 'Wow, this is amazing.'"

Perceptions of Racial Diversity

Regarding students' perceptions of the racial climate, responses ranged. Some students

mentioned the racial diversity among the student body and perceived institutional support for diversity as indicators of a favorable campus racial climate. For one, while the OSU student body was predominantly White, it was more diverse than what most students were used to in their racially homogenous hometowns. This gave some students the impression of a positive campus racial climate. Rani, for example, stated, “I would say, generally, you feel pretty comfortable if you're a minority, in any aspect. Whether you're LGBTQ or a minority, racially. I would say you feel pretty comfortable because there is diversity, to me.” Similarly, because their high schools did not actively engage in discussions related to diversity, the efforts of OSU to promote these conversations were particularly noticeable to students. As Mary Grace commented, “In college, everybody I feel like is more willing to talk about [diversity] …. In high school, there was none of that.” The presence of institutional resources, from the Multicultural Center and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to designated prayer rooms and office spaces for student organizations, also signaled to some students that the climate for racial diversity at OSU was a positive one.

While many students perceived OSU to be highly diverse, a few students expected to see more racial diversity on campus. Echoing the idea of sheer numbers giving a misleading impression of diversity, Alex stated: "I thought it would be more diverse and accepting here but it's really not. It's just that there are more people here, so you can find a community to be in." This lack of diversity also limited the opportunities for cross-racial interactions and understanding, a phenomenon Noor experienced in her classes, where students of color were often few in number:

> I took sociology, psychology, and we had discussions about race and I just thought it gets hard to have discussions like that as a group when you don't even have members of different racial and ethnic communities at the table. How can we discuss their

experiences or what it's like for them when they're not even present?

Noor's insightful observation stemmed from her experiences attending a private high school that was fairly diverse, with students of color comprising one-third of the student body. Having already had opportunities to converse with students of other backgrounds in high school, Noor expected to have similar experiences in college. To her disappointment, however, these expectations were not fully met during her time at OSU.

Latent Racism

The racial homogeneity across much of Ohio meant that many of the students' classmates likely arrived on campus without much exposure to racial diversity. Baymax shared the perception that her White peers "grew up with a certain type of belief system and culture. They weren't exposed to this type of racial culture [or] diversity." In fact, college may be the first time that many OSU students have the opportunity to meet and interact with Asian Americans and other students of color. As Cassandra explained:

> [OSU] does bring in so many people from Ohio [including] a lot of people from east Ohio or the rural areas … That's been really interesting, interacting with students who don't know race is a thing or aren't aware of it.

In fact, Kevin remarked that "there's some people in the beginning of their freshman year that come from these rural communities that are shocked: 'Oh my God, you're the first Asian person I've ever talked to in my life.'" The fact that many OSU students may be having their first meaningful encounters with racial diversity, including their first interactions with Asian Americans, during their college years suggests that the likelihood of Asian American students experiencing microaggressions and other racial transgressions on campus may be high.

Few students characterized the campus racial climate as blatantly negative or racist,

however. Paul attributed this to the small population of students of color on campus: “I think part of it is because there really aren't that many minorities at OSU …. I feel like there's really not that much [racial] tension because our voices are almost kind of unheard in a sense.” Though it may be plausible for the relative invisibility of students of color to contribute to perceptions of a conflict-free campus racial climate, Jack offered an alternative perspective in which racial tensions are instead expressed covertly:

> I think that the racial climate seems okay on the surface, but these small acts that happen in private probably happen a lot more often than you think and that contributes to the mentality that … it’s okay to have Asian people be the butt of a joke or disrespect an Asian American.

This underlying feeling that their peers may harbor latent feelings of disdain towards Asian Americans led some students to become hyperaware of their racial identities. Kevin, for example, described being wary of the White students he sees around campus. Though he readily admitted to relying on "stereotype[s] of rural America and their beliefs and their ideals," he could not help but maintain a sense of skepticism regarding the attitudes that his White peers may be holding:

> Ohio's a little bit more conservative … [so] I think about how these people perceive me … I just think about like, "Oh, do they even like me?" or "Do they low-key kind of hate me? Do they want me to go back to my country?" That kind of stuff.

Kevin did acknowledge that he does not often interact with the students about whom he has these thoughts. Yet, the association between Ohio's cultural and political contexts, conservatism, and racism was strong enough to cause him to feel self-conscious about his identity while simply walking around campus.

Isolation and Invisibility

Other students shared similar feelings of self-consciousness, particularly when they were outside predominantly Asian American spaces. In these moments, students' experiences were often reminiscent of those they had prior to college when they felt like an outsider due to their racial identity. As Paul stated: "The main group of people I hang out with is Asians, and the events I go to are Asian student orgs, but in classes and stuff, they're still basically all White people in [these] other environments." Baymax described a similar experience, whereby "in terms of other places on campus, it was more like going back into the minority feeling." These familiar feelings of being different were common in the classroom, within non-Asian American student organizations, or when students were walking around campus - all spaces in which almost all of the people surrounding them were White.

For example, students across multiple academic majors mentioned often being one of the few Asian American students in their classes. This even included classes in the sciences, an area in which it may be commonly assumed that Asian Americans are concentrated. In describing the demographics of her chemistry class, for example, Alex said: "It's definitely a lot of White people … Being one of the only Asian Americans in the classroom led some students to feel uncomfortable participating in class discussions, for fear of being tokenized or misrepresenting the Asian American community. Samantha shared her struggles with these feelings:

> Whenever [my classmates] bring something up, they all have the same mentality, the same idea around it … I would feel very uncomfortable if I were to bring up an issue that's going on in the Asian American community because no one else here identifies with that. It's kind of like I'm wasting my breath.

Students also experienced feelings of isolation in student organizations that were not

specific to the Asian American community. Noor, for example, was discouraged from joining a philanthropic club due to the racial composition of the organization's members:

> I do recall a couple club meetings I went to during my freshman year and then I didn't go to them again because I was the only person of color and the only girl wearing a hijab. That was weird for me to be in a room full of mostly White girls who were all completely different from me.

In addition, Jack, Alex, and Michael all described the challenges of being both gay and Asian American on campus, particularly that the lack of racial diversity among the LGBTQ student population hindered their ability to feel connected to that community. Jack, who often felt either marginalized or exoticized within LGBTQ spaces due to his race, commented, "I drifted out of the LGBT community because I realized it's very White. Not to say that's a bad thing, but it's hard when you are a minority within a minority." Alex also found it difficult to connect with OSU's LGBTQ organizations due to their racial demographics, which also extended to SHADES, the queer people of color group on campus: "There are definitely more Black students and Latino students [in SHADES]. There are really not many Asians … That's including international and domestic students." This perception was shared by Michael, who despite finding SHADES to be a supportive space, still wished for a greater presence of gay Asian Americans on campus:

> There's not that many gay Asians here … It was just harder to find someone that looked like me, I guess. Not just physically, but that would be able to hold the depth of conversation that would [reflect] the understanding that I had of my life.

Michael's wish for peers who could closely relate to his experiences with both race and sexual orientation, a desire also shared by both Jack and Alex, speaks to the importance of

representation among the student body, particularly for students with multiple and intersectional identities.

Conflation of Asian international and Asian American identities. Reminders that students are a racial minority on campus were also salient when students were in The Oval, the main quadrangle through which students often traverse between classes. In addition to seldom encountering other Asian Americans while walking through this space on campus, a couple students also described being ignored by student organizations as they pass by. These occurrences evoked feelings of hurt for Jack, who shared: "Sometimes they won't speak to you or treat you with the same kind of - I don't want to say dignity … but the fact that you are overlooked and seen as invisible, I think that's a little bit degrading." Lily also had similar experiences of being slighted, which she presumed to stem from assumptions that she was an international student:

> I have noticed when I'm walking through The Oval and people are handing out fliers, sometimes they will ignore me or talk to someone else while I'm walking by … We have a lot of international students here, so I think people assume that either I can't speak English well or won't understand them.

Lily's reference to the large number of international students emerged in several other interviews, indicating the visibility of this population on campus. In fact, the percentage of international students at OSU has increased in recent years (Greene, 2016), with the vast majority hailing from China and other Asian countries (Chenetski, 2014). This shift has resulted in an increase in what Jack called an "air of xenophobia" directed towards international students by the general student body. These sentiments have also had an impact on Asian American students, due to others' inability to tell the two populations apart. As Samantha explained:

> I think international students definitely get a bad rap around campus. I feel like it does influence how certain people see Asian Americans also, because …they have this preconceived notion that we're all really loud or we're all rude or something. I think it does impact the rest of us.

These negative attitudes towards international students were not exclusive to the general student body, however, but also shared by segments of the Asian American community as well. Continuing in her comments, Samantha stated, "I feel like a lot of Asian Americans also hold those same feelings towards international students also and they perpetuate it like, 'All these international students, they're so awful. They're giving us a bad rap.'"

For a couple students in the study, this tension between international students and Asian American students instilled in them a desire to distinguish themselves from international Asian students. Isaac, for example, described wanting to distance himself from negative perceptions of international Asian students:

> Sometimes I feel like I would rather not associate with international students on campus because … I don't want to be thought of as one of them. Sometimes when I'm walking around I feel like some of these people might think I can barely speak English because of the way I look, and I don't want that negative connotation, that negative stereotype on me.

Mary Grace harbored similar feelings regarding being mistaken for an international student, which caused her to intentionally "dress more American" or "speak more English" in an attempt to signal to others that she was not an international student. For both of these students, the heightened presence of international students on campus resulted in a parallel heightened need to assert their Asian American identities.

Being Asian American on Campus

As many students do when they come to college, the students in this study sought out different spaces on campus in which to get involved or build community. As a result of their experiences growing up, many students hoped to connect with other Asian American students and find the community of support that had eluded them this far in their lives. In particular, those who grew up with limited to no access to other Asian Americans tended to be strongest in their desire to seek out Asian American peers on campus.

Several students remarked, however, that while Asian Americans were numerically present on campus, they were not as visible as would be expected. While programs and activities specifically targeted towards Asian Americans, such as Asian American student organization meetings or Asian Pacific American Heritage Month events, would naturally draw concentrated crowds of Asian American students, many students did not encounter other Asian American students with much frequency during their everyday activities on campus. As Cassandra, discussed:

> On a day to day, being Asian American at Ohio State is very unseen, I think … There's 3,500 Asian Americans, supposedly, on this campus. I want to know where they are … Most of the Asian Americans I do see on campus I know already. That's why I'm like, "Where are they?" They must be hiding somewhere.

Hannah, in fact, even went as far as to describe the Asian American student population as a "hidden community" and a "hidden gem." When I asked her to elaborate, she explained: "As a prospective student, I didn't even know we had any of this … That's why I thought it was hidden, because it was never in my face." Hannah's characterization of the Asian American community as a "hidden gem" not only acknowledges the perceived obscurity of Asian American students on

campus but also captures the valuable role the Asian American community plays in some students' lives.

Discovering the Asian American community on campus elicited a range of emotional responses. For some students like Isaac, the feeling was one of excitement: “I was happy. I was excited. I was excited to meet all these people that kind of have similar experiences as I do.” For other students, though, this excitement around finally being around Asian Americans peers was slightly tempered by feelings of uncertainty around not knowing how to engage with the Asian American community. As Baymax described:

> That experience was really different for me. It was like, “Wow, there’s other people here. There's a community of Asian Americans.’ I found that very comforting and different, and also scary, because I didn't know how to approach [becoming a part of] it.

Hannah shared having similar feelings when she attended a welcome event for Asian American students at the start of her first year at OSU:

> I guess I was a little intimidated … I didn't know how to talk to Asians. It was weird … how do I approach anyone? Now it's not a matter of, "You're Asian, I'm Asian, let's talk." Back then it was like you see an Asian person in high school or even in the grade below you or something you're like, "Oh, hi." And you relate. But here everyone's Asian, so how do you start that conversation?

When there were few Asian Americans in high school or in their hometown, simply being Asian American was enough for students to establish a connection with other Asian Americans. When the Asian American population was much larger, however, like it was at OSU, a shared Asian American identity no longer seemed a sufficient reason to start a conversation with Asian American peers. This left some students like Hannah initially unsure of how to integrate into the

Asian American community. Fortunately, the presence of identity-based spaces on campus provided structured points of access for students to connect with racial and ethnic peers.

Points of Access for Exploring Race and Racial Identity

The extracurricular realm of OSU offered students opportunities to explore questions of Asian American identity through different types of activities, including a number that were specific to racial and ethnic identity. Students' decisions regarding the type of activity in which to get involved – or whether to participate in these identity-based activities at all – were guided by the understandings of race and racial identity that they had developed prior to college. For example, the students for whom being Asian American was synonymous with being an outsider among their high school peers were more likely to become active participants in Asian American activities on campus, whereas those students who perceived their Asian American identity as unique or special while growing up were less likely to be involved.

In this section, I explore students' differing patterns of involvement, focusing specifically on three identity-centered spaces on campus in which students tended to be immersed: ethnically-centered spaces, racially-centered spaces, and other identity spaces. I describe how each type of activity exposed students to a distinct set of experiences and perspectives, which then affected their understanding of racial or ethnic identity in particular ways. In addition, where relevant, I also describe the experiences of students who were not actively involved in these spaces and the reasons for their lack of involvement.

Ethnically-centered spaces. Several students, particularly those who were ethnically isolated while growing up, were actively involved in ethnic-specific student organizations at OSU. Baymax whose only interactions with other Vietnamese people growing up were mostly when visiting family, immediately joined and soon assumed leadership positions within the

Vietnamese Student Association (VSA). Similarly, having grown up without a Filipino community and barely any Filipino or Asian American peers, Michael found the Pilipino Student Association (PSA) to be a source of social connection and community. In addition, Michael's experiences with PSA also brought him knowledge and insight into his life experiences:

> Sometimes, it was basic things like, "Oh, my God. I love eating this," … or it was deeper things like, "Oh, I didn't know that's why my mom was like that," or "I didn't know that's why my dad taught me to be like that." There were just deeper explanations that informed me about why my life is the way it was.

The opportunity to share experiences with ethnic peers revealed to Michael the cultural influences that shaped the messages he received growing up, and which were formative in constructing his worldview. That the clarity Michael gained from his involvement from PSA was something he "couldn't really get from anyone else that was around [him]" prior to college speaks to the value of ethnic student organizations, particularly in areas like the Midwest where access to such spaces may not be readily available to students while growing up.

Not all participants found community in ethnic student organizations, however. Some made efforts to join these organizations, but either did not connect with the students they met or they did not fit in with the social dynamic of the group. Alex, for example, whose parents and extended family assimilated in their youth and thus lacked the cultural knowledge to pass along to her, did not connect with the Vietnamese student group on campus: "When I went to especially VSA and stuff, I didn't really connect with the other people there. They were all really nice. For some reason, I just didn't connect with them."

Rani also experienced feelings of disconnect when she attempted to connect with the Indian American community on campus, an endeavor she intentionally undertook once she got to

OSU: “When I came here, I was trying to get more into the Indian American community. I was like, ‘I have a bunch of White friends, but maybe I can try and make Indian friends.’” After attending a few meetings of the Indian American Association, however, Rani felt discouraged. Not only did she feel unable to socially connect with the other Indian American students, but she also felt disappointed in what she perceived to be her lack of cultural knowledge. As Rani explained:

> It's just hard because they all know each other already … I went to one of the meetings, they were all with little groups … There was two White girls staying by the side … [so] I hung out with them waiting for the meeting to start, people who I'm comfortable with.

That it was the two White students with whom Rani was comfortable likely reflects her experiences living in a nearly all-White hometown. Similarly, the self-doubt regarding her identity that Rani felt around her relatives and their “Brown parties” while she was growing up was also triggered during these IAA meetings:

> There was a girl who … was playing the guitar and then sang in English and then in Hindi. In perfect transition, accents in both. I was like, "I need to leave." Then I went home and I was really sad about it … I was like, "Do I really need to be doing this? I can be a fine Indian by myself … I don't really need to be in those clubs to be okay with the person that I am.”

Perhaps in part due to Rani’s experiences with identity prior to college, IAA ended up becoming a source of insecurity for Rani and did not provide her the sense of connection or validation that ethnic student organizations did for other students. While Rani has since attended events hosted by IAA on occasion, she has found community and become actively involved in a multicultural community engagement program on campus instead.

Racially-centered spaces. The second type of space in which study participants were immersed were racially-centered spaces, or those specifically focused on Asian American identity. Most common were the Asian Pacific Islander (API) Cohort program and the Asian American Association (AAA), with about half of the students I interviewed involved in either or both. Sponsored by OSU's Multicultural Center, API Cohort is a peer mentorship program that connects first-year Asian American students with Asian American upperclass students for mentoring experiences, social activities, and educational programs. For students who participated in API Cohort, the opportunity to interact with and receive guidance from older peers not only assisted with their transition to college but facilitated reflective conversations about their Asian American identity.

Students had similar experiences through AAA, a student-led social, cultural, and advocacy organization centered on the experiences of the Asian American community. Isaac described the impact that attending AAA meetings had on him as a first-year student: "That was the first time I actually went to anything that taught about Asian Americans and what it means to be an Asian American. I was like, 'Wait, what the heck am I doing? What just happened?'" This novel experience of learning about and reflecting upon one's Asian American identity also had a transformative influence on Baymax. Growing up with virtually no outlet through which to make meaning of her experiences as one of the only Asian Americans in her hometown, AAA gave Baymax the opportunity to finally "share feelings in a very safe space" with Asian American peers, which led her to declare, "It definitely made me feel like my experiences were validated, and that they mattered, and that my identity matters."

It was clear that both API Cohort and AAA aimed to center students' Asian American identity and expose them to issues of race affecting the Asian American community. However,

the impression I received from a few students, which was also supported through conversation with the staff advisor to both API Cohort and AAA, was that this emphasis tended to create a singular focus on the Asian American experience. According to Paul, this at times contributed to a lack of demonstrated support for other racial communities on campus: “A lot of the stuff that we talk about in API Cohort, AAA has to do with race and the oppression that Asian Americans face, but when we see this stuff happening with Black people, there's not much response.” Luna, who was among the more politically active students I interviewed, also conveyed frustration at the limited presence of Asian Americans at racial protests and other racial justice-related events on campus, pointing to what she perceived as incongruence between what organizations like AAA espouse and what they demonstrate:

> When I complain that there is not enough Asian American presence … they're like, "Well, it's good that you're there then because you represent us." I'm like, "That's not how it works … I have nothing to do with your org.” … And when I say, “You guys aren't staying true to what you guys are saying or preaching or talking about,” there is no push back.

Notably, the study participants who did participate in racial justice and racial solidarity activities tended to be involved in a different type of Asian American organization on campus, which I discuss in the next section.

It is worth mentioning here that students like Lily and Kevin, who grew up in areas that afforded them greater exposure to a community of Asian American peers, tended to not be actively involved in Asian American activities. For Kevin, this was in part due to his experiences in his high school’s Asian American student club. Kevin was initially motivated to seek out the Asian American community in college due to his high school experiences: “The reason why I

joined the Asian community here so quickly is because of my experiences in high school. I was like, 'Okay, I did an Asian club. I really enjoyed it. I should do the same in college.'" Compared to what he gained from his high school's Asian American club in terms of understanding his racial identity, however, the Asian American organizations at OSU left Kevin desiring more:

> [My high school club] based off of knowledge and discussion first. That's how you got to know people. Then you had fun with them as friends … Here it's like the direct opposite, where you try to get people in with fun, then you try to get them to learn things. People are like, "Where did the fun go?" … There's deeper issues that can be discussed, but the audience wants to avoid it because they're like, "Oh, this is like a lecture."

Though Kevin still maintained connections with the Asian American community on campus, his peers' perceived lack of interest in exploring the "deeper issues" of racial identity and the Asian American experience caused him to not be as heavily involved with Asian American student organizations.

This perceived prioritization of social activities among the Asian American community was also a deterrent for Luna, who was more actively involved in racial justice activities on campus. In fact, Luna had an explanation for why she believed the social dimension of the Asian American community was so prominent at OSU: "My theory is that a lot of them just weren't popular in high school, or were bullied or something, and this is their time to have that - to be socially accepted and to play into … the idea of popularity." Embedded in Luna's quote is an observation that hints at the influence of context on students' experiences with racial identity. For students who grew up socially isolated or marginalized because of their race, OSU may represent one of the first opportunities they have to befriend other Asian American students or feel a sense of belonging to a community of peers. The novelty of this experience and the

associated dynamics in navigating these social relationships may thus be what causes social activities to take precedence among Asian American student organizations. While this suited the needs of the students involved, it was not enough for Luna and others seeking deeper engagement with issues of social justice and racial solidarity.

Other identity spaces. Lastly, a number of students described experiences with spaces that specifically focused on the multiplicity of students' social identities. Of particular significance for this study was religious identity, as about a third of the students were involved with OSU's chapter of Asian American InterVarsity, an affiliate of InterVarsity (https://intervarsity.org), an evangelical Christian campus ministry. Because these students were the ones for whom the church was their point of access to an ethnic community while growing up, it is perhaps not surprising that AAIV served in that capacity in college. Like the students in the API Cohort program, students made Asian American friends and found a community of racial peers through AAIV. Paul, whose experience was particularly positive, shared, "People at AAIV were really welcoming, friendly and nice. There's just a best sense of community and even more so, a sense of family … I felt like that really did help my transition to college." Not only did AAIV assist students in their adjustment to OSU and campus life, but it also provided them with a support system that they did not have during their high school years. Hannah, for example, found support in the other Asian American women of AAIV, who helped her navigate through a particularly challenging personal experience:

> AAIV was a really good outlet for me even though I wasn't Christian … The girls in AAIV really came together as a support system for me and really helped me get past that … because of our racial identity as Asian Americans [and] as women.

Having been racially isolated and without an Asian American community throughout her

childhood, Hannah “desperately wanted to find that community" when she got to college. Despite not being religious and thus also not having grown up attending an ethnic church, AAIV became that community for her.

In addition to making social connections through AAIV, students engaged in meaningful and intentional exploration of their racial identity through the programs and activities that AAIV hosted. These included workshops on identity and leadership, which prompted Cassandra to critically reflect on her Asian American identity for the first time:

> I realized I'm highly assimilated into the majority culture and have very low ethnic identity. That freaked me out a little bit, because I was like, “Who am I? Because I'm not White." That was when I first started realizing I'm not White. Do I even have an identity? … That was the starting ground of reclaiming, in a sense, so many lost years of not being aware of being Asian American.

Given the inherent faith-based nature of AAIV, Cassandra and other students were developing an understanding of racial identity through a distinctly spiritual lens. In other words, religion and faith became their entry point to gaining a consciousness of racial identity.

In addition to identity exploration, students' involvement in AAIV also exposed them to issues of race and racial solidarity. Among the teachings of InterVarsity is the idea of racial reconciliation, or the belief that compassionate understanding and reconciliation of different racial experiences is the key to achieving racial justice (Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, 2007). For students like Isaac, this served as an introduction to issues of racial advocacy and activism: “We actually talk a lot about racial reconciliation, and we talk about issues like Black Lives Matter. We say we are fully supportive of our fellow ethnic minorities on campus and around the world, like around the U.S.” Several students mentioned attending racial protests in support of

Black students on campus through their involvement in AAIV. Paul, for example, who joined a sit-in organized by the OSU Black student community to rally against racism on campus, framed his participation as both a racial and spiritual imperative:

> If this kind of stuff was happening to Asian people, we would see so many Asian Americans talking about this stuff. When it's happening to Black people, why are we not helping them? … From my perspective, especially as a Christian, if we see our brothers and sisters dealing with oppression … we should be there for them.

Being introduced to issues of systemic racism and campus racial climate through the lens of faith prompted students to reflect on the ways these concerns affect minoritized populations, as well as the relationship of Asian Americans to the Black community and other communities of color.

Shifting Constructions of Racial Identity

What impact did students' experiences with race at OSU, a context comprising both a new microsystem and a new mesosystem, have on their understandings of race and racial identity? Being immersed in a more racially diverse environment than their hometown environments and having the opportunity to interact with Asian Americans and other students of color introduced students to different ways of thinking about their own racial identities. For many, this led to a shift in their prior understandings of what it meant to be Asian American, resulting in their constructing racial identity in new ways. Overall, five distinct constructions emerged from students' narratives about their Asian American identity since arriving at college: 1) being Asian American "is what it is"; 2) being Asian American is valuable and important; 3) being Asian American is a big deal; 4) being Asian American provides meaning and purpose; and, 5) being Asian American is a bridge to racial solidarity. I review each of these constructions below.

Being Asian American "Is What It Is"

While students readily acknowledged they were Asian American and made no attempts to downplay or dismiss their racial identity, several demonstrated a degree of distance and detachment from it. In other words, their Asian American identity was simply a matter of fact. This was particularly the case for those students who grew up knowing that being Asian American meant they were different from their peers, but who did not feel as though they experienced racial marginalization within their hometown environments. Being Asian American was thus a salient aspect of who they were, though it functioned more as a personal characteristic than as a social identity.

For example, having grown up surrounded by White peers but never feeling ostracized because of her race, Mary Grace expressed a degree of uncertainty about being Asian American: "I really don't know how I feel about [being] Asian American … I don't really feel negatively, or I don't really feel positively about it. I'm just neutral, I think. It is what it is, maybe." Learning about issues of race and racism affecting the Asian American community while in college created feelings of dissonance for Mary Grace, as the knowledge she gained starkly contrasted her experiences growing up. This led her to question the information she received: "I think it's great learning about these issues in college, but I felt that I was being, not forced, but being to a negative degree brainwashed … to think that I don't belong here." Instead of cultivating a stronger connection to her racial identity, gaining knowledge of the Asian American experience ended up fostering an uncertain relationship between Mary Grace and her Asian American identity.

Another way in which students demonstrated a degree of distance and detachment from being Asian American was to embrace an individualized understanding of racial identity. In

other words, while these students were comfortable with being Asian American, they did not express a strong need to connect with a larger Asian American community. These students tended to be those who were not actively involved in racial or ethnic student organizations on campus or who maintained a general ambivalence towards being around Asian American peers.

Rani was one of these students. In reflecting back on her decision to attend OSU instead of another college with a larger enrollment of Asian Americans, and specifically Indian Americans, she stated: "I'm happy I didn't go [there] because I feel like I would feel more out of place there … That would have set me back a lot, with not fitting in … whereas here, I can take it or leave it." For Rani to frame the possibility of connecting with other Indian Americans at OSU as a "take it or leave it" option conveys a nonchalance about being part of the Indian American community. Although this was likely a result of her experiences growing up without access to such a community and compounded by her unsuccessful attempts to join the Indian American Association on campus, Rani was not in denial of her identity. In fact, she described it in relatively positive terms:

> I think now, it's more important to me … [My friend and I] were just saying now we're more into it than we were in high school. It's just nice to learn about. Even if you're learning a little late, it's better than never … I think that's important. It makes you different, I don't think that's a bad thing.

Compared to the tenuous connection Rani has with the Indian and Asian American communities on campus, the relationship to her being Indian and Asian American is relatively stronger and more grounded, thereby illustrating the distinction between individual and collective dimensions of racial identity. Her "take it or leave it" approach, however, as with Mary Grace's "it is what it is" attitude, still signals a level of ambivalence for these students with regard to their Asian

American identity.

Being Asian American is Valuable and Important

Between the racial demographics of the student body, the various opportunities available for identity exploration, and institutional efforts to promote diversity, a number of students found themselves thinking about race and racial identity more frequently now than they did in their prior contexts. Baymax, for example, stated: "It's definitely something that I think about on a daily basis and something that I really embrace and am very proud of, whereas before, I didn't think too much about it." Even for students who were unable to avoid thinking about their Asian American identity while growing up due to experiences of racism, the college environment provided them spaces where the salience of their racial identity was a positive experience instead of a marginalizing one.

These spaces, whether racial and ethnic student organizations, Asian American InterVarsity, or the Multicultural Center, affirmed students' Asian American identities in ways they had not experienced previously. This led to new realizations regarding what it meant to be Asian American. Whereas racial identity was something that students tried to downplay or deemphasize while they were growing up, their experiences in college helped them discover the intrinsic value and importance of an Asian American identity. This realization that they "don't have to be the punchline" or "the butt of the joke" relieved students of the social stigma associated with being Asian American.

For the many students whose past relationship with their Asian American identity ranged from passive resignation to active resentment, racial identity was no longer a source of shame or embarrassment but rather a point of pride and empowerment. Samantha, for example, perceived her Asian American identity as lending her a perspective that was both unique and valuable:

> It's extremely important to me now, because that's my identity. That's who I am and that's what I will always be … It's something that I wouldn't want to change anymore …[because] I have something to offer and I bring something to the table.

As students became more comfortable embracing and expressing their Asian American identity, they began to internalize this aspect of who they were. For some, this eventually reached the point where being Asian American became what Hannah described as "the core of my identity," a far cry from their days of resisting or avoiding that dimension of themselves. Particularly for those students who were racially isolated growing up, the realization that being Asian American could be valuable and important was a transformative shift in their relationship with racial identity.

Being Asian American "Is a Big Deal"

Beyond having intrinsic value and importance, a few students recognized that being Asian American also had implications for their social and interpersonal interactions. Racial identity was about more than being phenotypically different from others; it also affected how others perceived and acted towards them. While this notion was not entirely new for those students who experienced feelings of difference or marginalization while growing up, their understanding was enhanced by learning about the concepts of race and racism through student organizations or academic courses. Alex, for example, shared that it was through her women's studies and sociology classes that she realized that being Asian American and a person of color had social significance:

> I just have a better understanding of what [racism] is and how to identify it. I wasn't really aware of that before college. I just sort of went through those first 18 years thinking, "Okay, I'm different but that's not a big deal." Then, I've learned it is a big deal

> because it affects everyone in a certain way … [so] when I go places now, I consider race more.

Recognizing the role and impact of race in society led Alex to perceive her Asian American identity through a different lens, which prompted her to newly consider how race plays out in her everyday experiences.

Jack described a similar outlook regarding his Asian American identity, though, for him, this realization took on greater importance given his experiences as a transracial adoptee. Despite encountering microaggressions and other forms of discrimination based on his physical appearance while growing up, Jack lacked the resources, particularly from his parents and family at home, to assist him in making meaning of his experiences. It was not until Jack learned about race through his participation in Asian American activities in college that he came to see his Asian American identity as a social identity:

> Because race is something that people just outwardly see, I think for a lot of people, regardless of how you identify … you're already perceived by your skin color and by the way you look … That's the way people would interact with you, the way people will see you.

This recognition helped Jack to better understand the impact that his past has had in shaping his sense of self: "All my experiences have contributed to who I am now. I reflect a lot on my experiences … I think it's important to have that internal dialogue." With a new lens through which to make meaning of his experiences with race, Jack developed a stronger relationship with his Asian American identity.

Being Asian American Provides Meaning and Purpose

Being immersed in a racial or ethnic community at OSU not only introduced students to

other Asian Americans who could validate and affirm their experiences but also relieved them of the social pressure to fit in with White peers. This facilitated opportunities for some students to begin to discern their authentic selves, which had been muted or suppressed as they navigated the racial dynamics of their hometown contexts. This was articulated by Samantha, who declared: "I'm starting to figure it out. I'm starting to find my voice. I'm starting to figure out who I really am."

For several students, gaining a stronger sense of self involved developing an understanding of their Asian American identity as having deeper meaning and purpose. This was a refreshing change from years of growing up feeling confused or constrained by their racial identity. Cassandra, whose experiences in AAIV prompted her to critically reflect on what it meant to be Asian American, shared:

> I have something different to offer, and the things that I have to offer are good and are valued and they're not just "Oops, you're Asian." It's Asian with a purpose. American with a purpose. It was the first time I had ever heard this message that I had something to contribute … because I don't feel like I ever felt affirmed in my identity growing up.

The notion that being Asian American lent students a distinct perspective to contribute was echoed by Kevin, who, in discussing his Chinese American and Asian American identities, stated:

> [Being Asian American] offers me a unique position, unique life experiences that I can bring to whatever I go into … Everything I do would probably have some sort of Chinese twist on it for sure … I just assume that it's just going to be a part of my life.

Similarly, Michael described the experience of connecting with a community of Filipinx peers and developing a stronger grounding in his racial and ethnic identity as not only empowering, but

also instrumental in identifying "what I wanted to do with my life, and what my life mission was and my vision for what I wanted to accomplish." In other words, "everything just fell into place" once Michael gained a better understanding what it meant for him to be Filipino. The clarity around racial and ethnic identity that students like Michael and others gained through their interactions with peers and student organizations functioned like a compass, providing them with direction as they navigated questions regarding their goals and aspirations.

Being Asian American Is a Bridge to Racial Solidarity

Just over a third of students articulated, albeit to varying degrees of clarity, that being Asian American meant having a stake in racial justice issues affecting communities of color. Most of these students arrived at this understanding of Asian American identity through their involvement in race-related activities in college, as few of them were exposed to opportunities to acquire such knowledge in their hometown and high school environments.

The visibility of campus activism in response to racism at the local and societal level facilitated students' understanding of racial solidarity. Participating in racial demonstrations and related activities compelled students to reflect on their own identities and experiences as Asian Americans. In referencing his past experiences with bullying and harassment while playing sports growing up, Paul stated: "I've definitely dealt with a lot of racism throughout high school and middle school. I think that's a big factor [in my participation], because I know how it feels. I've dealt with it before." Cassandra also shared experiencing feelings of empathy with other students of color, resulting in a personal connection to the issues affecting their communities:

> Finding who I am [with regard to] my ethnic identity has come through experiencing the pain of other ethnic groups … Through doing the die-in and marching with Black students and hearing the pain in their stories, it started something in me.

These feelings prompted Cassandra to become more deeply involved with racial advocacy activities on campus, an experience similar to that of Samantha, who concluded that "instead of just sitting quiet and being like, 'It doesn't impact me, so I don't care,' now it's turning into, 'I'm also a minority. I should also be a part of this.'"

That all three of these students' initial exposure to racial activism on campus was through AAIV is perhaps not surprising, given the organization's emphasis on racial reconciliation. It was not only AAIV participants who were involved in racial advocacy-related activities, however. Luna, for example, also adopted a perspective on racial justice that extended beyond the Asian American experience:

> I understand that there are certain minority groups that have it a lot worse, and so I'm more worried about trying to fix that problem because I know at the end, it's our problem, right? I don't think I'm focused on Asian American issues as much as I am the bigger issue.

For Luna, Asian American identity was important but not central to her engagement with racial justice, which was broader in scope and addressed the systemic and interconnected nature of racism in society. While this was due in part to the disconnect she felt with the Asian American community on campus, it also largely stemmed from the fact that many of her peers in both high school and college were Black, which introduced her to different racial perspectives. Opportunities for Asian American students to interact with other students of color, as well as gain exposure to issues affecting other racial communities, may be important for instilling in them a sense of racial solidarity. The limited access that most of the study participants had to such opportunities growing up (as is likely the case for many other Asian American students in the Midwest as well), however, suggests the value of the college environment in facilitating these

opportunities for students while they are on campus.

Looking Back and Looking Forward

Given how one's racial identity can serve as a lens through which one both sees and navigates through the world (Markus, 2010), I asked students towards the end of their interviews to share how they believe their current understandings of Asian American identity influence their perceptions of the past and their vision for the future. In addition, I prompted students to consider the role of geographic context, namely their experiences living in the Midwest, on their experiences with race and racial identity.

Reinterpreting the Past

Between gaining different understandings of Asian American identity and acquiring new knowledge about race and racism, many students found themselves reflecting upon their prior experiences with new lenses. Doing so brought clarity to moments from their past that either confused them or they were unable to explain, from why their parents did not seem to have friends in the community to why they were tested for placement in ESL classes despite speaking English fluently. Students' new knowledge about race also revealed to them past experiences with racism that they did not recognize at the time, including awkward or uncomfortable interactions with peers, teachers, and others in the community. As Paul remarked, "It definitely has brought a lot to the surface … It's made me look back and realize, 'Dang, I've had my fair share of racism.'"

A number of students had similar revelations when thinking back to their past experiences. Isaac, for example, shared:

> It definitely has changed my perceptions of growing up … It got me to think, "Why didn't I notice these things before?" The learning experience I've had at OSU has let me see

more things about my past that I was completely blind to at the time.

Similarly, John discussed hearing remarks now that bother him and realizing he had heard these things while growing up: “You just hear subtle comments and it's like, ‘Wow. I notice that now.’ Then I'd see myself back then and it's like, ‘I was such an idiot. I shouldn't let people say that to me.’” Having this new-found realization also led students like Baymax to regret not responding to the racist incidents they experienced in the past: “Just thinking about things that happened to me when I was younger … I'm like, ‘Why didn't I say something?’ or “Why didn't I stand up for myself?’ I just took it.”

For some students, these feelings of dissonance were particularly salient when they returned to their hometowns. Although they were back in the same context in which they grew up, they were no longer held the same perspectives regarding race. This led to experiences like the following that Mary Grace recounted:

> I went back home and spent time with my White friends. I couldn't really relate to them anymore … They're like, "Oh, here's my Asian," like hi and everything, which - they don't mean bad intentions through it, but I still feel uncomfortable when they say these kind of things now.

Being exposed to new knowledge and experiences regarding race not only caused students to reexamine their past experiences with racial identity but shifted how they interpreted the interactions they have with their peers.

While students conveyed frustration over not recognizing racism while they were growing up and regret over not doing more to respond to racist incidents as they occurred, they also expressed a degree of appreciation for having gone through the experiences they did. Paul, for example, articulated: "Although it was hard living in Worthington and stuff, it really shaped

who I am and made me grow as a person." Hannah expressed similar feelings regarding her time growing up:

> One thing I will say about Olmsted Falls though - I would almost say I'm grateful for it. That whole experience, that struggle, because without that struggle I don't know honestly if I would be here right now.

These opportunities for retrospection allowed students to recognize how being Asian American had a distinct impact in shaping who they were and have become.

Reflecting on the Midwest. When asked about the impact that growing up in the Midwest has had on their experiences with race and their racial identity, a number of students articulated the belief that they were better situated to engage with issues related to race and diversity because of the racial context of the region. For one, the racial demographics of students' hometowns and high schools were such that many of the students were constantly surrounded by and interacting with others of a different racial background, particularly White people. This led students like Mary Grace to declare, "I'm more comfortable around White people because I grew up with them." The notion of growing accustomed to being around White people was echoed by Jack, who commented on its inevitability within a Midwest context: "It's like you are forced, in some ways, to make friends with White people, which isn't inherently bad, but that kind of dominant culture, just becomes forced upon you inherently, just by being around it."

In addition to providing students with ample opportunities to engage in cross-racial interactions, being immersed in a predominantly White social and cultural environment also led students to become used to being the focus of attention. As Samantha described: "I think that [growing up in the Midwest] has definitely helped me … [to] be more vulnerable with people, because growing up in a predominantly White place, I had to put myself out there a lot." Other students also expressed maintaining an openness to how others may respond or react to them.

Noor, whose physical appearance frequently elicited questions about her racial and religious backgrounds, shared:

> I never really was offended … It was always more of a curiosity that people had, I think … it's [actually] made me want to learn more about [my identity], and understand more about it, so that when people do question me about it, I know and I can answer.

Michael discussed having a similar experience of fielding questions or comments from his peers. These moments not only forced Michael to engage with race-related issues he may not have otherwise, but also prompted him to intentionally consider how to respond most effectively. Over time, this led to confidence in his ability to engage in racial discourse: "I have more practice, too, with the rhetoric of talking about racial things because … sometimes, people will bring up things that you didn't even expect and you're like, 'Oh, my god. I have to think about that now.'" Ultimately, students believed these experiences of constantly educating others about their own identities contributed to their ability to understand other people's backgrounds and perspectives, or as Noor stated: "[It] makes it easier to interact and relate with other people and be more acknowledging and accepting of their differences."

Lastly, students remarked on the potential of the Midwest's small Asian American population to foster a greater sense of community, as Cassandra explained: "I think growing up in the Midwest, because there are so little of us … there's a feeling like these are my people." This feeling of belonging to a broader racial community was most prominent for Cassandra and other students who were actively involved in the Midwest Asian American Student Union (MAASU), an organization that connects and convenes Asian American college students from across the region for conferences and other activities. Recognizing both the limited visibility and the collective power of the Midwest Asian American community led Cassandra to declare the

following about what it means to have an Asian American identity:

> It does spur us on to more advocacy … [because] there's a feeling of if we don't stay proud of it, they'll take it away from us or we'll lose it … I don't know, like an endangered animal, in a way. In danger of being wiped out.

While bordering on hyperbole, Cassandra's suggestion that Asian American identity may be vulnerable to erasure reflects an underlying perception that Asian Americans hold a precarious position within the racial context of the Midwest.

Envisioning the Future

Just as students' understandings of race and racial identity while growing up informed the types of spaces with which they chose to associate in college, students' current understandings of race and racial identity informed their outlook for the future. As students discussed what they envisioned for their post-college lives, the impact of having grown up in a Midwestern environment was evident. Specifically, having been immersed in the geographic context of the Midwest influenced students' aspirations regarding where to live and, with which communities to associate, and what careers to pursue.

Desired location and environment. Despite having spent most if not all of their lives in the Midwest, many students expressed an interest in relocating elsewhere after college. While the novelty of experiencing a different part of the country was a common driving factor, the prospect of living in places like the metropolitan areas of California or the Northeast also represented an opportunity for students to access communities that are more racially diverse than those across much of the Midwest. For several students, part of wanting to live in a more racially diverse environment was the specific desire to be around a community of Asian Americans. Paul, for example, stated:

> I guess after graduating, I think I definitely want to live in a more diverse community. It'd be really cool to live in a big city, like Chicago or New York, or somewhere in California, where there are more Asians, and there's more diversity.

This idea that one would need to leave Ohio to find places with greater racial diversity was echoed by many students, along with the desire for an environment where the stress and fatigue of dealing with racism and social marginalization would be more manageable. As Alex articulated: "I feel like I need to move out of Ohio … It would be nicer or easier, or less stressful, if I lived in a city that's more diverse." Students also expressed related concerns over whether they would feel the same sense of safety and belonging in their post-college environments as they did within the Asian American community in college. Being involved with Asian American student organizations and connecting with Asian American peers at OSU provided students with a glimpse of what having a racial community can provide in terms of strength and support. The fear of losing access to spaces like this once they graduate and leave the college environment weighed on some of the students' minds, as Baymax captured in the following quote:

> [Growing up] just really emphasized for me what it feels like to be a minority and that I didn't have a safe space to run to. Going to OSU, yes, it is majority White, but I was able to have a safe space in an Asian American community … Students who graduate, and they move to other places that don't have as much of a tight-knit Asian American community, they always say, "I'm having a lot of confusion right now, because I kind of feel out of place, not having that safe space to go to." It does make me worried … Will I feel that way when I graduate?

After years of growing up racially isolated, returning to such an environment after college was a daunting prospect for students to consider, and factored into their decisions about potential

geographic locations for graduate school or employment.

While students did not want to live in places with demographics similar to their racially homogenous hometowns, many were also not interested in residing in places with majority-minority populations or neighborhoods comprised of mostly Asian Americans. Isaac, for example, in describing his visits to Chinatown in New York City, shared: "[After] living in the Midwest, [it] feels more like a novelty than a place where I can actually live." While residing in ethnic enclaves would provide students with the level of access to an Asian American community that many of them were seeking, students may perceive the racial contrast between ethnic enclaves and the environments of their hometowns and OSU as too stark to be comfortable.

In fact, a number of students qualified the degree of racial diversity they desired in a future living environment, in that they would prefer communities with only a moderate level of diversity. Rani, for example, alluded to living in a place with a level of racial diversity somewhere between what she experienced in her hometown and at OSU: "I would pick a suburb like the one I grew up in, but maybe with a little more diversity because when I got [to OSU], I thought this was a lot of diversity. So maybe like a middle ground." Hannah also sought what she called a "taste of the middle," which she believed would provide her access to an Asian American community without limiting her to only having Asian American peers: "I do want somewhere … [where] there are other Asian Americans I can resonate with, but also find new people." The racial contexts that students have grown accustomed to, between those of their hometowns and at OSU, played a role in determining the degree of diversity with which students could envision themselves comfortably living in the future.

Not all students expressed a desire to leave Ohio and the Midwest, however. Cassandra

was among the few who were open to remaining in the region, though there were only specific areas she would consider: “I wouldn't mind staying in the Midwest … the little pockets of it that are woke.” When asked to elaborate on the pockets to which she was referring, Cassandra stated, “I'd hate to live in rural Ohio. I don't think I would do well there, where all the Trump signs are. It wouldn't be good. I would just be angry every day, I think.” This stipulation of only living in the cities or urban areas of the Midwest was consistent across students’ responses, with Chicago and Columbus being the most common choices.

While some students cited practical reasons such as attending graduate school for why they would consider staying in Ohio or the Midwest, familiarity with the area, proximity to family, and a lower cost of living were among the more common reasons given. A couple students also believed the region would be ideal for eventually starting a family, though students again mentioned the desire for places with more racial diversity than when they grew up. As Paul and Samantha shared in the focus group:

> Paul: I think I would choose a suburb where it’s not like all Asians, but you’re not – my kids won’t be one of the only Asians in school. So, like, finding that balance.
>
> Samantha: Yeah, I definitely agree with that. Like I wouldn’t think the suburb I grew up in, particularly, to raise children, because I don’t want my children to experience that feeling of “I’m the only one.” You know? So, I guess picking an area where they can be exposed to people who look like them and people of color.

For Cassandra, the motivation for remaining in the Midwest stemmed directly from her experiences with racial identity within that geographic context. Specifically, she believed that discovering what it meant to be Asian American had such a strong impact on her due to the limited opportunities she had to explore racial identity while growing up. Staying in Ohio or the

Midwest to advocate for Asian American- and race-related issues as a way to give back to the community thus became an appealing prospect: "It's been such a formative place in who I am, and the things I've cared to love and things I've passionate about. I think I would just like to be here to share that or continue the legacy." Notably, Cassandra was one of the only students who articulated a reason for staying in the region in such a definitive and compelling manner, suggesting that the factors leading students to consider leaving Ohio and the Midwest may exert a stronger influence than those factors that are encouraging them to stay.

Anticipated career path. With regard to career options, gaining awareness of Asian American and race-related issues led students to consider the implications of their racial identity on their desired career path. Involvement in Asian American activities led a couple students to consider career opportunities related to diversity and social justice, though none of them had yet committed to the idea. Cassandra, for example, was beginning to question her goal of becoming a pharmacist, and whether that would allow her to serve the Asian American community in the way she would like:

> It really has changed the way I see my future … Before, I just thought if I become a pharmacist, I'll work at a hospital or go work at a community pharmacy. I'm realizing that no, I care so much about Asian Americans coming to learn about their identity [that] how can I be serving in a way that [I] can do that.

While Cassandra was trying to identify potential options for merging her interest in social justice with her aspirations of being a pharmacist, Paul had not yet reconciled the idea of pursuing a social justice-related career, which had always been outside the scope of what he considered possible for Asian Americans:

> I definitely thought about what if I got a job that dealt with more, I guess, social justice

> issues and stuff like that, but for me, it's just not really a viable option … [It's] not a path that I guess I've ever really thought of as an option for Asian Americans.

Both Cassandra and Paul had meaningful college experiences with race- and diversity-related issues, which deeply resonated with them and their values. However, they had limited exposure to career options that would allow them to continue their involvement with diversity and social justice issues after college. As a result, both students struggled to identify viable ways of integrating a focus on these issues into their future career plans, leaving them uncertain as to their path after college.

Other students perceived their Asian American identity as having less of an impact on their choice of career, but rather that their racial identity could represent a liability within their desired profession. Specifically, Isaac mentioned being wary of future employers discriminating against him in in the application process due to his last name:

> I do see being Asian American as a bit of a disadvantage in terms of finding jobs … [It's] on my resume that I am a U.S. citizen because there is a chance that when employers see my resume and they see my name they might assume that I need visa sponsorship and just put it on the side.

Alex also shared concerns over the possible consequences of having an Asian last name. Though she is still years away from becoming a dentist, Alex is already worried about prospective patients being deterred from her practice due to her name:

> I've read somewhere that people are less likely to go to a dentist or a physician if they're not able to pronounce the name. I don't know if I should change my name … [or] live in a community that's more diverse or racially tolerant because, as a dentist, I have to have clients. They have to choose me.

Having become accustomed to feelings of racial difference or marginalization while growing up and during college, students were keenly aware that these experiences were likely to continue after they graduate. That students like Isaac and Alex are already considering strategies of buffering against potential racial discrimination in their future careers hints at the impact that students' experiences with race and racial identity can have on their life decisions.

In contrast to a liability, other students believed their Asian American identity would be an asset or an advantage in the career realm. This line of thinking tended to be common among students in business and other pre-professional majors. John, for example, was involved with OSU's chapter of the Society of Asian Scientists and Engineering (SASE), an organization dedicated to the professional development of Asians and Asian Americans in the science and engineering fields. In describing his reasons for his involvement, he stated:

> In engineering, if you don't get a co-op, then it's really hard to get a job in the future … I ended up going to [the SASE] conference just for that … all the companies come there just to pick up their Asian demographic.

Notably, SASE was the only Asian American-related activity in which John was involved, and within that context, his racial identity was a means to secure an opportunity that would help his future career. That John was not active in the other, more culturally- or socially-oriented Asian American organizations on campus suggests that, for some students, being Asian American may serve more of a functional purpose than as a social or cultural identity.

Other students shared a similar idea that, as Asian Americans, they possess particular skills and competencies that employers desire in the workforce, such as cultural or language proficiency. Mary Grace, an accounting major, believed this would afford advantages in the hiring process:

> We know two different cultures so it kind of puts us ahead of the game … Companies want different mindsets and creativity … They want you to speak two different languages. It makes your resume higher up than other people's that don't have the diversity.

Such skills could also open doors to potential career opportunities that may not otherwise be as easily accessible, as Samantha speculated:

> Just being an Asian American physical therapist, that's different [and] I think that that will allow me to go different places … maybe in a Chinese-speaking place, maybe Taiwan or mainland China.

Through the quotes they shared, John, Mary Grace, and Samantha all conveyed perceptions that their Asian American identity could prove advantageous in their career paths. Together, their statements invoked the notion of racial identity as a commodity that potential employers can utilize to diversify their workforce or access new demographic markets. After years of being stigmatized for being different, the opportunity to not only reframe their Asian American identity as something valuable but to also strategically leverage their Asian American identity for personal gain is understandably appealing.

As career exploration is a component of many students' college experiences, many of the students I interviewed were in the midst of discerning potential career options. Among the many different factors that students were considering in their decision-making process were the impact of race and racial identity. Whether being Asian American represented a call to racial advocacy, a potential liability within their chosen field, or a key for unlocking career opportunities, the role of their racial identity in determining possible career options and delineating available career paths was clearly on students' minds.

Summary

Although arriving at college thrust the students of this study into a new environment, it was an environment still firmly situated within the broader geographic context of Ohio and the Midwest. OSU's undergraduate population largely hails from and thus reflects the predominantly White racial demographics of the surrounding region, and the region's social and political conservatism have a tangible impact in shaping the campus culture and racial climate of the institution. Even so, OSU is more diverse than most of the students' hometowns and high schools, including a substantially larger Asian American community than what students had been used to in their home environments. In addition, OSU offers students more points of access to race-related resources than what had been available to them prior to college, from the Multicultural Center and its programs and initiatives to the many Asian American student organizations and their activities. How students navigated this new campus landscape and negotiated their Asian American identities in the process varied, however, influenced by how they experienced race and racial identity while growing up.

From perceptions of the racial diversity and racial climate on campus to the nature and degree of interaction with OSU's Asian American community, students' responses to their college environment differed. Students who came to college with a positive association with their Asian American identity, having had regular access to Asian American peers or spaces for identity exploration, tended to be less involved in Asian American-related activities on campus. In contrast, the students who were more likely to be involved were those who felt racially isolated or marginalized prior to college. Although some opted for ethnically-centered spaces such as the Pilipino and Vietnamese Student Associations, and others gravitated towards racially-centered spaces like the Asian American Association or Asian American InterVarsity,

both groups shared a desire to connect with peers of similar backgrounds after having limited to no access to such a community for most of their lives. This was not the case, however, for all of the students who grew up racially isolated. Several students expressed ambivalence around connecting with other Asian American students, having grown comfortable – or at least accustomed to – being one of the only Asian Americans in their social environment.

Even though the ways in which students navigated their college environment varied, the process of negotiating their racial identity in this new context led many to experience a shift in their understanding of what it meant to be Asian American. Being Asian American was no longer simply about being phenotypically and culturally different, a social outsider, or academically successful, which were how most of the students understood their Asian American identities prior to college. For many, being Asian American was now a valuable and important aspect of their identity, and one that provided a sense of direction and purpose to their lives. Some students were beginning to explore connections between Asian American identity and the broader racial justice movement, for example, thereby deepening and complicating their understandings of what it means to be Asian American. As students' constructions of racial identity continued to evolve, so too did their perspective on the role of race in their lives – from the past to the present, and into the future. Growing up in the Midwest thus not only had an impact on how students experienced Asian American identity prior to and during college, but it appears to also influence students' plans and aspirations for their post-college lives as well.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

As the proverbial heartland of the U.S., the Midwest has become characterized as "genuine and boring, pastoral and provincial, friendly and naïve, solid and square" (Kim, 2015, para. 13) within the general American consciousness. The region's racial and cultural homogeneity has also associated the Midwest with monikers like "vast banana wasteland" (Wei, 1993, p. 30), suggesting that Asian Americans are not only few and far between but also lost and forgotten within this geographic region. Yet, the documented historical presence of Asian American communities in the Midwest, combined with the current and projected growth of the Asian American population within the region, present a direct challenge to this common yet misguided assumption that Asian Americans are absent from Middle America (see Wilkinson & Jew, 2015).

It is critical for higher education institutions to pay attention to this demographic shift, as it signals an impending increase of Asian American students at colleges and universities across the region as the next generation of youth graduates from high school and begins arriving on campus. Understanding how these students have experienced race in their hometown environments and the impact of these experiences on both their racial identities and their sense of self will be key to ensuring our campus racial climates are supportive and inclusive of this population as they transition to college. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore the impact of geography on Asian American students' experiences with race, guided by the following research question: How do the social, cultural, and political contexts of geographic location influence how Asian American students make meaning of their racial identity?

To answer this research question, I conducted a qualitative, single-site case study (Yin, 2014) at The Ohio State University (OSU), a large, public Midwestern institution. The bulk of

my data collection for this study occurred during a 10-day site visit to OSU in the fall of 2016. Sixteen Asian American undergraduates, all of whom grew up in the Midwest and represented a range of ethnicities, academic majors, and areas of campus involvement, participated in individual semi-structured interviews on their hometown and college experiences with race and racial identity. In addition, eight of these students also participated in a focus group where they collectively reflected on the contextual influences of Ohio and the Midwest region.

While on site, I also conducted non-participant observations around campus to glean insight into the day-to-day racial dynamics at OSU. Upon returning from my visit, I reviewed and mapped demographic data from the U.S. Census, federal and state Departments of Education, and OSU to better understand students' multilayered social contexts. I also reviewed news articles, websites, and other documents to gain additional information on the cultural and political contexts of students' hometowns, OSU, and the surrounding state and region.

My data analysis utilized Charmaz's (2006) constant comparative coding methods, which aligned with my constructivist orientation that centers students' narratives and interpretations of their subjective experiences. After several rounds of coding using a combination of *a priori*, in vivo, process, and focused coding methods (Saldaña, 2015), I employed methods of situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) to visually organize my codes and categories in ways that allowed me to discern latent relationships and derive overarching themes. Guided by a theoretical framework that combined concepts from ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994/2004), racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2015), and racial identity construction (Wong, 2011), the central finding that emerged from this study was that the Midwest's distinct social, cultural, and political contexts interacted to create and delimit a particular set of conditions within which study participants constructed their understandings of Asian American identity.

More specifically, students drew upon the information about race that was available to them within their surrounding multilayered ecological contexts and interpreted these sets of knowledge in various ways as they assembled their definitions of Asian American identity. It was through this identity negotiation process that being Asian American came to mean being phenotypically and culturally different, marginalized and an outsider, unique and special, or academically successful within students' hometown environments. The college environment at OSU, however, offered different sets of knowledge that students could use to augment, modify, or reconstruct these understandings of Asian American identity. In other words, students' understandings of Asian American identity within their contexts prior to college served as the reference point against which they made meaning of the racial knowledge and experiences they encountered within the context of college. How students made meaning of this newly available knowledge, from what aspects they chose to integrate into their existing racial definitions to their reasons for doing so, was central to the (re)construction of their Asian American identities.

In this concluding chapter, I synthesize the major findings of this study to offer a geographic perspective for understanding how Asian American students in the Midwest experience and make meaning of race and racial identity. Although this study is specifically focused on the Midwest region, I argue that a geographic lens can be a valuable tool to understand the factors contributing to students' racial experiences in *any* and *all* contexts. In addition to discussing this study's connection and contribution to the existing literature on Asian American college students and racial identity, I also outline a number of implications this study raises for research and practice in higher education, and conclude with the significance of this study within the country's current and emerging sociopolitical landscape.

Crafting Regional Racial Narratives: Structuring Racial Contexts

Growing up in Midwestern suburban neighborhoods, students were immersed within a macrosystem that promoted traditional notions of a comfortable, upwardly mobile, middle class American lifestyle. These allusions to the popular narrative of the American Dream (Clark, 2003; Hochschild, 1995) and the theoretical notion of the White spatial imaginary (Lipsitz, 2011) circulated throughout students' hometown environments. As racial projects, both the American Dream and the White spatial imaginary have historically linked suburbia, meritocracy, and success with Whiteness through exosystem forces, from immigration and labor policies that facilitated the upward mobility of early European immigrants (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007) to redlining practices of government and banks that systematically segregated urban and suburban neighborhoods by race (Lipsitz, 2011; Solórzano & Vélez, 2017).

These macrosystem and exosystem contexts structured students' experiences of race and racial identity, setting the stage well before the students were even born. For example, many of their parents' journeys reflected the American Dream, as many migrated to the U.S. specifically for educational or professional pursuits. While Asian immigrant communities have historically tended to settle in urban centers along the East and West coasts of the U.S., students' parents joined the smaller pockets of Asian American communities in the Midwest. Initially pulled by economic forces related to education and employment, they eventually stayed for the opportunities the U.S. offered them and their children. Parents' decisions to reside in the Midwest suburbs, with their promises of upward mobility and a positive quality of life, therefore effectively situated students within a predominantly to extremely White racial context - a context deliberately manufactured through decades of housing, economic, and social policies designed to segregate racial communities in the region (Haywood, 2013).

This racial context and its emphasis on conformity and social harmony contributed to a mesosystem environment where different racial identities and experiences received limited recognition, let alone validation. Students' descriptions of their social interactions in their hometowns and high schools suggested an absence of meaningful discourse regarding race and diversity, which was also reflected in the imagery and language on the websites of students' hometowns and high schools themselves. This phenomenon both contributed to and perpetuated the racialization of Asian Americans as invisible, White, or "the other" by those in students' microsystems, from peers and classmates to school officials and neighborhood residents. Not only did these racial constructions fail to affirm students' already tenuous Asian American identities, but they also reinforced the Black-White paradigm that has dominated much of the racial discourse in the U.S. (Alcoff, 2003; Perea, 1997).

The Black-White paradigm conceptualizes race in the U.S. as a dualistic or binary phenomenon structured along an axis of privilege and power and constructed through the historical and contemporary relationship between Whites and Blacks (Kim, 2000). As the nation's population diversifies, however, scholars have debated whether and how other racial groups are positioned within the paradigm. It has been argued, for example, that the experience of Asian Americans is more closely aligned with that of Whites, to that of Blacks, or located outside the paradigm altogether (Alcoff, 2003). While the experiences of the students in the study do not offer a definitive answer, they do highlight the imperfect nature of the Black-White paradigm and its limited ability to adequately capture the Asian American experience.

This has particular implications for the Midwest region, given its historical and contemporary contexts with regard to racial demographics and race relations. The discourse resulting from recent racial incidents in Ferguson, Missouri and the University of Missouri-

Columbia, for example, not only highlighted the racism that still exists but also how deeply entrenched the Black-White paradigm is in the region (Marans & Stewart, 2015). Further contributing to Asian Americans' peripheral position within the Midwestern racial landscape is the region's sociopolitical climate. The 2016 presidential election recently brought existing tensions around race, immigration, and the economy into sharper focus, particularly within the Upper Midwest and Rust Belt regions that contributed heavily to President Trump's election victory (Horn & Fugelberg, 2016; Levy, 2016; Tavernise, 2016). Immersed within the conventional and conservative leanings of this politically polarized climate, many students experienced racial marginalization, or at best racial isolation, throughout their childhood and into their college years.

Emerging from these multilayered contextual influences are narratives of race that are regionally defined and that circulate throughout students' lived experiences. For one, the racially homogenous demographics of students' hometowns and surrounding areas positioned White racial identity as the norm, both literally in terms of numbers and figuratively with regards to students' psychological point of reference. In addition, the suburban and small-town landscape of the Midwest created an environment where values of niceness and friendliness translated into notions of convention and conformity - a challenging proposition for the students of the study, who were physically, culturally, and racially different. Lastly, with racial discourse heavily centered around relations between Whites and Blacks, Asian Americans were frequently rendered invisible or relegated to the margins. These regional racial narratives not only underlay the processes of racial formation within a Midwest context but also contributed to students' formative experiences with race and racial identity.

Responding to Regional Racial Narratives: Constructing Racial Identities

How the students in this study responded to the regional racial narratives that were circulating within their environmental contexts illustrates the crux of racial identity construction. Just as Moya and Markus (2010) theorized racial identity as the outcome of interactions between an individual and the world around them, the students incorporated messages from their various ecosystems regarding what it meant to be Asian American into their personal definitions of racial identity. Discerning an Asian American identity was thus a contextualized phenomenon, shaped by the interaction between external environmental forces and students' internal meaning-making processes.

This notion of a contextually constructed racial identity supports prior research on communities of color in different geographic areas (Cheng, 2013; Wong, 2011), with the idea that the information available for students to make meaning of race and racial identity is specific to geographic location. This includes interpersonal interactions and relationships, which contributed substantially to how students in this study made meaning of racial identity in their Midwestern hometown environments. Students' experiences of being Asian American around parents and siblings at home, around peers and classmates in their predominantly White schools, around racial and ethnic peers at local ethnic organizations (if available), and around members of their suburban communities exposed them to particular narratives regarding race and racial identity.

For one, all of the students grew up knowing that the labels "Asian" or "Asian American" described them. However, their relationship to these identities was not simple nor straightforward, especially in a context where Asian Americans are often physically hypervisible yet socially invisible. This paradoxical experience, which has also been documented in previous studies on Asian Americans in the Midwest (Kim, 2001, 2015) gave rise to narratives of Asian

American identity as something students should embrace and protect, hide and suppress, or dismiss and ignore. Students negotiated their racial identity vis-a-vis these narratives, filtered through different spaces and different groups of people.

For example, students varied in response to their Midwestern suburban neighborhoods and their particular social and cultural characteristics. A few students opted to blend in with their peers and embrace the community-oriented atmosphere of their predominantly White hometowns, at times preferring it to places with a larger presence of Asian Americans. Other students recognized that the supposedly pleasant and comfortable lifestyle of their hometowns were not fully inclusive of them, causing them to become skeptical or even wary of the racial dynamics within their hometown environments. Lastly, a number of students attempted to resist the racial hegemony of their hometowns by rejecting pressures to assimilate or "whitewash," while simultaneously critiquing their peers' and classmates' attempts to do so. Constructing Asian American identity was thus an active process, bound within and affected by specific environmental contexts.

Another salient aspect of many students' experiences, and one that was also intricately linked to environmental context, was their limited access to Asian American communities. This racial isolation, in turn, limited their opportunities to meaningfully explore racial identity. As is the case in regions like the Midwest where Asian American communities are geographically dispersed (Kim, 2015; Trieu, 2016), students' Asian American identities were often compartmentalized by time and distance. Immersion in a racial and ethnic community on a periodic basis (e.g., once a week or several times a year) or at distant locations (e.g., another town or state) contrasted the near-daily experiences of racial difference or isolation in more immediate school and neighborhood environments. As "isolated ethnics" (Trieu, 2016) in nearly

all-White spaces and with only occasional exposure to other Asian Americans, students developed feelings ranging from passive resignation to active resentment towards their Asian American identity.

While racial isolation is common and prevalent for Asian Americans in the Midwest, it is important not to universalize that experience to all Asian American students who reside in the region. Two students in this study, Lily and Kevin, had experiences that aligned with those whom Trieu (2016) called "everyday ethnics," or Asian Americans with direct or regular access to a racial or ethnic community. Growing up with a relatively sizable number of Asian American peers in school provided both Lily and Kevin with a degree of social support and validation. As the only student with access to a school-sponsored club for Asian American students, Kevin also had the unique opportunity to learn about historical and contemporary issues affecting the Asian American community. Although Lily's and Kevin's experiences were in the minority of the students in this study, they likely reflect those of others who also reside in the few places in the Midwest where Asian American communities are geographically clustered.

Ultimately, these various identity negotiation processes that students underwent were what led some students to feel different and others to believe they were "basically White," some students to feel like marginal outsiders and others to feel unique and special, and still others to believe they had no choice but to be academically competitive and successful. However, as contextually constructed racial identities, changes to students' contexts - as what occurred when they transitioned to college - resulted in shifts in how they understood their Asian American identities.

Navigating the College Context: Reconstructing Racial Identities

Although OSU is situated within the same regional context as students' hometowns,

attending college entailed a shift in students' various ecological systems. The passage of time between students' high school years and their college years represented a change in their chronosystems, for example, and being enrolled in college meant students were now exposed to exosystem influences of the higher education system. From institutional policies governing undergraduate recruitment and enrollment to institutional practices pertaining to diversity and equity, all affected how students experienced race while in college. In addition, the college environment also encompassed new microsystem and mesosystem influences, including a new social landscape and a new campus culture. Collectively, these multiple contextual influences structured the college environment in ways that promoted and upheld certain discourses about race, while also contributing to students' experiences with race and racial identity.

In this section, I discuss students' experiences transitioning to the college environment at OSU, as well as how they navigated the racial landscape of campus. This is followed by a look to towards the future and how geographic context affects what students envision for their personal and professional lives after college. Because this part of the discussion lends itself well to implications for higher education research and practice, relevant and tangible recommendations are interwoven throughout.

Transitioning to the College Environment

The transition to college can be a critical moment in identity exploration and development for Asian American students. As this study demonstrated, Asian American students at Midwestern institutions are likely to arrive on campus without having explored their racial identity in intentional or meaningful ways. As such, institutions may want to consider facilitating such opportunities for Asian American students once they are in college. Faculty and staff in functional areas that are involved in students' transitional experiences – whether orientation and

first-year programs, residential life and student activities, or academic advising and first-year seminars – are particularly well positioned to guide students in critically reflecting on their experiences with race and racial identity. Integrating individual or group reflection activities into the schedule of new student orientation, the agendas of residence hall floor meetings, or the lesson plans of first-year seminars, for example, can provide Asian American students with structured opportunities for identity exploration.

In addition, institutions can strengthen the effectiveness of diversity-related programming and activities that occur during students' initial years in college by recognizing the impact of students' pre-college contexts on how they experience race and racial identity. For some of the students in the study who grew up racially isolated, for example, encountering a community of racial peers for the first time was an intimidating and overwhelming experience. This may be similar at other Midwestern institutions, where Asian American students likely also hail from hometowns with small Asian American populations. The tension students may feel from desiring to connect with but not knowing how to approach a racial community is an area in which student affairs professionals may be able to provide support and guidance. In addition to hosting dedicated welcome socials and similar events for first-year Asian American students, institutions may want to consider smaller-scale opportunities such as individual or small group peer mentoring programs for students to connect with other Asian Americans.

Attention to the demographics of the student body is also an important consideration for institutions in their support of Asian American students. This is particularly the case with regard to the Asian international student population. Contributing to the study participants' experiences of marginalization at OSU was the conflation of Asian American and Asian international students' identities and experiences. This phenomenon, which is becoming increasingly common

at many institutions (Wang, 2016), invokes the long-standing racial project of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners (Kim, 1999). With classmates ignoring or avoiding students due to assumptions of their foreignness and negative perceptions of their identities, the feelings of difference that students experienced in their hometowns continued into college. Faced with a racial discourse that positioned them as foreign or different, students were compelled to differentiate themselves from international students by intentionally accentuating or exaggerating their Asian *American* identities.

Further research on this identity negotiation process and the resulting campus climate for these communities warrants consideration, particularly as the Asian international student population at U.S. colleges and universities grows due to exosystem-level enrollment practices aimed at diversification and revenue generation (LaFranchi, 2012; Lewin, 2012) and amid a macrosystem-level sociopolitical climate that is increasingly xenophobic and hostile towards communities perceived to be different (Guha, 2017). Institutions may also want to also consider efforts to educate the campus population about the different experiences of Asian American and Asian international students, as well as implement intergroup dialogues or other initiatives to address latent or explicit tensions between the two populations.

An additional consideration related to campus demographics is the diversity within the Asian American community, which can translate into a range of experiences among the Asian American student population on campus. In addition to their racial identities, for example, the students in the study discussed how their ethnic (e.g., Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Korean, Vietnamese), religious (e.g., Christian, Muslim), sexual orientation (e.g., gay), and other (e.g., transracial adoptee) identities differently affected how they experienced and adjusted to the new environment of college. This variation in students' experiences invalidates the common

misconception of Asian American students as a monolithic group and challenges practitioners to be more nuanced in their approach to working with the Asian American students on their campus. I offer a more detailed discussion of this point in the next section.

Navigating the Campus Racial Landscape

The presence and accessibility of a community of Asian American peers on campus introduced the study participants to a new social landscape, one that allowed them to interact with Asian Americans in ways they were not easily able to prior to college. Racial student organizations like the Asian American Association, as well as ethnic student organizations like the Pilipino Student Association or the Vietnamese Student Association, represented opportunities for identity exploration that were previously unavailable to students. As such, they were more than just sites of socialization; they were also microsystem environments for gaining awareness and making meaning of Asian American identity, echoing prior research on the value and role of these organizations in affirming and developing students' racial and ethnic identities (Inkelas, 2004; Museus, 2008; Trieu, 2017). Staff in student activities offices and cultural centers should therefore consider allocating resources, from dedicated funding to designated faculty and staff advisors, in support of these types of student organizations.

The distinct yet intertwined nature of racial and ethnic identity among Asian American students, as demonstrated by the students in the study and also discussed in prior research (see Johnston-Guerrero & Pizzolato, 2016), suggests the need for institutions to nurture both racial *and* ethnic spaces for Asian American students' identity exploration. Additionally, these spaces may not be the only or primary microsystem spaces for identity exploration. A number of students made connections with their Asian American identities in college by way of other identity-related experiences, including those involving religious faith, sexual orientation,

sociopolitical orientation, or academic interests. Serving as what Accapadi (2012) described as points of entry to racial consciousness, these experiences each represented distinct pathways for students to discern what it meant to be Asian American. These experiences not only indicate that students are constructing racial identity across multiple campus spaces, but also reflect the importance of acknowledging students' multiple and intersecting identities.

For students who identified as gay, for example, challenges with visibility and inclusion within both the general and the student of color LGBTQ student organizations heightened the salience of their Asian American identities. Feeling isolated and marginalized within these spaces led these students to critically reflect on their racial identity, and how being gay and Asian American uniquely shaped their racial experiences on campus. Similarly, students involved in Asian American InterVarsity (AAIV) were prompted to explore the intersection of their religious and racial identities, and in doing so, constructed an understanding of Asian American identity informed by their spiritual beliefs. This is what made the concept of racial reconciliation particularly resonant, which also oriented them towards racial solidarity efforts. For these and other students involved in advocacy and activism-related activities, their participation exposed them to broader racial justice issues and led them to understand Asian American identity as intertwined with the experiences of other communities of color.

As such, research on the role of student organizations in Asian American students' experiences of identity should expand beyond traditional racial and ethnic student groups to more fully examine these other types of student organizations as they may also be critical sites for racial identity development (see Park, Lew & Chiang, 2013). Increased attention to such spaces in institutional practice is also warranted, from including these organizations in outreach efforts geared towards Asian American students to forging collaborations between multicultural

affairs staff and the staff advisors to these organizations. In addition, future studies can more deeply explore Asian American students' reasons for involvement, or lack thereof, in these different types of activities – including whether and how these reasons may be shaped by geographic context.

This study also offers potential explanations for Asian American students' real or perceived absence from campus racial activism activities (Cheng, 2015). Particularly within the Midwest, college is likely the first time many Asian American students are gaining consciousness of race as a social identity. Students' energies may therefore be consumed with making meaning of this newly-discovered racial identity within the mesosystem of the campus environment, from the novelty of connecting with a racial community to the excitement of establishing friendships with Asian American peers. Unless the spaces in which students are involved intentionally engage them in racial advocacy – as AAIV and the Midwest Asian American Student Union (MAASU) did for the students in the study – students may not have the awareness or knowledge to seek them out and are therefore likely to remain engaged in more socially-oriented activities.

Not all of the students in the study had a strong affiliation with the term "Asian American." For some, the term evoked ambivalence due to negative or, at best, neutral experiences with race in their hometown environments. While these students did not explicitly deny or reject their racial identity, they also tended not to gravitate towards campus programs and services specifically targeted towards Asian Americans. Institutions may want to consider alternative ways of engaging this particular group of Asian American students on their campuses, from programs that are more multicultural in nature, such as a multicultural leadership initiative or service learning project, to those that are issue- rather than identity-based, such as a mental

health awareness or career exploration workshop. Because these types of activities are also conducive to identity exploration, they are well suited to engage Asian American students in meaningful reflection on their racial identity, which can be particularly valuable for those students who may not otherwise have the opportunity.

Beyond the realm of student organizations and activities, students in this study also encountered race-related experiences in other places on OSU's campus, ranging from academic spaces like the classroom, to co-curricular spaces like the Multicultural Center, to physical spaces like The Oval. The differing racial experiences students had as they traversed across these different spaces on campus parallels what other scholars have termed microclimates (Vaccaro, 2012) or microcontexts (Chan, 2017a). Research that yields deeper insight into how micro-level campus spaces differently affect Asian American students, particularly studies utilizing spatial methods such as heat maps (e.g., Kenyon College, n.d.; Venn, 2016) or walking interviews (Harris, 2016), would enhance institutions' ability to address the campus racial climate for their Asian American population.

Asian American students constructed their understanding of racial identity in different, and in some cases, multiple spaces on campus. This not only speaks to the importance of recognizing students' multiple and intersecting identities, but also the value of multi-factor (as opposed to linear) approaches to understanding racial identity development (e.g., Accapadi, 2012; Wijeyesinghe, 2001, 2012). Particularly in areas like the Midwest, where students' racial and ethnic identities may not be their foremost or most salient identities due to the lack of opportunity to develop these identities prior to college, recognizing the varied pathways that Asian American students may develop racial consciousness and construct racial identity takes on greater importance.

Envisioning Life After College

Students' narratives illustrated the role of geographic context in structuring the environment in ways that steered students towards certain constructions of Asian American identity. Although OSU was situated within the same geographic region as students' hometowns, and thus subject to similar macrosystem-level influences, the campus environment introduced students to new sets of knowledge and information regarding race. This provided students with opportunities to reevaluate and redefine their understandings of Asian American identity, while also revealing new possibilities for expressing their racial identity.

This is not to say that exploration of racial identity was guaranteed by virtue of students' attending OSU, however. As a contextual environment, OSU offered students various points of entry for making meaning of their Asian American identities, but not all students took advantage of or participated in these access points to the same degree, if at all. Some students intentionally sought out these opportunities and some discovered them accidentally, while others opted not to participate at all due to lack of interest or perceived need. The outcomes of these different pathways, as the students in this study demonstrated, ranged from confidence and assuredness to ambivalence and uncertainty regarding one's Asian American identity and the role it plays in one's everyday life.

These understandings of Asian American identity not only shaped students' current experiences on campus but also affected what they envisioned for their short- and long-term futures. From what students projected their career path could be to where in the country they desired to live, the influence of geographic context extended to decisions regarding their future trajectories. As such, these post-college aspirations represent an extension of students' chronosystems; just as students' experiences with race prior to college informed the race-related

choices they made during college, students' experiences with race in college are in turn shaping their choices for the next phase of their lives.

A number of students, for example, discussed their racial identity as a salient factor in their career discernment process. Those who were not as involved in Asian American- or race-related activities, and thus more ambivalent about their racial identity, tended to view being Asian American in terms of an asset or liability within their desired professions. In contrast, those who were actively involved in Asian American- or race-related activities, and therefore embraced their Asian American identity, were more likely to express interest in careers that would allow them to continue engaging with issues of race and diversity. However, with demographic constraints of their environment limiting their exposure to examples of Asian Americans in such careers, some students struggled to see this as a viable option for them after they graduate.

For this latter group, programs and initiatives that introduce them to diversity- and social justice-related career options across a range of professions may be worth implementing. Partnerships with public health, social entrepreneurship, environmental justice, community arts, and other justice and equity-centered organizations, for example, can help Asian American students envision new and different possibilities for their careers. The wide network of local, regional, and national Asian American nonprofit and community organizations around the country may be a useful resource in this area, serving as a potential source of guest speakers, internship opportunities, or programmatic offerings.

Regardless of career aspiration, many of the students in the study shared aspirations of leaving Ohio and the Midwest after they graduate. Propelled by a desire to seek communities with a larger presence of Asian Americans, or communities which are at least more racially

diverse than their hometowns or OSU, students had their sights set on urban areas of California and the Northeast. The economic consequences of this "brain drain" phenomenon, particularly in rural and post-industrial regions of the country, has garnered much attention (Fiore et al., 2015; Florida, 2006; Hansen, Ban, & Huggins, 2003). That Asian American students are compelled to migrate away from the state and region due to factors related to race and racism should therefore be of concern for OSU and similar Midwestern land-grant institutions, given their missions to serve the public good of the state.

Studies that examine Asian American students' post-graduation trajectories and their contributing factors may be of interest, particularly in Ohio and other Midwestern states where the high outmigration of college graduates has made retaining them a priority (Bui, 2016). Research on Asian American alumni would be of similar value, including the extent to which they attribute their decisions regarding where to live and what careers to pursue to their undergraduate experiences with race and racial identity. Findings from such studies can inform institutional efforts to enhance the campus racial climate for their Asian American students, thereby supporting their identity development while also potentially increasing the likelihood of their remaining in the local region upon graduation.

No matter where students end up geographically, however, they will likely experience another shift in their ecological systems, exposing them to new microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and potentially macrosystem influences. Ensuring that Asian American students are equipped to socially and professionally navigate these post-college environments is an area where student affairs practitioners can play an important role. Senior transition programs designed to facilitate students' transition to life after college (Yeadon, 2009), for example, can integrate workshops or other opportunities for students to intentionally examine the geographic

contexts of where their prospective graduate school, employment, or other post-college options are located. Similarly, academic advisors, career counselors, and multicultural center staff can help Asian American students consider and prepare for the racial implications of living and working in different regions of the country.

Ultimately, institutions must do more than simply provide Asian American students with access to racial and ethnic student organizations, multicultural office and centers, ethnic and Asian American studies, or other campus avenues for racial identity exploration. There needs to be an equal investment in facilitating students' participation and utilization of these resources, and assisting them in applying the knowledge they acquire from these spaces to their current and future lives. This is especially the case for Asian American students who may not immediately recognize the value of these resources, whether because race is not as salient of an identity to them or they did not have the chance to meaningfully reflect on their Asian American identity prior to college.

This last point is worth reiterating. Not only does it describe a central aspect of many Asian Americans' experiences of race – particularly within regions like the Midwest – but it also illustrates the importance of understanding the processes of racial formation and racial identity construction for Asian American students. A confluence of historical and sociopolitical forces has obscured the presence and positionality of Asian Americans within the nation's racial landscape to the point where Asian American students' understanding of racial identity is often limited, due to the lack of access to relevant race-related knowledge and resources throughout much of their lives. The college environment, however, can provide students with opportunities to learn about and construct meaning of their Asian American identity in novel ways. As articulated by the students in this study, these newly discovered understandings of racial identity

can also potentially affect students' sense of who they are today and who they may become in the future. Given this critical role that colleges and universities can play in students' racial identity formation, I offer some additional implications for practice that institutions across all geographic regions should consider.

Further Considerations for Institutional Practice

Although this study was focused on one Midwestern institution, institutions in all locations can benefit from greater understanding the effects of geographic context on how their students experience issues of race and diversity. Admissions, institutional research, and student affairs assessment offices can all play valuable roles in this area. Many institutions already collect data on students' geographic backgrounds for recruitment and admissions purposes; analyzing this data by race and ethnicity would yield additional insight into demographic trends in student enrollment. Disaggregating enrollment patterns by ethnic group (e.g., Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese) would be particularly useful for institutions to better understand their Asian American student population, given that the ethnic composition of Asian American communities tends to vary by geography (Lai & Arguelles, 2003). Furthermore, by mapping this data at the local, regional, and national level, and then comparing these maps to maps illustrating the demographic, social, cultural, political contexts of the corresponding regions, institutions can visualize and better understand the spatial contexts from which their Asian American students are arriving.

This information can also assist faculty and staff in working more effectively with the Asian American population on campus. Curricular content within ethnic studies programs can be tailored in ways that resonate with students' geographically contextualized experiences, an approach that could easily be applied to sociology, history, psychology, and other disciplines as

well. In the Midwest, for example, the fact that the region boasts large populations of both Southeast Asian refugees and transracial Chinese and Korean adoptees can serve as a springboard for examining the connections between foreign policy, immigration law, community formation, and identity development (see Lee, 2009). Doing so would not only provide a regional focus to the study of these topics but also recognize the distinct experiences that Asian American students from those particular backgrounds may have had while growing up.

Similarly, institutions' multicultural affairs, diversity and inclusion, and other offices can consider geographic context when designing their race- and diversity-related programs, from the language and terminology they use to talk about race to the assumptions and expectations they hold regarding students' familiarity with race-related topics. For example, this study demonstrated that the Midwest's distinct historical, demographic, and sociopolitical context may lead Asian American students in the region to understand race through a strong Black and White binary lens. Midwestern institutions may therefore have a greater need to assist Asian American students in gaining critical awareness of their racial identities through reflection-based activities and educational programming before they can effectively engage them in interracial solidarity and coalition-building activities.

Another area in which understanding geographic context can inform institutional practice is in student recruitment and enrollment. Geographic shifts in recruitment and enrollment patterns, such as increasing the percentage of out-of-state or international students (Hoover & Keller, 2011; LaFranchi, 2012), can result in student populations with different perspectives on race and racial identity. This may especially be true if racial diversification of the student body is among the intended outcomes of these recruitment strategies (Franklin, 2013). Research that examines how these demographic shifts in the student body affect the nature and quality of

students' cross-racial interactions, as well as the resulting impact on campus racial climate, can inform the creation of institutional initiatives related to racial diversity. Strategic plans for diversity and inclusion, curricular diversity requirements, diversity awareness and education programs, and responses to campus racial incidents are just a few examples of areas that can benefit from a geographic perspective regarding how students experience race and racial identity.

In addition to enhancing institutional knowledge about the Asian American student population, the importance of having adequate representation of Asian American administrators and a visible presence of multicultural and diversity-related offices cannot be understated. Many participants in this study referenced OSU's Multicultural Center and the staff coordinator for Asian American student activities as critical in their identity exploration process, supporting prior research that has indicated the value of these campus resources (Patton, 2010). Institutions that are concerned about the positive well-being of their Asian American students should therefore allocate the necessary resources to best serve this student population, including investing in the recruitment and retention of Asian American faculty and staff. This is another area in which attention to the composition of the Asian American student body is important. Institutions located in regions like the Midwest, with its larger presence of South Asian and Southeast Asian Americans (AACAJ, 2012), for example, should consider hiring faculty and staff of these backgrounds to serve as role models for students who share these identities.

In geographic areas where Asian American students represent a small percentage of a school's undergraduate population, collaborative programming efforts across multiple institutions can expand the number of opportunities for Asian American students to build a sense of community and develop a sense of identity. Joint social events, educational programs, and even course offerings may be worth exploring, especially if individual institutions' resources for

such initiatives are limited. In addition, regional Asian American student organizations such as MAASU and its equivalents on the East Coast (i.e., East Coast Asian American Student Union [ECAASU]) and the Southeast (i.e., Southeast Regional Council of Asian American Leaders [SERCAAL]) can offer Asian American students the rare yet empowering experience of connecting with peers with shared racial and regional experiences (Kodama, Poon, Manzano, & Sihite, 2017). Institutions should intentionally encourage and support their Asian American students' involvement in these activities, including allocating the funds necessary for students to participate in or even host these organizations' conferences and gatherings.

Further Considerations for Research

Most of the recommendations for future research discussed thus far address and build upon the specific findings that emerged from this study. However, this study also offers a number of broader and more general implications for research on geographic context and college students' experiences. In this section, I suggest potential research topics and methodological designs for future studies on the relationship between geography and identity. Some address this current study's limitations, while others expand the scope of inquiry that this study introduces to higher education research.

This study's focus on geographic and spatial contexts adds to the body of literature on Asian American college students and racial identity, joining the work of scholars who are also introducing new lenses through which to better understand how Asian American students experience and make meaning of race and their Asian American identities (e.g., Accapadi, 2012; Johnston-Guerrero & Pizzolato, 2016; Samura, 2016; Wong, 2011). There are, however, a number of opportunities for future studies to address the limitations of this study and enhance what is known about the relationship between geography and Asian American students'

experiences with race and racial identity.

First, as this study was limited by time and resources, researchers may want to consider more immersive case study designs. This could include participant sampling strategies to increase the representativeness of the Asian American population, particularly in ways that include multiracial Asian American students and more Southeast Asian, South Asian, and transracial Asian adoptee students, given the concentration of these populations in the Midwest (AACAJ, 2012; Lai & Arguelles, 2003). Conducting interviews with other students of color (e.g., Black, Latinx, Arab American, Middle Eastern, Native American) and White students may provide additional perspectives on the campus climate, including how Asian American students are perceived by other student populations. Conversations with faculty, student affairs staff, and administrators who work directly with Asian American students, as well those who do not, may also offer institutional perspectives that student interviews may not adequately capture.

In addition, the opportunity to visit and perform observations of students' hometown environments would provide additional context for students' experiences prior to college and serve as an additional data source for researchers to triangulate with students' narratives. Furthermore, because nearly all of the students in this study grew up in suburban environments, studies that explore how urban and rural areas shape Asian American students' experiences with race would complement this study and provide a fuller picture of how the Midwest region structures the boundaries of racial formation for Asian Americans. Conducting longitudinal studies in which Asian American students are interviewed in high school and again after they have enrolled in college would also contribute further richness and depth to the higher education field's understanding of this topic, as it would allow researchers to capture students' perceptions of their hometown environments while they are still immersed in them, as opposed to

retrospectively.

Similarly, research that expands the scope of inquiry to include multiple institutions across the Midwest would add to what is known about the regional context's influence on Asian American students. Case studies focusing on other geographic locations would also broaden higher education's understanding of the Asian American student experience. Examining how Asian American students construct racial identity in the Deep South, for example, would be an interesting study given the region's distinct historical, social, cultural, and political contexts with regard to race. In addition, comparative studies on institutions in different parts of the country can highlight both regional commonalities and differences in racial identity for Asian American students, as would studies that examine the experiences of Asian American students who migrate to different geographic regions for college (see Chan, 2017b).

Particularly for institutions in the Midwest, the findings of this study also indicated the need to challenge the normativity of Whiteness and its effect on Asian American students' perceived choices for enacting their racial identities. Future research can delve deeper into the processes of racial identity construction and examine whether certain sets of racial knowledge or race-related experiences are more effective in prompting Asian American students to think critically about their racial identity, or at least more likely to catalyze this identity negotiation process. In addition, whether geography and its associated ecological contexts moderates the availability, quality, and impact of these sets of knowledge and experiences would also be worth exploring.

The notion that geographic context can influence students' identity development also extends beyond Asian American students. How other students of color, LGBTQ students, and even students of different faith backgrounds understand their identities may also vary depending

on the state or region where they grow up and attend college, thereby opening up multiple lines of inquiry for future research to explore. On a related note, researchers who study identity may want to include a brief examination of the geographic context of their study sites and participants' backgrounds in their study designs. Regardless of whether a study's focus is directly focused on geography, the effects of geographic context are perpetually present and exerting influences on students' environments and their experiences within them. Ignoring or glossing over the impact of geography and notions of place may mean overlooking an informative dimension or potentially important data source for the study.

Finally, this study joins the work of other scholars who have incorporated spatial perspectives in their examination of college students' experiences. By expanding the focus beyond the effect of geographic location on college access and choice (e.g., Cooke & Boyle, 2011; Dache-Gerbino, 2014; Hillman & Weichman, 2016) to include the influence of geographic context on students' racial identities, this study also pushes the field of higher education to make Soja's (2010) "spatial turn" in its understanding of college students and racial identity. Future research that centers the impact of geographic location, distance, and movement on how students experience race and make meaning of their racial identities can continue to propel this spatial turn, and in doing so, reveal new and valuable insights into the role of higher education institutions in preparing students for the racial realities of contemporary U.S. society.

Conclusion

As the U.S. contends with an increasingly turbulent sociopolitical climate, catalyzed by the outcome of the 2016 presidential election and fueled by the subsequent widening cultural divide, attention to the shifting nature of college students' various environmental contexts becomes a critical consideration. Not only have macro-level beliefs and attitudes regarding race,

immigration, and other social issues grown more intense and hostile (Brownstein, 2017; Stack, 2017), but they are also being legitimized and codified through institutional laws and policies (Liptak, 2017; Shear & Hirschfeld Davis, 2017). This has resulted in an increasingly negative national climate for race, one to which the Midwest region is certainly not immune (Guha, 2017), and within which current and future Asian American college students are experiencing race and constructing their racial identities.

The role of higher education institutions within this contemporary social, cultural, and political context thus extends beyond simply helping Asian American students make meaning of their racial identity. With a shared mission of preparing college students to become global leaders and engaged citizens, it is also incumbent on colleges and universities to cultivate in their students the knowledge and skills for navigating a world where identities and ideas are rapidly diversifying (Hurtado, 2007). Because becoming multicultural competent depends on having a strong sense of identity (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004), opportunities for Asian American students to explore their racial identities are also foundational for their development of multicultural competence. This takes on critical importance for higher education institutions, and particularly for those located in the Midwest, as college is likely the first time that many Asian American students in the region have access to structured and meaningful opportunities to reflect on their racial identities.

By utilizing an ecological perspective to examine Asian American students' racial identities, this study reinforced the need to account for environmental and contextual influences in how students understand what it means to be Asian American. The use of racial formation and racial identity construction theories to highlight the processes through which Asian American identities are socially and contextually constructed responds to previous calls for research on

race that bridges multiple spatial scales of analysis (Saperstein, Penner, & Light, 2013). This linking of micro-, meso-, and macro-level perspectives provides a more holistic understanding of how Asian American students make meaning of their racial identities within the confines of geography, and in doing so, enriches and deepens the higher education field's understanding of racial identity in ways that are just beginning to be explored.

EPILOGUE

Towards the end of my focus group with study participants, I asked students to share their initial thoughts when they heard that someone was conducting a research study on Asian American college students in the Midwest and that the study was among the first to explore this topic within higher education research. The responses I received, which I use to conclude this examination of Asian American college students and racial identity, offer a revealing glimpse into how students perceived their positionality within the racial and geographic context of the Midwest.

Many of the students talked about feeling surprised by this study's focus. Some, like Paul, did not realize Asian American college students were the subject of any research at all: "I was very much like, 'Oh, wow. There's studies being done on Asian American college students?' I wasn't really aware of that." Others were further intrigued by the specificity of the study's scope. Rani shared her reaction upon reading the call for study participants: "I just thought it was very specific, honestly, because I saw the headline and I was like, 'Oh, look it's for Asian Americans.' And then it was like, in the Midwest, and I was like, 'Oh wow, that's so fitting.'" This comment prompted some smiles and nods of agreement from other students, indicating they had similar responses to the study's recruitment materials. Cassandra then declared, "I honestly low-key didn't think it was real," to which John quickly quipped, "Like, what are you [as a researcher] doing?", eliciting much laughter and more vigorous nodding around the room. It was clear that the sentiments being conveyed strongly resonated with the group.

When I asked Cassandra why she did not believe the study was real, she replied: "I don't know, it just didn't seem like, a thing, or like something important or something that people

would care to read about or want to know about." The skepticism Cassandra felt was not regarding the authenticity of the study, but rather in reference to the idea that her experiences (and those of other Asian American students in the Midwest) were not distinct nor interesting enough to be worth examining. This belief invokes the twin narratives of Asian Americans as invisible and the Midwest as unremarkable, as Samantha insightfully articulated during the focus group:

> I think the fact that it is one of the first [studies of its kind] just reaffirms the fact that we just get lost in everything. We're the part of the nation that no one really pays much attention to, and I feel like as Asian Americans, we're also part of the country that no one really thinks twice about a lot of the time.

Students' absence within both the racial and regional consciousness of the country resulted in their internalizing, and therefore implicitly endorsing, the notion that their experiences were somehow not noteworthy or important.

While the topic of this study registered surprise or skepticism among the students, it was curiosity that ultimately drove them to participate. As Kevin stated: "I think for me it was like, 'What is there to find out?' Not the sense that there's nothing there, but like, 'What do I not know?' because I know that being here [in the Midwest] has to affect me somehow." For Kevin and other students, the premise of this study confirmed there was indeed something distinct about their experiences as Midwestern Asian Americans, a hunch they have long felt but have yet to be able to articulate. Participating in this study was thus a unique opportunity for them to gain insights into their experiences that they may not have otherwise discovered.

By centering the spotlight of Asian America on the country's geographic center, this study not only illuminated the experiences of Asian American college students in the Midwest

region but now also pushes the higher education field to recognize the distinct and regionally constructed experiences of this student population. Having been perpetually overlooked and long understudied, it is time for Asian American students in this part of the country to have their voices heard and their experiences recognized. In the words of one study participant, "I think once [this] study is done, people will think more about what it means to be Asian American in this region [and] how we're different from people in other places." It is my hope that this study does indeed fulfill this student's expectations, and that his story and the stories of his peers will now be woven into the larger narrative of the Asian American experience.

Appendix A: Demographic Form

Thank you for your interest in this research study. The purpose of this study is to explore how growing up and attending college in the Midwest influences Asian American students' understanding of race and their racial identity.

Please answer the questions below. Your responses will remain confidential. If selected for the study, you will be contacted to schedule a convenient date and time for the interview. Your name and email address will then be unlinked from the rest of your responses and deleted. If you have any questions, feel free to email Jason Chan, PhD student at UCLA and the primary investigator of this study, at jasonzyx@ucla.edu.

1. Name:
2. Email Address:
3. Age:
4. Racial Identity:
5. Ethnic Identity:
6. Gender Identity:
7. Sexual Orientation:
8. Religion/Spiritual Background:
9. Socioeconomic Status:
10. Are you the first in your family to attend college in the U.S.?
11. Immigrant Generation Status:
    - *1st generation (you immigrated to the U.S. for college)*
    - *1.5 generation (you immigrated to the U.S. before or during your early teens)*
    - *2nd generation (you were born in the U.S. and your parents were immigrants)*
    - *3rd generation or higher (you were born in the U.S. and your grandparents or earlier ancestors were immigrants)*
12. Where did you grow up? *(Please list city, state, and zip code. If you moved around, please list all the places you lived.)*
13. Where did you attend high school? *(Please list city, state, and zip code. If you attended more than one high school, please list all the schools you attended.)*
14. Class Year:
    - *First-year*
    - *Sophomore*
    - *Junior*
    - *Senior*
    - *Fifth-year*
15. Academic Major(s):
16. List all the activities or student organizations in which you have ever been involved since you started college. (*If you are no longer involved in an activity or organization, please indicate which those are.)*

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Timeline Exercise [15-20 minutes]

On a blank sheet of paper, construct a timeline of your life starting from birth to today. Along this timeline, indicate and briefly describe pivotal moments in your life that contributed to your understanding of race and your racial identity. These moments can be positive or negative in nature and can range from minor to major in scope. The timeline does not need to be drawn in any particular way; you may choose to construct a traditional horizontal straight-line timeline, or you may be creative and illustrate your timeline using metaphors or other visual representations. Please bring your timeline with you to your interview.

Mental Map Exercise [15-20 minutes]

On a blank sheet of paper, draw a map that illustrates the places and locations throughout your life that played an important role in developing your understanding of race and your racial identity. These places can range in size and scope (as small as a classroom or as large as a city, for example), and the length of time you spent in these places does not matter. You are not limited only to the town where you grew up; if you visited or traveled to other places that influenced your understanding of race and your racial identity, include those as well. Your map does not need to be drawn to exact scale, though it should capture a sense of relative distance between places like an actual map would. Please bring your map with you to your interview.

Individual Interview [90 minutes]

As this is a semi-structured interview, these are guiding questions; not all questions may be asked, and questions may not be asked in this exact order. Follow-up questions may also emerge during the conversation.

Background

1. How do you identify racially? Why do you identify in this way?

Past Experiences with Race and Racial Identity

2. Tell me about where you grew up. What was it like growing up there?
    - *Prompt: What brought your family there?*
3. What was it like growing up as an Asian American? What were your experiences like at home, in school, in the community, or in other places?
    - *Prompt: home/family spaces, racial/ethnic community spaces, general community spaces, religious spaces, educational spaces, ethnic enclaves*
4. Tell me about when you first heard the term "Asian American." What did the term mean to you? Did you identify with the term?
    - *Prompt: Tell me about when you first recognized you were Asian American.*
5. How did you learn what it meant to be Asian American? Who/what taught you this? In what places did this learning occur?
    - *Prompt*: *parents/family, community members, peers, classmates, teachers, media*
6. What challenges did you experience related to your racial identity, and where did these occur? What support systems were available to you, and where were these

located?

7. How important was being Asian American to you? How did being Asian American affect your experiences (socially, psychologically, educationally, etc.)?
    - *Prompt*: *How did being Asian American affect your experiences with friends and peers? How did it affect your experiences in school? How did it affect how you felt about yourself?*

Current Experiences of Race and Racial Identity

8. Tell me about your experiences on campus in regards to race. What are they like?
9. What is it like to be an Asian American on campus? What factors have contributed to these experiences?
    - *Prompt: How would you describe the campus racial dynamic in general?*
10. Are you a member of a racial or ethnic student organization on campus? Why or why not? What has that experience been like?
11. In what spaces on campus are you more aware of your racial identity, either positively or negatively?
12. What challenges do you experience related to your racial identity, and where do these occur? What support systems are available to you, and where are these located?
13. How have your experiences in college changed your perceptions of your experiences with race or racial identity growing up?
14. How important is being Asian American to you now? How does being Asian American affect your experiences (socially, psychologically, educationally, etc.)?
    - *Prompt*: *How does being Asian American affect your experiences with friends and peers? How does it affect your experiences in college? How does it affect how you feel about yourself?*

Making Meaning of Race and Racial Identity

15. What does having an Asian American identity mean to you? What impact do you think your racial identity has on your life experiences?
16. Is there anything additional you wish to share about your experiences with race and racial identity, or the role and meaning of these in your life?

Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol

Introductions and Overview [10 minutes]

Sketch Map Exercise [20-30 minutes]

Discuss the following items as a group. Then, indicate your responses on this map of the state and surrounding region.

1. Where on this map are the following populations located?
   - Asian American and people of color communities
   - Conservative and progressive communities
   - Urban, suburban, and rural communities
2. Where on this map would you feel comfortable/uncomfortable living, visiting, or traveling through?
3. If you could divide this map into smaller geographic areas based on social, cultural, and political environment, how would you do it?

Discussion Questions [50-60 minutes]

1. To what degree were you able to come to a consensus on these questions? What made the process easy or challenging?
2. How did where each of you grew up influence your initial response to the questions? Were there observations that stood out to anyone?
3. How would you describe the different geographic areas you designated by social, cultural, and political environment?
4. How do you feel being in this geographic region of the Midwest has influenced your experiences with race and racial identity?

Appendix D: List of Generated Maps

Source: Social Explorer (http://www.socialexplorer.com)
**All maps were generated for both the state of Ohio and the Midwest region at the county-level*

1. Total Population: Not Hispanic or Latino: Black of African American Alone (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
2. Total Population: Hispanic or Latino (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
3. Total Population: Not Hispanic or Latino: Asian Alone (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
4. Election Competitiveness: Vote % Difference Between Democratic and Republican Candidates: U.S. Presidential Elections 2008
5. Election Competitiveness: Vote % Difference Between Democratic and Republican Candidates: U.S. Presidential Elections 2012
6. Election Competitiveness: Vote % Difference Between Democratic and Republican Candidates: U.S. Presidential Elections 2016

Source: Policy Map (http://www.policymap.com)
**All maps were generated for both the state of Ohio and the Midwest region at the county-level*

1. Estimated percent of all people who were a race other than White between 2010-2014 (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
2. Estimated percent of people who are Asian Indian or of Asian Indian descent between 2010-2014 (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
3. Estimated percent of people who are Asian Chinese or of Chinese descent (expect Taiwanese) between 2010-2014 (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
4. Estimated percent of people who are Asian Filipino or of Filipino descent between 2010-2014 (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
5. Estimated percent of people who are Asian Korean or of Korean descent between 2010-2014 (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
6. Estimated percent of people who are Asian Vietnamese or of Vietnamese descent between 2010-2014 (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
7. Estimated percent of people who are Asian Japanese or of Japanese descent between 2010-2014 (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
8. Percent of all people who are Asian and of "Some Other Race" in 2010 (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
9. Probability that two individuals chosen at random would be of different races or ethnicities between 2010-2014 (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)
10. Estimated typical (median) income of an Asian householder between 2010-2014 (ACS 2014, 5-Year Estimates)

Source: American Values Atlas (http://ava.publicreligion.org)
**All maps were generated for the U.S. at the level of region, state, and metropolitan area*

1. Religious Affiliation: Religious Tradition (2016)
2. Politics: Political Ideology: Conservative/Moderate/Liberal (2016)
3. Discrimination: Discrimination Against Immigrants: Yes/No/Don't Know (2016)

Appendix E: List of Documents Reviewed

1. Websites
    a. The Ohio State University
        - Asian American Association
        - Asian American Studies
        - Multicultural Center
        - Office of Diversity and Inclusion
    b. Students' Hometowns
    c. Students' High Schools

2. Institutional Documents
    a. Common Data Set (2016-2017)
    b. Diversity Data for Faculty and Staff, Unit Level Statistics (Fall 2015)
    c. Enrollment Report (2016)
    d. First-Year Enrollment by County, State, and Country (Fall 2016)
    e. Office of Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan (2012-2017)
    f. Statistical Summary (2015-2016)
    g. Student Life Strategic Plan (2012-2017)

3. News Articles
    a. Cincinnati.com
    b. Cleveland.com
    c. Columbus Dispatch
    d. Columbus Underground
    e. New York Times
    f. The Lantern (OSU student newspaper)

4. Organizational Reports/Briefings
    a. American Immigration Council
        - New Americans in Ohio (2015)
    b. Ohio AAPI Advisory Council
        - State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Ohio (2014)
    c. Ohio Development Services
        - Ohio Asian Americans (n.d.)
    d. Partnership for a New American Economy
        - New Americans in Columbus (n.d.)
        - New Americans in Cincinnati (n.d.)
        - New Americans in Toledo (n.d.)
    e. Public Religion Research Institute
        - The Ohio Values Survey (2013)
        - Religion, Values, and Immigration Reform: A Look at the States (2010)
    f. The Brookings Institution
        - State of Metropolitan America (2010)

Appendix F: Visual Maps Derived from Situational Analysis

Map 1: Situational Map

INDIVIDUAL HUMAN ACTORS

- Study participants; parents and siblings; relatives and extended family; friends; high school peers; teachers and school administrators; church peers; college peers

NONHUMAN ELEMENTS

- Racial classification systems (society/institution); housing/residential patterns; school districting; academic tracking; college admissions process; social media; college curriculum; availability/access to of race-related resources

COLLECTIVE HUMAN ACTORS

- Schools, churches/mosque, Chinese schools, OSU, MCC, Asian American Association, API Cohort, AAIV, ethnic student organizations, SHADES, #BLM, MAASU

IMPLICATED/SILENT ACTORS/ACTANTS

- Hometown community members; surrounding Asian American communities; teachers and school administrators; college student body; Asian international students; other students of color; "whitewashed" Asian Americans; college faculty, staff, administration

DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL/COLLECTIVE HUMAN ACTORS

- Stereotypes of Asian Americans; Asian Americans are White (or not Black); Asian Americans are academic achievers; Asian Americans are competitive; Asian Americans are invisible; stereotypes of upper middle class Whites; White kids are popular; White peers are privileged; whitewashed Asians; school administrators are uncaring/indifferent; church community as second home; OSU is party/football school; Asian Americans are complacent; Asian international students are different; Asian American community is a hidden gem

DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF NONUMAN ELEMENTS

- Race is objective differences; race is Black and White; race is culture; race is ethnicity; Dublin is where all the Asian Americans are; college admissions tougher for Asian Americans; resources equals support

POLITICAL/ECONOMIC ELEMENTS

- Rust Belt; agriculture; Columbus as emerging metro; Ohio as swing state; 2016 election; immigration policies; #BlackLivesMatter

SOCIOCULTURAL/SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS

- Midwest as quintessentially American, nice, passive, neutral, White/not diverse, etc.; LGBTQ presence/acceptance is progressive; representation as diversity; suburbs as utopian

TEMPORAL ELEMENTS

- History of race and Asian Americans in Midwest/Ohio; patterns of immigration/ migration; context/era of parents' transition; demographic shifts; 2016 presidential election

SPATIAL ELEMENTS

- Regions of Ohio; spatial concentrations of people of color/Asian Americans; ethnic organizations as community hubs; relatives/family in other states/countries; limited/distant access to resources; suburbia; OSU spaces (The Oval; MCC; the Shoe)

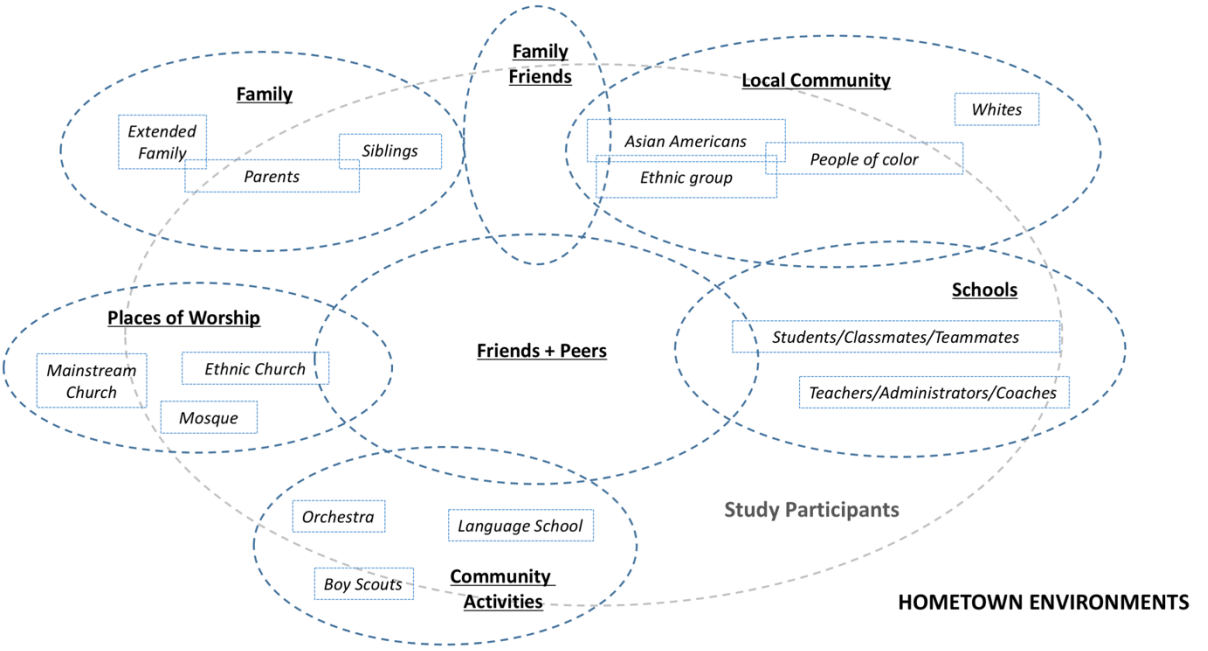
MAJOR ISSUES/DEBATES

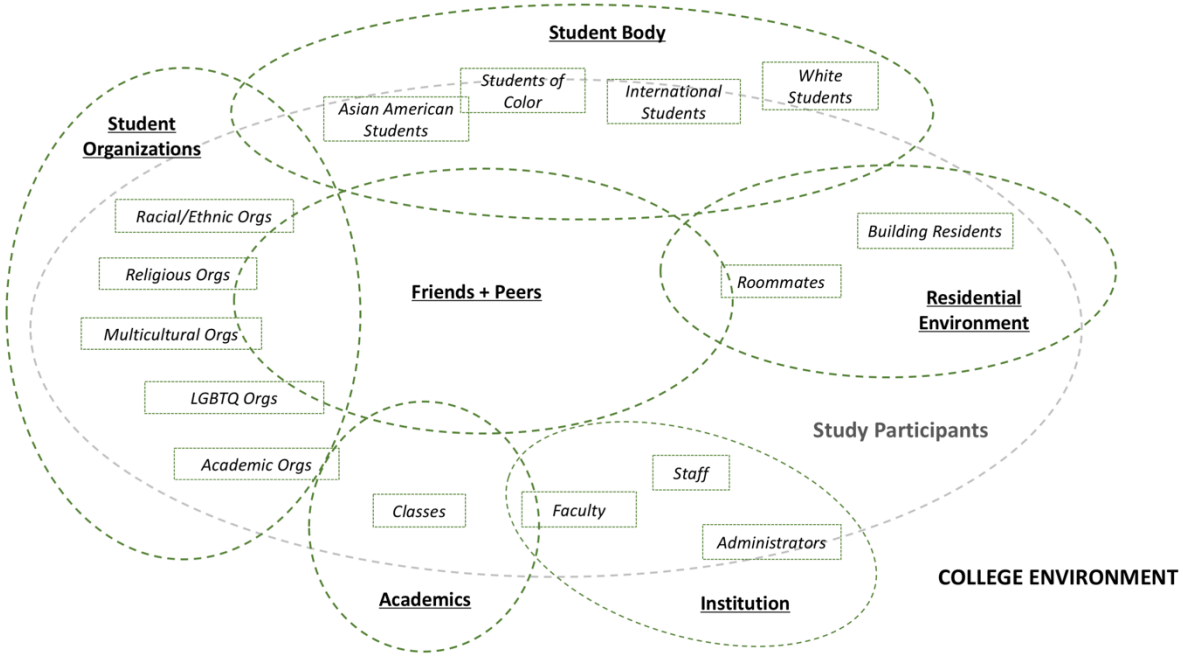
- Different expressions of Asian American identity; role of Asian Americans in racial justice movement; positionality of Asian Americans in racial narrative

RELATED DISCOURSES

- Black-White binary; Whiteness as norm; colorblind ideology; identity politics; Asian Americans as model minorities, invisible, wedge group; racial essentialism; racial reconciliation; Ohio as average/representative of U.S.; Midwest as America's heartland

Map 2: Social Arena and Social Worlds Maps





Map 3: Positional Map

	Negative Association	Ambivalent Association	Positive Association
Demographic Identity	**Asian American identity is a liability** *e.g., disadvantage in college admissions or job hiring processes*	**Asian American identity is a label or a checkbox** *e.g., objective descriptor of a personal characteristic*	**Asian American identity is an advantage** *e.g., symbol of diversity in job hiring processes*
Cultural Identity	**Asian American identity is something you have at home** *e.g., cultural identity is privately expressed around family*	**Asian American identity is about being culturally different** *e.g., different foods, different languages, different traditions* **Asian American identity is about academic success** *e.g., model minority myth*	**Asian American identity is unique or special** *e.g., one is distinct from peers in a positive way* **Asian American identity is a commodity** *e.g., marketable asset for career opportunities*
Social Identity	**Asian American identity is something to be ashamed of** *e.g., whitewashing, racial jokes* **Asian American identity is a stigma or burden** *e.g., life would be better if one wasn't Asian American*	**Asian American identity is a marker of social difference** *e.g., feel different than peers in either positive, neutral, or negative ways*	**Asian American identity is source of pride and empowerment** *e.g., sense of community; "my people"* **Asian American identity is a connection point to racial justice** *e.g., in solidarity/coalition with other communities of color*

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