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Understanding Identity and Practice of Asian American Educators in Urban Schools

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Education

by

Juliet Lee

2018

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Understanding Identity and Practice of Asian American Educators in Urban Schools

by

Juliet Lee

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Megan Loef Franke, Chair

There has been a call for teachers of Color to meet the growing diversity of the student population in the United States. Research on teachers of Color, their identities, experiences, and the ways they leverage their identities in the work they do to support students of Color has largely omitted the perspectives of Asian American teachers. Through a sociocultural lens of identity and Asian Critical Race perspective, this study investigates the ways a group of Asian American teachers articulate their identities and the ways their identities shape and emerge in their practice with diverse students. Findings reveal Asian American teachers articulate their identity in oppositional ways to their ideas of “the other.” With respect to teaching, identities emerge in their practice in the ways they actively engage in conversations with students to dispel stereotypes, share their Asian American culture, and navigate a racial in-between space in having broader discussion around race. Implications from this study suggest a need for dedicated spaces for Asian American teachers to unpack and reflect on the range of identities and experiences they bring to teaching, as well as the ways identity and practice mutually shape each other.

The dissertation of Juliet Lee is approved.

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2018

## DEDICATION

For my parents.

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Philip, T. M., Lee, J., & Lau, T. (2013, November). *The role of Asian American Pacific Islander educators in a multiracial society*. Paper and workshop presented at the annual conference of the National Association for Multicultural Education, Oakland, CA.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

“The first thought I had was, ‘what’s this Chinese lady know about living here? She doesn’t know anything about us, so why waste my time?’” –Sydney

“I judged you by your ethnicity. I thought because you were Asian and very young, you were going to act like you were better than your students.” –Roselyn

“Prior to developing a relationship with Ms. Lee, I was in wonderment of Ms. Lee’s Asian American ethnicity. This is due partly by my lack of exposure to Asian Americans back home (in Ecuador) and in the South Bronx.” –Amy

The above reflections from my former students, Sydney, Roselyn, and Amy revealed their initial impressions of me, their sixth-grade math teacher in a school in the South Bronx area of New York City. Of the many ways my students could have perceived me, it was clear in their statements that most salient to them, initially, was my Asian American racial background. Further, it was not only being Asian American, but being Asian American in the particular place and context of the South Bronx, a historically African American and Latinx<sup>1</sup> community. Based on my racial background alone, my students perceived me as an outsider to their community (“what’s this Chinese lady know about *living here*? She doesn’t know anything *about us*”); that this outsider status to the community would shape my interactions with or assumptions about my students (“you were going to *act like you were better than your students*”); and despite the diversity of New York City, there was a lack of opportunity for meaningful connections between groups (“*my lack of exposure to Asian Americans in the South Bronx*”). Sydney, Roselyn, and Amy’s reflections continued:

“Although Ms. Lee isn’t of my same ethnicity nor has she grew up in my environment, I feel her and we can understand one another.” –Sydney

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term Latinx/Chicanx to be inclusive of individuals who do not identify within the gender binary of Latino/a, Latin@, or Chicano/a (Salinas Jr. & Lozano, 2017). Any use of Latino/a, Latin@ or Chicano/a reflects authors’ or participants’ voices.

“Of course I was wrong because you cared for each and every one of us. I can relate to you in multiple ways.” –Roselyn

“Ms. Lee provided me with comfort and support which were crucial to me at the time where I was learning to adapt to the different educational and social culture of New York City. Ms. Lee was the only Asian American staff and teacher in the school. Looking back on this now, perhaps my Asian American teacher stood with me until now because we were both different. In my case I stood out for moving from the Spanish speaking country of Ecuador to starting sixth grade in a completely different country; Ms. Lee stood out because of her ethnicity and the lack of others like her in my school.” –Amy

The second half of my students’ reflections provided insight into the ways their initial perceptions based on racial background shifted over time and spoke to a relational element that fostered this shift. My students spoke of us “understanding one another,” feeling “cared for,” and ways “we were both different” as a source of “comfort and support.” Their reflections left me with several questions: how were these relationships built? How did Sydney’s initial perception of “she doesn’t know anything about us” shift to “*I feel her* and we can understand one another?” How did Roselyn “relate to (me) *in multiple ways*” when she first assumed I would “act like you were better than your students?” Further, in what ways did our relationships support the learning we were able to engage in together in our class? It was these questions that sparked my interest in exploring these issues more deeply and wanting to place my individual experience within the larger landscape of what is known about Asian American teachers.

Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, and Freitas (2010) discuss a demographic imperative for teachers of Color. As students of Color make up 50 percent of the student population in United States, which is projected to become majority-minority within the next decade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), the teaching population continues to remain overwhelmingly White at 82 percent of the teaching force (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). There has been a call for teachers of Color to reflect this growing diversity and to meet the range of needs for

this group of diverse learners (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1999), the assumption being teachers of Color are more effective in teaching students of Color (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008). Indeed, studies have investigated the strengths teachers of Color bring to the classroom and this work has been successful in bringing the voices of African American and Latinx educators to the forefront. We are continuing to learn about the ways African American and Latinx teachers draw from their identities and experiences and are successful in: (1) building positive relationships with their students, (2) encouraging collaboration among their students, (3) focusing on sociopolitical awareness, (4) providing opportunities for students to learn about racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, (5) serving as role models for their students, (6) teaching with culturally relevant and responsive methods, and (7) making conscious decisions to connect with and give back to the community (Galindo, Aragón, & Underhill, 1996; Gay, 2002; King, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 2002; Mitchell, 1998; National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004; Villegas & Davis, 2008).

Missing from this work are the voices of Asian American educators. Studies focused on Asian American educators have more frequently explored the *lack* of Asian Americans in education (Bracey, 2001; Rong & Preissle, 1997). Less explored are the experiences of Asian American educators and “without these perspectives, what we know about teachers of Color is partial, at best” (Goodwin, Genishi, Asher, & Woo, 1997, p. 222). This is not to suggest that there is less of a need for African American and Latinx teacher perspectives or that Asian American teacher perspectives are needed more. Rather, the issue is that Asian Americans should also be given attention in these areas (Goodwin, 1995). This study aimed to provide more insight into this missing component of what we know about Asian American teachers.

The purpose of this study was twofold. For teachers of Color, personal identity is closely connected to teacher identity (Quiocho & Rios, 2000), so I first wanted to investigate what Asian American as an identity meant to a group of teachers. To understand identity broadly, I took the lens of Sociocultural Theory, which posits identity as socially, culturally, and historically situated (Omi & Winant, 1994) and as happening through interactions with others across different contexts. Within Sociocultural Theory, I considered the notions of storytelling, figured worlds, and positioning to understand how teachers have come to their understandings of Asian American identity. To understand the specific experiences of Asian Americans, I took on an Asian Critical Race Theory lens in centering race in the lives of Asian Americans. Taken together, I wanted to learn: what are the stories teachers share about the spaces and interactions with others that have given them a sense of “Asian American-ness?”

The second purpose of this study was to learn more about the experiences of Asian American teachers and in particular from teachers who, like me, taught primarily Black and Brown students to understand the role of Asian American teachers more broadly. Specifically, I was interested in thinking about how their identities as Asian American shaped their practice and interactions with students. Taken together, this study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. How do a group of Asian American<sup>2</sup> teachers articulate their racial identity?
  - a. What is the collective identity that emerges from a group around what it means to be an Asian American educator?
2. How, if at all, do Asian American teachers’ articulations of their racial identity emerge and shape their practice?

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<sup>2</sup> I take the U.S. Census definition of Asian American to mean persons living in America having origins in the Far East, Southeast Asia, or Indian subcontinent. Because of the distinct histories and experiences of those originating from the Pacific Islands or Native Hawai’i (Diaz, 2004) and that participants in the study did not self-identify as Pacific Islanders, I do not use Asian Pacific Islander (API), Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI), or Asian Pacific American (APA). Any use of API, AAPI, or APA reflects authors’ voices.



To investigate the above research questions, I organized a series of focus groups with eight Asian American teachers. Aligned with sociocultural perspectives that identity happens through interactions with others, a group setting was the main structure as opposed to individual interviews. In addition to interviews, I collected classroom artifacts to get a sense of teacher practice. I analyzed data through an open coding approach (Merriam, 2009) based on categories generated from existing literature, while allowing for new themes that emerged from teachers. Subsequent rounds of coding were conducted to identify sub-categories within larger themes.

The findings from this study present several contributions. Through teachers' stories, we gain a deeper understanding of Asian American identity and the ways teachers negotiate their experiences that push back against dominant racializations of Asian Americans. By examining identity in practice, this study also contributes the Asian American voice to teacher education. The overwhelming presence of Whiteness can be silencing for teachers of Color, who bring rich experiences and as new teachers themselves, need space to translate their cultural knowledge to pedagogical practice (Sheets, 2004; Sleeter, 2001). Reflections from the teachers in this study speak to the ways Asian American voices are further invisibilized between White teachers and teachers of Color because of the racial in-between space that Asian Americans occupy. Addressing the gap in the literature about what is known about the experiences, strengths, challenges, and classroom work of Asian American teachers, findings from this study have implications for ways to provide support to Asian American teachers at the pre-service level to reflect on and leverage their identities in their teaching, as well as continued support in reflecting on how to grow in their practice and how their practice reflexively shapes their identity. Methodologically, bringing teachers together in a group setting allowed for stories to emerge that may not have through individual interviews, as teachers were able to engage with each other's

ideas. The significance of the group setting suggests the need for collective spaces for Asian American teachers within teacher education.

### **Researcher Positionality**

While teaching, I became interested in issues of teacher learning within mathematics education and came to graduate school with the intention of learning more about the work of teacher educators in pre-service teacher education and professional development settings. In thinking about issues of teacher education more deeply, the work of teachers of Color was emphasized, however, largely void of Asian American teachers. Within existing work, I wanted to move beyond the idea of Asian American teachers for Asian American students and think more deeply around the role of Asian American teachers for other students of Color. During this time, I was taking classes in Asian American Studies at UCLA, eventually transitioning to a teaching assistant role for a range of Asian American Studies courses. Asian American Studies gave me the language to name my experiences as an Asian American and Asian American woman, as well as the knowledge in learning my own history and the larger history of struggle and solidarity between Asian Americans and other people of Color in the United States. I also had the opportunity to participate in a class specifically for Asian Pacific Islander (API) educators, where we thought more deeply around our positionalities and commitments to racial and social justice (Philip & Curammeng, 2015). In that space, I was confronted with interrogating my identity as an Asian American, as well as reexamining my work as an educator of Black and Brown students and the implicit ways I may have been perpetuating inequities in my classroom. The gap in the literature coupled with my newfound desire to connect more deeply with other Asian Americans and Asian American teachers are what shifted my research to take on this new theme.

At the conception of this study, I imagined being a participant in addition to the facilitator of the group. Being part of the university course specifically for Asian American educators was a unique opportunity and I was excited to be part of a similar space again. Upon further reflection, I decided that in order to best understand and learn from the group, my focus was better directed at facilitation rather than both facilitating and participating. Therefore, my role in the group was that of a “structured eavesdropper,” where the participants were encouraged to talk to and address each other and I intervened at such moments to encourage participants to explain or clarify their thinking, especially should there be moments with different views or disagreements (Kitzinger, 1995).

This work is informed by my perspectives as an Asian American, an Asian American woman, and former teacher. I shared similar identities with many of the teachers in the group and this insider status allowed me to develop rapport with teachers. Further, I had similar stories and experiences that gave me a familiarity of contexts teachers described. However, as Subedi (2007) reminds us, identifying with the same community does not necessitate an understanding of others’ experiences. Although there were moments that indicated a shared understanding, such as through non-verbal gestures like pointing, snapping fingers, or utterances (e.g., “mm-hmm”), I would intervene and ask teachers to clarify what they meant by certain terms or phrases they were using to describe different experiences. I was also an outsider to the group, particularly in relation to the city where the study took place. As I grew up and lived in the East Coast, I did not have the same level of familiarity as the teachers when they described the towns they grew up in. I also intervened in these moments and leveraged my outsider status by asking teachers to further describe their local communities in order to gain a richer description.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Review**

This chapter outlines the guiding lenses of the study, followed by a review of literature related to Asian American teachers. First, I outline the theoretical frameworks of Sociocultural Theory and Asian Critical Race Theory, as well as my rationale for these lenses in examining the identities and experiences of Asian American teachers. Within Sociocultural Theory, I focus on the notions of positioning, figured worlds, and storytelling that allows for an understanding of the contextual ways Asian Americans continually negotiate their experiences to make sense of their identity in relation to being Asian Americans and teachers. I then outline the tenets of Asian Critical Race Theory to center race in understanding the experiences of Asian Americans. Through those lenses, I discuss previous literature around race and Asian Americans that have implications for their identity and experiences as Asian American teachers.

#### **A Sociocultural Theory of Identity**

Sociocultural theory (Wenger, 1998) views learning, development, activities, and experiences as centered on the culture in which they take place. Wenger posits individual activity as socially, culturally, and historically situated and in this view, there is a reflexive relationship where understandings, beliefs, actions, and participation in different contexts mutually influence one another. That is, understandings, beliefs, and actions are shaped by participation in different communities and participation in different communities shapes understandings, beliefs, and actions. Achinstein and Aguirre's (2008) application of sociocultural theory in their work with minority teachers defines it as "ways in which people continually experience, negotiate, and define themselves in relationship to social and cultural communities, including race, ethnicity, class, gender, and language, and historical, political, and

institutional contexts that surround those communities” (p. 1509). As opposed to viewing identity as fixed or as personality traits that one is born with, sociocultural theory recognizes identity as fluid (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996), a constant negotiation as an individual becomes a participant of various communities over time and is always co-constructed in relation to others (Urrieta, 2007). As such, this study does not take a perspective on Asian American identity described in models that outline a step-like, linear process where individuals move through stages between their ethnic culture and the dominant, White culture (e.g., Kim, 2012; Fong, 2008).

I draw from the work of several scholars and their application of sociocultural theory in understanding identity. In considering identity through interactions, Esmonde (2009) prefers the term, *positioning*, to consider how one does not have a sole identity, but rather, invokes multiple identities depending on how individuals position themselves, as well as the ways they are positioned by others. Understanding identity means making sense of this positioning, or, the ways identities “shift in meaning and salience from one context to another” (p. 1012). Esmonde describes the ways positioning happens across contexts through the way one speaks, the clothes one wears, and with whom we interact with and how. While individuals have choices within this process to position themselves, there are also collective practices, or, the larger socially accepted ways of being, thinking, feeling, or acting, whereby individuals are positioned by others as members. This notion of positioning is important for Asian Americans because of the ways Asian Americans “live and move between multiple cultural borders” (Suzuki, 1998, p. 45).

Asher et al. (1997) in Suzuki (1998) outline these borders as:

- 1) between White culture and Asian culture;
- 2) between their Asian ethnic group and other Asian ethnic groups;

- 3) within their own ethnic and cultural group; and
  - 4) between Asians and other people of Color, specifically, African Americans and Latinos
- (p. 6-7).

Asian Americans, then, alternate between and among these groups, choosing their behavior or affiliation based on the context, creating a situated identity (Suzuki, 1998). In this way, Asian Americans hold multiple identities depending on how they position themselves and are positioned among and between different groups. Understanding these nuances means eliciting the situations or contexts where these various identities are evoked, as well as norms and practices within the particular spaces they participate in.

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain (1998) build on identity as a social practice and notions of positioning and bring in their concept of *figured worlds* as the place where identity formation takes place. Understanding identity involves examining positioning within figured worlds, or, the settings, in which these practices are situated within. It is within these figured worlds where one “figures” themselves out by engaging in the social and cultural practices or activities of that particular space, “recognizing particular characters, determining the significance of certain practices, and valuing certain outcomes over others” (p. 52). Figured worlds can be understood through stories and artifacts. Artifacts, for example, an item of clothing, stereotypes, or documents, “open up” figured worlds and provide a “gaze” into the figured world, its relevance, and the individual’s position within it (p. 61-63). Stories reveal the ways different elements of the figured world, such as, “ethnicity, gender, race, nationality, and sexual orientation” (p. 7) relate to and interact with each other in day-to-day activity that shed light into the ways an individual constructs an understanding of the self. Stories are a reflection that tells

others about who one is, but more importantly, reflect what one “tells themselves about who they are and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (p. 3).

Building on the use of stories, Sfard and Prusak (2005) posits identity as a continual process of becoming and is made up of the stories one tells that shed light on the processes that lead to the choices one makes in deciding “who” or “what kind of person” one is (p. 16). Stories can be *significant*, because they “imply membership in, or exclusion from, various communities” and when significant stories are so repetitive and certain, we can say one has a “sense” of something (p. 17). Stories can also be *critical* and reflect moments where one’s sense of self is “shaken” and changed in a way where you cannot make an immediate decision about who one is (p. 18). While these stories are individually told, others, who Sfard and Prusak call, *significant narrators*, collectively shape them. Significant narrators are other influential voices that carry messages so strong to impact one’s actions.

Urrieta (2007) takes the above ideas of positioning, figured worlds, and storytelling in his study of how a Mexican American identity shifted to a more political Chicana/o identity for a group of educators. Through participation in the Chicana/o figured world of higher education, specifically, MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Atzlán), participants had the opportunity to (re)learn the *history-in-system*, or, the actual sequence of events, while (re)examining their *history-in-person*, or, each individual’s experiences and personal history. Significant narrators in the form of peers, older students, or professors played a crucial role in sharing their stories about previous experiences with racism and discrimination. Hearing these stories led participants to reanalyze their own experiences through a racialized lens, which led to feeling “shaken up, angry at the injustices they could now see, or confused with the struggle to self-make in the midst of new perspectives and narratives” (p. 125). As participants began to

figure out a new sense of self, they increased their participation in activities that enacted a Chicana/o identity. These included conceptual forms such as a recognition of the value of their home cultures or reinterpreting social and cultural relations using the terms, *raza*, *la causa*, or *comunidad*, that reflected the broader Chicana/o identity. Chicana/o identity was also enacted in other ways, such as using cultural symbols like art, music, clothing, and language that participants did not previously use, participating in political organizing which helped participants see their ability to be change agents, taking leadership roles in community organizations, and a commitment to raising consciousness and educating others from a counter-hegemonic perspective. This commitment is what led participants to decide to pursue education and in particular, to teach in urban schools. Participants saw their positions as educators as their way of either making an impact in the same ways their former teachers did, to “undo the harm” (p. 135) of those they did not want to be like, view teaching as activism, and to get students to think differently about the world they live in, so they can want to make a change. Through a sociocultural lens in Urrieta’s work, we can see the ways in which participation in the Chicana/o figured world shaped participants’ identity and had implications for their practice as educators.

Thinking about Asian American identity through these lenses means examining the figured worlds in which Asian Americans participate in and the norms, practices, and interactions within those figured worlds that have shaped and continues to shape their understanding of what it means to be Asian American, as well as an Asian American educator. These may include the communities in which they grew up, schools they attended, clubs or organizations, particular coursework, or their teacher education program. Eliciting the stories they tell about themselves illuminate how they decided what it means to be Asian American, such as significant stories that shed light on situations where they are most comfortable in their



Asian American identity, as well as the spaces where they feel most uncertain. As identity happens through interactions, this also means attending to how the sharing of these stories with others creates moments where they might reexamine their understanding of their identity.

### **Asian Critical Race Theory**

To understand race in the lives of Asian Americans, I take on an Asian Critical Race Theory lens, which stems from Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT originally emerged in the field of law to critically examine the ways race and racism operates in legal studies. This study shares the perspectives as outlined by the core tenets of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000):

1. Race is a *social construction*.
2. *Race and racism are normal* and ordinary in society and in the everyday lives of people of Color.
3. A *revisionist history* can expose the ways oppression permeates society.
4. Different groups are *racialized in different ways*.
5. Whites will support policies or laws that benefit people of Color when they benefit Whites as well, or *interest convergence* (Bell, 1980).
6. There is no singular or unitary identity that defines any group, or, *anti-essentialism*.
7. Everyone has overlapping identities that shape one's experience, or, *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1993).
8. People of Color can challenge dominant narratives through *storytelling*.

CRT has since been applied to analyze the ways race and racism operate within education (Solórzano, 1998; Tate, 1997; Teranishi, 2013; Yosso, 2005), after which branches of CRT came about to address the specific needs of various communities (e.g., Latina/o Critical Race Theory, Tribal Critical Race Theory, QueerCrit). Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), as a branch of

CRT, builds on the original tenets of CRT with additional tenets specific to the experience of Asian Americans. AsianCrit centers the experiences and realities of Asian Americans and through this lens, we can better understand the role of race in the lives and identities of Asian Americans. The seven tenets of AsianCrit are outlined by Museus (2014):

1. *Asianization* builds on the CRT tenet that race and racism are a normal part of everyday life in American society, but posits that Asian Americans are racialized in a qualitatively different way from other people of Color. These racializations include the model minority stereotype, perpetual foreigners, yellow perils, marginality/invisibility, or as a monolithic group.

2. *Transnational Contexts* focuses on how Asian American experiences have been shaped by historical and contemporary, national and international contexts and that understanding how racism impacts Asian American lives means understanding these contexts, particularly the role of imperialism, war, and migration in shaping Asian Americans and their communities.

3. *(Re)Constructive History* builds on the revisionist history tenet of CRT, with a specific focus on (re)constructing Asian American history to include the role of and expose racism towards Asian Americans that have largely been excluded within United States history. Doing so can also inform a progressive future for a collective Asian American identity.

4. *Strategic (Anti)Essentialism* is based on the assumption that race is a socially constructed phenomenon that is shaped and reshaped by economic, political, and social forces. While these dominant forces impact the ways Asian Americans are racially categorized and racialized in society, Asian Americans can engage in actions that affect these processes. While engaging in this work, Asian American researchers and activists generate an understanding of

Asian American communities as a whole and build on possibilities for unity. At the same time, researchers and activists must make purposeful decisions about which communities to include in developing intricate knowledge about this diverse and complex community.

5. *Intersectionality* builds on the idea that racism intersects with other forms of oppression to shape the experiences of Asian Americans. Studying Asian Americans means understanding the ways in which racial identity is mutually shaped by other social identities such as gender, class, or sexuality.

6. *Story, Theory, and Praxis* asserts the interconnectedness of counterstories, theory, and practice when analyzing Asian American experiences and advocating for Asian American communities. This tenet underscores the value of stories to inform theory, where theory guides practice, and practice brings out stories and utilizes theory for transformative change.

7. *Commitment to Social Justice* highlights the aim of AsianCrit as working toward eliminating racism as well as all other forms of oppression.

### **Asian American Teachers**

Despite the rapid growth of the general Asian American population after 1965 that shaped an increase in Asian American representation in other fields, the amount of Asian American teachers remains at less than two percent of the teaching population (Boser, 2011). In terms of teacher diversity reflecting the growing diversity of the United States, Goodwin (1995) calls this an “unequal equation.” There is certainly a demographic imperative (Achinstein et al., 2010) for more Asian American teachers.

A significant portion of the existing work about Asian American teachers examines what deters Asian Americans from pursuing careers in education. Asian American teachers report parental pressure, the perceived low-status of the profession, misalignment with Confucian

values, issues with the English language, or apprehension in working with diverse students as factors that prevent them from pursuing teaching (Bracey, 2001; Gordon, 2000; Park, 2009; Rong & Goetz, 1989; Rong & Preissle, 1997). These studies, however, do not take into account the acculturation and generation status of Asian Americans, who may not be as closely tied to those values (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). Indeed, Asian Americans who choose teaching do express a desire to want to make a difference, work with young people, and love being in schools (Goodwin, 1995; Pang, 2009).

Asian American teachers, on average, have fewer years of teaching experience than other groups. Twenty-two percent of Asian American teachers have three or fewer years of experience as compared to 16 percent of teachers overall and over one-third of Asian American teachers have five or fewer years teaching experience (Teranishi, 2010). The attrition rate of Asian American teachers is troubling; Asian American teachers leave the classroom at faster rates than other groups and rather than pursuing other opportunities such as administration, graduate school, or higher education, they are more likely than other groups to leave the field of education altogether (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2010). Asian American teachers often feel as if they are the “only one” and stand out among their primarily White colleagues (Endo, 2015; Teranishi, 2010), as well as a level of invisibility, whether within the mainstream curriculum they have to teach, being voiceless in the school decision-making process, or not having other Asian American or teachers of Color as sources of support (Goodwin et al., 2006; Ramanathan, 2006; Teranishi, 2010). These findings paint a disturbing picture of the state of Asian American teachers: one that reveals the few Asian American teachers who decide to enter teaching feel as though they are not being supported in

ways that encourage them to persist, leading many of them to leave the field still as novice teachers.

What is known about the work of Asian American teachers is extremely limited and presents a gap in the literature. Like other teachers of Color, Asian American teachers' experiences, challenges, concerns, needs, and strengths are shaped by their racial identity, understandings around race, former experiences as students, and racial microaggressions from students or colleagues. These experiences are tied to the dominant ways Asian Americans are racialized; how they internalize or resist these dynamics has implications for the ways they perceive themselves in relation to other Asian groups and other people of Color, which then shapes their work as educators.

One of the dominant racializations of Asian Americans is that of a perpetual foreigner, a nativistic racism that portrays Asian Americans as forever foreign and unassimilable. The perpetual foreigner racialization is captured in the ways Asian Americans are constantly questioned with "where are you from?" followed by "where are you really from?" despite being in the U.S. for generations (Lee, 1996). Previous literature around Asian American identity has focused on this tension between being Asian and American, where "American" is measured by a high degree of assimilation or acculturation to White, middle-class norms and the achievement of the American Dream of high educational attainment and job success (Zhou, 2009; Zhou & Lee, 2007). Especially for those who are second generation and later, being native-born, they do not have ties to their Asian-origin cultures, traditions, or languages and describe themselves as "Americanized," meaning, adopting American values, cultural practices, worldviews, and knowledge of popular culture (Kibria, 2002; Lee, 2005). A tension arises because while Asian Americans may identify themselves as American, the ways they are perceived as perpetual

foreigners by others limit this label. Though Asian Americans have high levels of assimilation into the mainstream U.S. culture, even to the extent of being “honorary Whites” (Kim, 1999) and are re-defining and creating new meanings of who is “American,” there is a strong association that the American identity is ultimately for Whites, only (Min & Kim, 2000). This leaves Asian Americans in an in-between space of being “not *real* Asians” while also “not *real* Americans” (Tuan, 1999).

The perpetual foreigner racialization shapes dynamics among Asian Americans, specifically for U.S.-born Asian Americans to assert their “American-ness” in relation to recent immigrants often disparagingly referred to as “fobs” or “fresh off the boat.” Kibria (2002) discussed the ways foreign-born Asians are a reminder of this racialization for U.S.-born Asian Americans and in an effort to negate the ways they are perceived as foreign “in the eyes of others” (p. 88), Asian Americans may engage in disidentification with Asian immigrants. Her informants described the ways Asian immigrants “threatened their achievement of American-ness” (p. 87) and acceptance in the dominant society because of their demeanor, language, or the ways they dress that contrast with “signs and behavior of middle-class Americans” (p. 90). Ochoa (2004) notes a similar dynamic in her study of Mexican and Mexican American identity. She introduces the idea of hypervisibility versus invisibility in her analysis, meaning, the ways Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants perceived themselves in relation to each other were based on stereotypical, hypervisible images that then invisibilized and limited the ways they were able to express their identity. For example, Mexican immigrants critiqued Mexican Americans based on assumptions, such as lacking knowledge of customs or Spanish language because they were assimilated. Likewise, similar to the informants in Kibria (2002), Mexican Americans perceived Mexican immigrants’ customs as conflicting with what it means to be

“American” as measured by “speaking English, maintaining a job, following rules, respecting others and self, and becoming a citizen” (p. 114), which led Mexican Americans to distance themselves from Mexican immigrants. These hypervisible images have implications for how one constructs themselves in relation to perceptions of the “other.”

Related to this racialization, Asian American teachers report their ability to teach particular subjects called into question because of a presumed foreignness. Asian American teachers of English as a second language in Goodwin et al. (2006) felt their competence was challenged by White parents, administrators, and colleagues because they assumed the teachers did not know the language well enough. In Choi’s (2012) study of Korean American social studies teachers, participants’ ability to teach American history was challenged because they didn’t “look American” (p. 83). Mr. Moon, one of the teachers in her study also described being the subject of a colleagues’ history lesson titled, “Is Mr. Moon American?” that asked students to debate his identity. Though he was born in the U.S., Mr. Moon reflected that ultimately, his citizenship and identity will always be questioned because others do not “see American” (p. 83). The teachers in both of these studies were aware of assumptions with relation to language and citizenship and engaged in actions they perceived to “actively rebuff” (Goodwin et al., 2006, p. 232) these images to position themselves in ways to “claim a legitimate identity as an authentic American” (Choi, 2012, p. 83). For these teachers, that meant being “nonstereotypical” by being “mean and loud” (Goodwin et al., 2006, p. 232) or Choi’s (2012) description of Mr. Moon as “highly loud, energetic” that was emphasized by his “big, tall, and muscled body image” that she described to “contradict the typical image of an Asian immigrant male” (p. 83).

Asian Americans are also racialized as a monolithic group, which ignores differences and diversity within the Asian American community related to ethnicity, religion, language, or

customs. Goodwin et al. (2006) found this to be a challenge Asian American teachers face in being singled out as a “universal oriental” and expected to be an expert in anything related to Asian culture, regardless of their ethnicity. Newton (2003) discussed this “unconscious racism” (p. 86) from cooperating teachers of the Asian American pre-service teachers in her study, who welcomed the pre-service teachers by putting up pictures of sushi and temples. Most often, this generic Asian identity was synonymous with being Chinese (Kibria, 2002), with Asian American teachers of other ethnicities being asked to translate Chinese language for students or parents, encouraged to teach in schools with predominantly Chinese students, and constantly having to correct students’ and colleagues’ assumptions that they are Chinese (Goodwin et al., 2006; Newton, 2003; Rodríguez, 2015).

Intersecting with gender, Asian American female teachers report microaggressions based on the specific narratives about Asian American women as hypersexual. Asian American female teachers encounter “racialized sexualization” (Endo, 2015, p. 614) and often have to navigate comments from colleagues related to their appearance, such as their beauty, youth, skin, or hair, as well as implications related to being sexy, a good wife, or having knowledge in massage (Endo, 2015; Newton, 2003; Subedi, 2008).

Aligned with the argument of cultural match between teachers and students, a majority of research focuses on Asian American teachers as role models and advocates for Asian American students. Asian American teachers draw from a shared upbringing or language to relate to their students, act as mediators between the school and Asian parents, and their presence provides an example that teaching is a viable career option (Choi, 2012; Goodwin et al., 2006; Pang, 2009; Sheets & Chew, 2002; Suzuki, 1998). Teachers of Color, though, are beneficial not only for students who are a cultural match, but for *all* students and emerging research is beginning to



explore the experiences and role of Asian American teachers, particularly when working with non-Asian students.

As students, Asian American teachers did not see their culture or experiences reflected in the curriculum (Choi, 2012). This marginality or invisibility influenced their goals as educators in wanting to change that experience for their diverse students, specifically as social studies teachers. Asian American social studies teachers express frustration with having to teach the dominant, Eurocentric curriculum (Choi, 2012; Choi, 2018; Rodríguez, 2015) that omits Asian American history and the histories of their students. It was important for Asian American social studies teachers to modify their curriculum to be inclusive of different histories to communicate to their students that their backgrounds are valued, challenge notions of citizenship, and provide opportunities to explore and ask questions about other cultures, which led to deeper conversations about race and ethnicity (Branch, 2004; Choi, 2012; Rodríguez, 2015; Rodríguez, 2018).

Understanding Asian American experiences and identity necessitates attention to the prevailing model minority narrative and the implications of this narrative that shape the perspectives of Asian American educators. The emergence of Asian Americans as the model minority is historically situated during the post-World War II period when the Asian American population underwent a considerable shift from primarily laborers to skilled professionals. Chen and Buell (2017) outline this time of domestic growth in areas such as transportation, infrastructure, military defense and medicine, as well as international threats and competition in the space race that created a demand for skilled labor and expertise in STEM fields. The U.S. met this demand through the occupation preference of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act and “opened the proverbial door” (Chen & Buell, 2017, p. 6) that had previously

been closed to Asian immigration. This drew in a significant number of Asian students and professionals with backgrounds in technology, science, engineering, medicine, mathematics, and nursing, laying the foundation for assumptions of Asian Americans' abilities in STEM fields. However, Chen and Buell (2017) frame the recruitment from Asia as a racial project, arguing the demand could have been addressed in other ways, such as by improving the education for Black students. Instead, the U.S. turned to Asian workers, who filled labor shortages at lower costs, earning lower wages for the same positions as their White counterparts.

Concurrently, the Civil Rights Movement was emerging and in relation to other groups of Color, specifically, African Americans, Asian Americans were positioned as "good minorities" (Subedi, 2013; Teranishi, 2013; Wu, 2013), for example, in Petersen's (1966) article titled, "Success Story: Japanese American Style." During this time of racial tension, Asian Americans were portrayed to have overcome prejudice and discrimination and achieve success through cultural values of hard work and effort, all while limiting political and civic engagement and not challenging the system (Lee, 1996; Poon, Squire, Kodama, Byrd, Chan, Manzano, Furr, & Bishundat, 2016). Doing so meant that Blacks and Latinxs should be able to as well, suggesting they are "problem minorities" and discounting the work of Civil Rights activists in addressing racial barriers and discrimination and dismantling White supremacy (Museus, 2014; Poon et al., 2016). Compared to pre-1965 Asian laborers, who were perceived as yellow peril and described in everything "from official government documents to everyday discourse as heathen, filthy, morally inferior, savages, and lustful" (Philip, 2012), perceptions of Asians in the U.S. began to shift to that of a "model" minority. This positioning of Asian Americans as a racial wedge between Whites and other people of Color ultimately serves to reinforce White supremacy (Poon

et al., 2016) and has since been an enduring and organizing construct around the experiences of Asian Americans.

Within education, the model minority stereotype portrays Asian American “success” through the cultural values held towards education, the importance of hard work and perseverance emphasized by families, and praises an innate talent in math and science. This stereotype has worked to reinforce ideas of meritocracy in education and that success can be achieved through individual bootstrap effort despite structural challenges (Subedi, 2013). The stereotype functions to erase the racialized histories and struggles of Asian Americans in the U.S. (Philip, 2012) related to land ownership, citizenship, immigration, marriage, and labor (Kim, 1998), as well as the ways they have engaged in resistance and political organizing (Espiritu, 1992) and instead, portrays Asian Americans as a monolithic group experiencing overall success, even to the extent of “outwhiting the Whites” (Wu, 2014). The stereotype makes Asian Americans “invisible, not seen as a marginalized or racialized community” (Subedi, 2013, p. 169), “left out of the discourse on diversity” (Lee, 1996,), and raises “questions about what Asian Americans share with other racial minorities” (Kibria, 1998, p. 951). The assumption that Asian Americans do not experience racism or oppression and the omission from the diversity discourse has been a lasting consequence of the model minority stereotype.

To combat this stereotype, scholars have engaged in research to dispel or counter the stereotype. This work documents the ways in which the struggles and needs of Asian Americans are masked by this racialization and call for research that disaggregates Asian sub-groups to examine the specific issues related to history, immigration, poverty, language, and discrimination that are factors in the educational experiences of Asian Americans (Lee, 1996; Museus, 2014; Teranishi, 2010; Teranishi, 2013). In their review of literature, Poon et al. (2016) note this

approach as reactionary and in disproving ideas that all Asian Americans experience success, have particularly framed Pacific Islanders, Pilipino Americans, and Southeast Asian Americans as examples of low educational attainment. While not discounting the need to understand supports for different groups or to center the lived experiences of Asian American sub-groups, they argue this approach has reinforced the deficit and divisive nature of the stereotype and further essentializes notions of Asian Americans as tied to educational achievement. By countering the model minority in a point-by-point approach, Poon et al. (2016) critique the failure of this work to critically examine the stereotype and echo scholars who call for a critical engagement in the ideological origins of this construct as a racial project that upholds colorblind narratives and ultimately perpetuates and sustains Whiteness and White supremacy (Chen & Buell, 2017; Chin & Chan, 1972; Lee, 2003; Philip, 2012; Philip & Curammeng, 2015, Saito, 1998).

Still, the stereotype can only operate successfully when it is internalized by the community (Asher, 2001; Kibria, 1998). Because this stereotype seems flattering, Asian Americans may try to emulate model minority behavior in seeking acceptance from the dominant group (Lee, 1996). Doing so means accepting what Chin & Chan (1972) call, “racist love,” where the stereotypes assigned are accepted as reality and fact. The ways this stereotype is internalized by Asian Americans has implications for the ways they articulate their identity. Lee (1996) found Korean students preferring an ethnic label as opposed to a pan-ethnic label because of a desire to distance themselves from other Asian Americans, particularly those from Southeast Asian backgrounds, whom they viewed as academic underachievers and from low-income communities. Across groups, Lee (2003) and Dhingra (2003) reveal the ways the internalization of Asian cultural explanations for a perceived higher socioeconomic and education status led

informants to distance themselves from other people of Color, namely, African Americans. An uncritical acceptance of the model minority stereotype results in a “destruction of an organic sense of identity” (Chin & Chan, 1972) and an Asian American consent to hegemony (Lee, 1996).

The model minority stereotype has masked the political and racialized histories of Asian Americans and Philip (2012) notes the current de-politicized and de-racialized meaning of Asian American as one signifying a group of people who come from a particular region of the world and assumes they share similar experiences and cultural values. In its origins, Asian American is a political identity that emerged during the Civil Rights and Third World Internationalism movements to represent a collective, pan-ethnic, political empowerment in solidarity with other groups of Color (Espiritu, 1992). Philip & Curammeng (2015) call for a return to the roots of Asian American as a political identity that is tied to the current racial and political climate. Doing so would entail an “unlearning and relearning” (p. 33) of history so that Asian Americans have an understanding of the ways they have been racialized in the United States. Recent work has investigated the ways Asian American teachers’ work is shaped by their understandings of the historical and political origins of the model minority stereotype, particularly in teaching other students of Color. Chao & Kokka (2014) investigated the ways Asian American male mathematics teachers actively engage in conversations around the stereotype, particularly around perceived abilities in math, to combat the stereotype as part of their social justice goals. Chow (2017) calls for a post-model minority framework that pushes back on educational attainment, alone, as a measure of success. Through an examination of Asian American teachers’ backgrounds, she reveals the ways their experiences as refugees growing up in low-income neighborhoods have shaped their social justice commitments to the communities where they

teach and how they leveraged their experiences to connect with their students along class lines. With respect to identity, knowing the racial and political origins of the term, Asian American, has implications for Asian American teachers, particularly for those in urban schools. Philip (2012) studied pre-service teachers who understood their Asian American identity in different ways and explored how these various meanings connected to their understanding of their role as educators working with African American and Latinx students. He found those pre-service teachers who saw themselves as “White Asians” and not as people of Color had a weak understanding of history and the influence of social, political, and economic factors. Instead, they carried with them ideas that reinforced the model minority stereotype and meritocracy. On the contrary, those pre-service teachers who identified as people of Color, with the view of a shared history of struggle and oppression as other groups of Color, felt a need to teach Asian American history not only to bring awareness to students, but also to emphasize similarities in experiences across groups. The pre-service teachers who identified as people of Color were troubled by Asian Americans who are not aware of their history, as this knowledge and understanding was important to them as an educator. These pre-service teachers also had a better understanding of social, political, and historical events and conditions that led to the view of Asian Americans as Whites and were more willing to engage in difficult conversations with students about racism, oppression, and difference. For these pre-service teachers, it was critical as educators to connect and engage with students, including getting to know their communities. For Asian American teachers, an understanding of history influences their racial identity, which has implications for their practice.

Park (2009) finds having a support network of other Asian American teachers as a crucial factor for retention and several studies speak to the role of a collective space in supporting Asian

American teachers. Kiang (2004) organized a professional development program with K-12 teachers as they explored Asian American history and literature. The participating teachers came away with deeper insights into race relations in the United States and a better understanding of how Asian Americans are racialized within a Black-White paradigm. For Asian American teachers, this was a positive space where, for the first time, their experiences were reflected in the curriculum and they developed a better understanding of themselves and their families. All teachers began to challenge the dominant curriculum in their respective schools in bringing in some of the books and materials used in the professional development program to make their curriculum more inclusive of Asian American history and literature.

Nguyen (2008) formed the Vietnamese Teacher Support Group (VTSG) in response to a group of student teachers who felt apprehension in sharing their distinctive histories and struggles with other teacher candidates in their program. In this group, the participants discussed their varying teaching philosophies that were based on their refugee status and conflicting experiences with schooling in Vietnam and in the U.S. The VTSG became a space where they could unpack their previous experiences and openly discuss and make sense of what it is like to be a Vietnamese American teacher in public schools, particularly as they were negotiating their cultural and teacher identity and understanding their role as a moral agent.

Philip and Curammeng (2015) discussed a university course offered for APIs to explore their roles as educators in a multiracial and multicultural society. Within this course, students shared stories around their identity, positionality, intersectionality of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, as well as the role of Asian Americans as allies to other communities of Color in collectively striving for social and racial justice. At the close of the course, students were left with “more questions than answers, more openings than closures” (p. 20), but recognize this

process of becoming as personal and collective and that with deeper understandings of their racializations came with new insights into their roles as Asian Americans educators. This study hopes to build on previous work in creating a space for Asian American educators to come together, as well as contribute to an emerging body of work that brings a new perspective to the field in exploring the experiences of Asian American teachers working with students of Color.



## Chapter Three

### Methods

This chapter outlines the methods used in designing, recruiting, and analyzing the data from the study. First, I describe the process of sampling and recruiting the eight teachers who participated in the study. Next, I describe the data collection process, including the initial individual interview with each teacher, followed by an outline of the four focus groups meetings. Focus groups served as the primary approach for engaging teachers around the ideas of identity and practice and as the main source of data. I then describe the process of data analysis and close with a discussion of the limitations of the study.

### Participants

Teachers were drawn from the Southern California school districts. Because this was not a study about a particular type of teacher (i.e., math teachers, high school teachers) and the goal was to learn from a variety of teachers and their practice, there were limited selection criteria. These included teachers who: (1) identified as Asian American, (2) taught at the secondary level, and (3) had three or more years of teaching experience. As secondary level teachers, there were likely more similarities such as the structure of the time spent throughout the school day or the ways they engaged with students. With three or more years of teaching experience, teachers were more able to talk about practice in detailed ways. While novice teachers have valuable contributions, their experiences and struggles as beginning teachers are different from veteran teachers who have had more time to think about their practice.

**Sampling.** Teachers were recruited through a purposeful, snowball sample (Merriam, 2009) based on the above criteria. I created a study flyer outlining the criteria, a summary of the study, the expected time commitment, and the offer of a \$50 gift card. I first reached out via

email to two Asian American teachers with whom I had prior relationships with from working on other university projects, gauging their interest in participating. I then asked them to disseminate the study flyer through their networks for other potential participants. Through the university, the study flyer was sent out via email to the Center X and Asian American Studies networks. The Center X network accessed secondary teachers from the university's teacher education program, teachers who have participated in previous professional development programs, as well as school administrators from the university's leadership programs. Similarly, the Asian American Studies network reached alumni who have interests in Asian American communities and may work in education, as well. On the school district level, I emailed the study flyer to the chair of the teacher union's Asian-Pacific committee. Finally, I shared the study flyer through my own personal networks, which was then shared more broadly through my colleagues' social media networks. From this process, ten teachers expressed interest, however, within the process of scheduling the initial meeting, two teachers were not able to continue for personal reasons, resulting in the final group comprising eight teachers. The eight teacher participants are outlined in Table 1 below and are organized according to number of years of teaching experience.

Table 1.

*Teacher Participants*

Teacher name*	Gender	Number of years teaching	Grade(s) taught	Subject(s) taught	Ethnicity <sup>3</sup>	Generational status
Danny	Male	15	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Science	Ethnic Chinese from Malaysia	1.5
Janet	Female	13	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Math and Science	Korean	2
June	Female	10	High School	Math	Korean	2
Jenny**	Female	7	High School	Physics	Chinese	2
Leo	Male	6	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Science	Filipino	2
Niko***	Female	5	Alternative High School	Social Studies	Thai Chinese	2
CM**	Female	4	High School	Chemistry	Ethnic Chinese from Vietnam	2
Agmula***	Female	3 (+3 years Administration)	Alternative High School	Social Studies	Filipino	2

\*All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

\*\*Jenny and CM taught at the same school.

\*\*\*Niko and Agmula taught at the same school.

**Data Collection**

**Individual Interview.** Prior to the participants coming together as a group, I conducted an individual interview with each teacher (Appendix A). The goal of this interview was for the teacher and I to get to know each other on an individual basis, for me to share my interest and goals for the study, as well as gain insight into the ideas each teacher was bringing to the group regarding issues of identity and practice before engaging with others in a collective space. I met

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<sup>3</sup> Ethnicities as identified by the teachers.

each teacher at a location of their choice; two of the teachers at their home, one teacher at a restaurant, and five teachers in their classroom. Interviews were audio recorded and informed consent was obtained during this initial meeting. The initial interview ranged from 30 minutes to one hour and speaking to each teacher helped inform and shape the questions posed within the focus group.

**Focus Group.** To understand Asian American teachers' racial identity and practice, the majority of data from this study emerged from a series of four focus group meetings. Focus group meetings over time provided a space where participants came together and shared their experiences, as well as hear and engage with others' experiences. Because participants were meeting each other for the first time, several meetings were required to build a safe space where they felt comfortable sharing details and stories from their lives, especially around potentially sensitive topics such as race, gender, and their experiences as educators.

Teacher groups have been referred to as teacher study groups, lesson study groups, focus groups, inquiry groups, or collaborative groups. The nature and structure of each of these models varies, and have ranged in focus from supporting pre-service teachers as they learn to teach for social justice (Picower, 2007), to supporting teachers to engage with and understand student thinking in mathematics (Kazemi & Franke, 2004), or a space for teachers to critically examine issues of race, gender, or class as they transform their practice (Saavedra, 1996). Despite the different goals, they all share the common feature of teachers coming together to form a space where they are collectively exploring or learning about various aspects of their practice. Participants have reported the value of teacher groups in creating a safe space where they can share knowledge and stories, pose questions, and learn from each other (McCotter,

2001). These groups often serve as critical spaces for teachers of Color as they share their experiences as people of Color (Dillard, 1994).

Building on a sociocultural framework, the use of a focus group in this study is appropriate because it explicitly focuses on group interaction and communication (Kitzinger, 1995). Focus groups allow participants to share stories, experiences, and points of view in a group setting where others are encouraged to comment and ask questions to examine how and why people think the way they do, in a way that may not be possible in a one-on-one interview (Kitzinger, 1995). Being in a group setting provides opportunities for participants to hear others' stories, which may encourage reflection on their own, spark other ideas, and for participants to build on each other's ideas. Kitzinger (1995) also highlights the opportunity of a group setting to tap into "everyday" forms of communication such as jokes, teasing, and arguing that might shed light into the values, subculture, norms, and shared or common knowledge of the group and allow for participants to discuss and explore questions or topics in the own vocabulary.

Sharing the ways participants make sense of and understand their identity as Asian Americans and their role as educators sheds light on the particular figured worlds that have or currently make an impact, as well as previous and current significant narrators that have been important in the process. These may potentially include the figured world of the focus group and other teachers in the group as significant narrators.

***Sites of focus group meetings.*** One of the teachers, Janet, offered her classroom as the site for the first focus group meeting, which was centrally located and had a free parking lot. Because of the convenience for everyone traveling from various parts of the city, teachers chose her classroom for the second meeting, as well. Another teacher, Danny, offered his home for the third meeting. In the time between the second and third meeting, he underwent surgery and had

limited mobility during his recovery. One of the restrictions was not being able to drive, so teachers agreed to accommodate and meet at his home. To celebrate our time together, our fourth and final meeting took place at a Korean restaurant chosen by the teachers. All of the meetings took place on a weekday during afterschool times and ranged from 1.5 to two hours in length.

*Focus group interviews.* The discussions for the group meetings were semi-structured. I had a set of open-ended questions or topics for discussion, but allowed the conversation to progress as the group saw fit, “taking the research in new and often unexpected directions” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299). The sessions were organized to create a space for participants to first talk about their identities as Asian Americans and then discuss issues and experiences as Asian American teachers. The questions for each session were organized according to the particular goal of the session (Appendix B) with the expectation that participants may address or cycle back to topics within other sessions as they build a safe space over time and as listening and discussing with others may spark other reflections. This was also to recognize that stories and experiences that provide insight to one’s identity are complex and layered.

The first two meetings focused on Asian American identity. The first meeting began by asking each teacher to introduce themselves to the group, including where they grew up, went to school, why they chose to participate in the study, and what they hope to gain from their participation. While I did not explicitly ask about their experiences as Asian Americans, ideas around Asian American identity already began to emerge in their initial introductions, particularly when talking about the communities they grew up in and the schools (K-12 and college) they attended. Because of the amount of people in the group, the initial introductions took the entire time of the meeting and when I did a time check informing the group that our

time was ending, teachers asked if they could continue the conversation, to which everyone agreed. As a result, the end of the first meeting touched on questions that were planned for the second meeting.

The second meeting focused on delving deeper into Asian American identity. I had questions planned for the second meeting, but after transcribing the first meeting where we started to talk about what Asian American means, I noticed teachers were describing Asian Americans in a particular way and I wanted to follow-up with those ideas first. I opened the second meeting with brief introductions and then revisited some ideas that were emerging from the first meeting before asking other questions listed in Appendix B.

The remaining two meetings transitioned to focus on the experiences as Asian American educators. The third meeting opened with asking teachers how they became interested in teaching, how they came to teach the specific subject they, and to describe their current school context and students. These questions also asked teachers what they perceived to be the broader role of Asian American teachers, the strengths they bring to the classroom, the challenges they face, and whether they feel being an Asian American teacher is different from other teachers of Color.

The fourth meeting engaged teachers in discussing their classroom practice. Teachers were asked to describe moments when they were or were not purposeful in talking about their identities as Asian Americans, as well as to reflect on the ways they would have liked to have to have been supported in their teacher education program or as veteran teachers. For the last session, teachers were also asked to bring in artifacts from their classroom to discuss with the group. Artifacts may have included unit/lesson plans, pictures, student work, or descriptions of interactions that occurred with students.

*Focus group data sources.* Focus group meetings were audio and video recorded so that I could prioritize the discussion rather than on taking detailed field notes (Kitzinger, 1995). An iPod Touch was used as the video recording device and so as not to be intrusive to the participants, was set on a stand in an area where it captured the entire group. The iPod Touch was attended to only when turning on and off. Videotaping allowed me to capture the speaker, the various talk turns of individuals and the group, as well as gestures and body language. An audio recorder was used to support the voices that may not be captured clearly on the video recording. The audio recorder was placed in the middle of the group and only attended to when turning on and off.

Artifacts collected from the teachers served as another source of data. The majority of data came from teachers' reflections and artifacts provided a "gaze" (Holland et al., 1998) into teachers' classrooms, as well as a way for teachers to talk concretely about how they saw their identity in relation to and emerging in their practice. Six of the teachers brought in pictures as their artifacts; four of them were of objects displayed in their classroom and two were of student work. Two of the teachers recounted an interaction with a student as their artifact. All data were stored on an external hard drive accessible by a password known only to me. To maintain the anonymity of the participants and their affiliated schools, pseudonyms chosen by the participants were used in all documents, including transcripts and analytic memos.

### **Data Analysis**

After each session, I transcribed the audio recording and revisited any artifacts collected. After transcribing, I wrote an analytic memo to document moments or themes that were emerging, made notes of ideas that needed to be revisited in future meetings, and modified the goals or questions as needed. This concurrent process began data analysis, as emerging themes



or ideas were beginning to be noted (Merriam, 2009). Transcriptions and collected artifacts were analyzed through an open coding approach (Merriam, 2009), where the data were first analyzed for hypothesized categories based on existing literature (Table 2) and then for categories or ideas that emerged from participants. Following an initial round of data analysis, the data were revisited and analyzed for sub-categories within the larger categories. For example, all instances where participants discussed the ways they are racialized as Asian Americans were noted and assigned a code. Within the category of racialization, sub-codes were assigned when participants articulated particular forms of racialization, such as model minorities or marginality/invisibility. The organization of Table 2 is such where the categories arose over the course of the meetings. That is, participants discussed ways they have been racialized not only around Asian American identity, but also as they reflected on their schooling experiences or described the ways they enacted their practice. These ideas were traced over the sessions on an individual basis as well as those that reflected ideas of the larger group as whole. To be sure the categories and sub-categories were reflective of the voices of the participants, I sent preliminary findings to participants via email as a way of member checking (Merriam, 2009).

### **Limitations**

This study presents several limitations. First, there are limitations related to the voices reflected in the study. While there was no specificity of ethnic backgrounds, the sampling and recruitment process resulted in the majority of the participating teachers being of East Asian descent. The centrality of East Asian perspectives within Asian American scholarship has been critiqued (Espiritu, 1992; Hirabayashi, 1998; Spickard, 2007) and I recognize the need for more diverse Asian American groups represented. The findings from the study do not broadly reflect the voices of individuals from South Asian, Southeast Asian, or mixed-race backgrounds, whose

experiences are qualitatively different from East Asian Americans in many ways. Further, among the many layers that were discussed (e.g., class, language, immigration), there were intersectionalities that were not discussed, for example, the ways the Asian American experience is layered with sexuality. This study also reflected the voices of primarily Asian American females, with six of the eight teachers being female. Therefore, the perspectives of Asian American male teachers are less captured. Finally, this study took place in the Southern California area, which also reflects a dominant Asian American perspective given the history and larger population of Asian Americans on the West Coast (Rodríguez, 2017). Therefore, teachers' experiences and perspectives are informed by living in communities with not only an Asian American presence, but also other communities of Color. I approached this work to share the stories of Asian American teachers in hopes of deepening an understanding of the Asian American experience and its layers and complexities. These stories were from a particular time and space and are not meant to represent the experiences of all Asian Americans. Essentializing the experiences of marginalized communities would be contrary to the goals of my work and the tenets of Asian Critical Race Theory.

There are two limitations related to teaching and teaching practice. First, while any particular stance towards teaching was not an explicit part of recruitment, because of the networks accessed in the recruitment process, the teachers who participated in the study all attended the same teacher education program, which is well-known for their social justice mission and focus on preparing teachers to serve in low-income communities. Therefore, teachers' perspectives around teaching reflected a particular commitment to equity and social justice within the context of urban schools and communities. Second, while the second research question addressed teacher practice, classroom observations were outside of the scope of the

study. To get a sense of teacher practice, then, classroom artifacts and teachers' descriptions and reflections of their teaching were the main source. Classroom artifacts only provide only a snapshot into teachers' classrooms and descriptions and reflections relied on teachers' interpretations, particularly when recounting interactions with students. I was not able to speak with students to get their perspectives around the same interactions teachers described or to get a sense of their relationships with teachers.

## Chapter Four

### Results

This chapter outlines the findings from the study. The first set of findings presented attend to the first research question focusing on the ways teachers articulated their identities as Asian Americans. Asian American identity was framed in relation to “the other” and how teachers saw themselves as different from “the other.” The second set of findings attends to the second research question around the experiences and practice as Asian American educators. Findings from this section reveal Asian American teachers’ work in clarifying assumptions or stereotypes about Asian Americans, sharing elements of their culture with students, the ways they navigate a racial in-between space in relation to students and colleagues, and closes with teachers’ reflections with regard to teacher education as a lens into their identity as related to practice.

#### Asian American Teachers’ Racial Identity

The first research question explored the ways Asian American teachers articulated their racial identity. As teachers shared stories about how they have come to understand themselves as Asian Americans, the conversations indicated an othering between the ways the teachers thought of themselves in relation to “other” Asian Americans. This was reflected in statements such as:

“I realized I didn’t really identify as much with, you know, your average Asian American.” -Janet

“I met the new Asians (teachers) at my school and I was like, ‘I do not get along with them, they are NOT my people.’” -Jenny

“yeah, we’re not like those Asians.” -Niko

The language used by the teachers of “your *average* Asian American,” “*they* are not my people,” “we’re not like *those* Asians,” revealed teachers saw themselves as different from “other” Asian

Americans. These distinctions emerged in three ways across the conversations: (1) a perception of “typical” Asian Americans as “White Asians,” (2) inter and intragroup dynamics of being “more,” “less,” or “not Asian enough,” and (3) Asian American as an explicit political identity. While these distinctions have been categorized for analysis purposes, each is layered and at times, overlapped with one another.

**“Typical” or “Average” Asian Americans: “White Asians.”** Throughout their stories, teachers described a distinction between them as compared to “other” “typical” or “average” Asian Americans. The use of “typical” or “average” as descriptors related to the perception of Asian Americans who internalized their status as White. Teachers were critical of those whom they viewed in this way, as Danny, a 1.5-generation Chinese American described:

What’s really interesting to me is that a lot of Asians who make it, whatever that means, think they’re White, they’re part of that White construct and they can’t step out of that White construct, so they end up being part of that oppressive machine.

Danny was critical of Asians who “think they’re White” and his statement revealed his understanding of the honorary White status that is assigned to certain Asian American sub-groups. He problematized the shifting notions of Whiteness in another statement, “I’m not sure what White means anymore” with the above statement that “Asians who make it, *whatever that means.*” Teachers in the group spoke about and acknowledged honorary Whiteness as a privilege Asian Americans hold and because of that privilege, felt it was even more imperative that Asian Americans understand historically and socially how and for what reasons this status was assigned in order to understand the larger ways that race operates. Without this knowledge, Danny’s caution was that Asian Americans may accept this status and become “part of the oppressive machine,” an idea that will be revisited in a later section. It is important to note the discussion around honorary Whiteness in the particular context of the space given the group of

teachers comprised of primarily East Asians, whom honorary Whiteness is most available to as compared to South Asians and Southeast Asians, who are racialized differently from East Asians. There was a level of privilege that existed in the space among the teachers in that ideas of honorary Whiteness did not need to be further unpacked given the ways other Asian American sub-groups are not offered the same associations.

For many of the teachers, the idea of Asians who were “part of the White construct” came up first in their schooling experiences and the following descriptions provided further detail of how the teachers conceptualized the “other” “White Asians,” as well as how they saw themselves as different. Danny opened the conversation and outlined the ways Asian American students were organized according to “tiers” at his high school:

You had your White Asians, everything they did was very Americanized- they knew what the trendiest fashion was, they played basketball (*Janet: they played lacrosse*) ....the AP kids were the White Asians.

Danny’s opening statement tells us that “White Asians” occupied the top “tier.” He equated Whiteness with being “Americanized,” along with a perception of what “American” meant, such as playing certain sports (i.e., basketball, lacrosse) or having access to a particular lifestyle (knowing the “trendiest fashion”). The idea of being “American” and what “American” means emerged across the conversations and will be revisited in a later section. He continued:

Then there was the second tier, the immigrant kids who learned how to speak English fluently, we can still communicate to each other in our native tongues... White Asians spoke zero of their native tongue.

Danny described the ways language was a marker for being a “White Asian,” where speaking fluent English, and *only* English (“White Asians spoke *zero* of their native tongue”), placed one at a higher status. Even though one can speak English, having the knowledge and being able to “still communicate to each other in our native tongues” meant a lower status because it signaled

a relation to immigration. The “second tier” were not native speakers, rather, “*learned* how to speak English” because they were “immigrant kids.” Danny distinguished himself as separate from “White Asians” in his use of “we” in placing himself in the “second tier” with the “immigrant kids.” CM, a second-generation Chinese American who attended the same high school as Danny several years later, echoed the significance of immigration status in shaping student dynamics at the school between, “I-just-came-America-in-8<sup>th</sup>-grade and then there is the I-came-to-America-when-I-was-four and I-was-born-here,” further nuancing “immigrant kids” to differences depending on age of immigration.

Language was especially important for Danny, who immigrated to the U.S. at the age of four. He described his early experiences in school:

I was the immigrant kid and I couldn't pick up the language that well, so when I got here in the third grade, all of the Asian kids...they were the ones picking on me like, 'you're a fob, you can't speak English.'

Danny recognized in his early schooling experiences the ability to speak English fluently as a symbol of power, placing one at a higher status or “tier.” He was “picked on” by Asian American peers because of his struggle to learn the language, calling him “fresh off the boat” or “fob,” a term that generally holds negative connotations referring to those who were born outside of the U.S. His observations of the ways “tiers” were organized according to language during his high school years reinforced the idea that being a “White Asian” was a particular “type” of Asian American sub-group that he was not a part of. Danny continued to describe:

And then there's the other tier of kids who were the “azn” tier, they were the gangsters, they were the ones who were delinquents and they were proud to be the ditchers and the smokers and the drinkers.

Danny's description of the “azn” “tier” gave an image of youth who engaged in rebellious behaviors (i.e., ditching school, smoking, drinking) that is counter to the model minority images

of studious and quiet students often associated with Asian Americans. Teachers unpacked the “azn” culture as a counterculture that emerged as a way for Asian American youth to “differentiate themselves from White culture” with a “rebel element” that pushed back against “this image of, oh you’re just a math nerd, you’re just a goody two shoes” and an “alternate image” to say, “I’m not the type of person you think I am, America, I am this rebel, cool image.”

Leo, a second-generation Filipino American shared a similar observation that:

There’s 2 big (groups), the smarter kids- all the AP kids, the honor kids...and the regular kids, for some reason no one really talked about the regular kids who weren’t doing so well. We knew the ones who were “azn”...who were standing in front of the building smoking.

While other “tiers” were more clearly organized according to language and immigration, the teachers teased out the way the “azn” “tier” was distinct in that “both American and fobby (“fresh off the boat”) Asians could be azn.” It is interesting to note that engaging in behaviors that were counter to model minority stereotypes was so strong to place one at a lower “tier.” That is, whether “azn” students were native English speakers or immigrants became irrelevant, more so that they did not take on the image of the “White Asians” who, in Danny’s initial statement, were also “the AP kids.” Leo’s description was also revealing in that the groups who were noticed were “smarter kids” because they were the “AP kids, the honor kids” who took on model minority images and the azn group (“we *knew* the ones who were azn”) who were a counter image to the model minority; whereas, “no one really talked about the *regular* kids” who were perhaps invisibilized within these two dynamics.

Finally, Danny closed with:

Then you had the other tier where they spoke very little or zero English...there were tiers of Asians within our school and it’s all based on how close you are to being White.



The lowest “tier” once again revisited the idea of language, where speaking “very little or zero English” meant the lowest status of all at Danny’s school. The closing statement summed up his and others’ reflections of how “tiers” were organized in relation to Whiteness (“how close you are to being White”) through markers of language, immigration status, or engaging in behaviors that were or were not aligned to dominant perceptions of Asian Americans as model minorities.

In addition to language, immigration, and perceptions as model minorities, being closer to Whiteness was also marked by distinctions related to socioeconomic class. As the teachers continued to reflect on other ways they saw themselves as different from “White Asians,” Danny and Janet, a second-generation Korean American, shared the ways this difference manifested in material ways. Danny explained:

It’s such class related, too, right? It’s connected to how much wealth people have also. So to me, like, I feel I’m Asian American, but other people didn’t see me as Asian American until I looked the part. And looking the part means having money, being able to afford things that make you American.

Danny described feeling strong in his Asian American identity, but others’ perceptions based on socioeconomic status marked him as different. Here again, we see a relation between being “White Asian” with having access to certain things perceived as “American” (previously, playing basketball and lacrosse, trendy fashion). Danny described an example from high school where he “didn’t look the part:”

There were things that I definitely didn’t have access to...my mom didn’t have the money, all the White Asians, they had money, so at the end of the year, they could go to Hawai’i, so I guess, ‘oh, I’m not like you guys.’

This sparked Janet’s experiences:

It was really in high school when I realized Asians are really like THIS, and I am not like that. I don’t have the money to be cool and have the cool stuff.

Danny and Janet's use of language indicated a strong feeling of differentiation between them and whom they perceived to be "White Asians" based on socioeconomic status. In Danny's example, his inability to join peers on a trip to Hawai'i at the end of the school year indicated he was not part of the "White Asians" group as he says, "oh, *I'm not like you guys.*" Janet made a strong distinction in describing how she felt she was "not like" "other" Asians. Because she did not, "have the money to be cool and to have the cool stuff" she distinguished herself that "Asians are really *like THIS*" and "I am not *like that.*"

For June, a second-generation Korean American and Agmula, a second-generation Filipino American, this feeling came up when they began college and was more relational. June recalled her process for choosing a religious club on campus:

When I went to college, I joined a Christian club and that's when I met other Korean Americans, but they grew up in well off places and so for me, it was more like my class. I was like, 'oh man, these Korean Americans, they grew up with a lot more than I grew up with' so I didn't feel connected with them.

Agmula followed up with her experience with student organizations:

Yeah, the class thing, when I went to college and I was interacting with other Filipinos in the Filipino organization, I felt even isolated in that space because they're more like, upper-middle class and so like, just like you were talking about, sometimes I felt like, 'I'm not even Filipino!' but I just always felt the class thing.

Differences in socioeconomic class were clear in June and Agmula's expressions of feeling othered from co-ethnics. June "didn't feel connected" with Korean American peers in a Christian club because "they grew up in well off places." She shared a story of going on a snowboarding trip with the group- the first time June had gone snowboarding. She had to buy snow clothes in preparation and was unable to afford all the items one would typically wear to go snowboarding. She thought, "all I could afford, at least the pants cause I didn't want to land in snow and get all wet, so I bought \$30 snow pants" and paired it with a parka that belonged to her

mother, which was too big for her. Looking in the mirror, she “started crying” and “was so stressed out” thinking about how she appeared as compared to “all those other girls.” This was an instance where she realized others in the group “grew up with a lot more than” she had, leading her to eventually leave the club and join another that she described was with “my people,” “who came from humble beginnings.” Similarly, Agmula “felt the class thing” among other Filipino Americans who were of “upper-middle class” to the extent of feeling “isolated” and as if she did not belong to her own ethnic group as she said, “I’m not even Filipino!”

In describing themselves in relation to “other” Asian Americans, particularly their peers in K-12 schooling and in their undergraduate college environment, teachers’ use of language in phrases such as, “Asians are like *this*, and I am not like *that*,” “I didn’t feel connected with *them*,” or, “I’m *not like you* guys,” indicated a strong feeling of differentiation with whom they perceived as “White Asians.” The perception of “White Asians” was marked by the ability to speak English fluently, native-born status, a high achieving student as part of the model minority image, and a higher socioeconomic class that meant access to a particular lifestyle of being “well off,” or having, “the cool stuff.”

**“More,” “Less,” or “Not Asian Enough.”** While descriptors such as “average” or “typical” referred to “White Asians,” teachers further unpacked the ways they saw themselves as different from “other” Asian Americans using language in statements such as:

“Man, I am really not Asian enough.” -Niko

“Maybe I’m not being Filipino enough, maybe I’m not being Asian enough.” -Leo

“I felt I was more Korean than some of the other Koreans.” -Janet

The idea of being “more” or “less” Asian or “not Asian enough” was captured in CM’s analogy of being a “spectrum” of “how Asian you are” and while motioning her hands back and forth, added, “this definition keeps floating.” Teachers conceptualized what made one “more” or

“less” Asian in two ways, (1) cultural knowledge as a comparative and (2) an “East Asian/Southeast Asian divide.”

***Cultural knowledge as a comparative.*** Teachers expressed having cultural knowledge as a way of measuring “how Asian” one was. Leo, a second-generation Filipino American described an “interviewing” process that he goes through when he initially meets a co-ethnic:

It kind of happens with other Filipinos, there was this interviewing just to make sure- where are you from? What do you do at home? What do you eat? That was my way of evaluating whether or not I was okay as an Asian, because if they look like me, then maybe they’ll act like me and if they don’t, then maybe there’s something wrong with me, maybe I’m not being Filipino enough, maybe I’m not being Asian enough.

For Leo, comparing knowledge was his way of measuring if he was “Asian enough” or “Filipino enough.” Others sharing the same traditions or customs was his way of feeling validated in his “Asian-ness” and if not, “maybe there’s something wrong with me.” He continued to explain that the “interview” was his way of finding “Filipinos that were like me.”

For other teachers, having cultural knowledge was a measure that made them feel “more Asian” than co-ethnics whose identities they felt were more superficial. One area where this came up was in their critique of ethnic-based clubs in college. Janet, a second-generation Korean American described:

When I went to college, I found out about these different Asian groups and I was like, ‘I’m not gonna join these Asian groups just cause I’m Asian.’ I’m not gonna go drink and smoke and sing karaoke all day...a lot of Koreans did these things and I felt I couldn’t really identify.

Agmula added:

Yeah, they’d be like, the ‘tippies,’ the typical Filipinos and I was like, ‘I don’t want to be associated all of that, that’s where all of THEM went,’ in those Filipino clubs.

Echoing the informants in Kibria (2002) who viewed ethnic-based campus clubs as artificial and

having a “party focus” rather than a political or educational one, Janet and Agmula resisted joining ethnic-based clubs at their respective college campuses, especially given a disinterest in the particular types of activities they observed their peers engaging in (i.e., “drink, smoke, and sing karaoke”). Agmula used the descriptor of “typical” as discussed in the previous section, suggesting that “typical” Asians, or “tippies” as she referred to “typical Filipinos,” were closer to Whiteness. Agmula followed up that she did not “want to be associated with all of that, that’s where *all of THEM* went,” once again indicating a differentiation between herself and others. Teachers viewed ethnic-based clubs on their respective college campuses as superficial and resisted joining, whereas they felt they were “more Asian” because of having particular cultural knowledge. Janet explained:

People who claim to be Korean don’t even do things to preserve their culture and I do that! I do traditional fan dance and three drum dance...I was performing in all these places so I felt like I am ambassador for my culture, and I think that really helped to shape my identity as Korean. I felt on some level I was more Korean than some of the other Koreans...I was still preserving my culture and sharing it.

Jenny, a second-generation Chinese American immediately followed up with:

I identify 100% with what you’re saying, instead of Korean dancing, I did Chinese line dancing, yeah, the same, I’m more Chinese than you are, but I don’t want to join your club just cause I’m Chinese.

Janet and Jenny’s cultural knowledge, specifically the performance of traditional dances gave them a sense of being “more” culturally authentic than peers whom they felt joined ethnic-based clubs because of a shared background alone and without knowledge of their customs. For the teachers in the group, having and sharing cultural knowledge with others reflected ways they felt more or less connected to other Asian Americans.

**“East Asian/Southeast Asian divide.”** Previous literature has discussed the centrality of East Asian (i.e., Japanese, Chinese, Korean) perspectives and representation within the larger

Asian American community, while Southeast Asian, South Asian, and Pacific Islander perspectives often occupy the periphery (Spickard, 2007). The teachers who were not of East Asian descent spoke to this feeling of being “not Asian” or “not Asian enough” because of a dominant perception of Asian American as East Asian. Niko, a second-generation Thai American described:

I was with more Koreans (in middle school) and I remember being like, ‘I’m not Asian’ cause my family is from Thailand. Then (in college) I was REALLY like, ‘man, I am really not Asian enough.’

Niko described growing up in a community of “Brown folks, Central American mostly” and attended a middle school outside of her neighborhood. Contrast to her peers in her neighborhood, Niko’s peers at her new school were majority Korean American, whom she felt disconnected from as a Thai American, giving her a feeling of “I’m not Asian.” This feeling of being “not Asian enough” remained with Niko and was enhanced (“*I was REALLY like, ‘man I am really not Asian enough’*”) to her undergraduate years when she attended a university with a majority East Asian American presence:

I feel that way all the time in my life, like, East Asian, I felt really weird, so I did more Southeast Asian and Filipino stuff so I can feel a little more normal. I was like, ‘man, I am not Asian’ just cause that East Asian/Southeast Asian divide felt really intense.

This “weird” feeling continued into college to the point where Niko chose to do “stuff,” meaning, join clubs and organizations on campus that centered Southeast Asian and Filipino communities in order to “feel a little more normal.” She described a “divide” between East Asians and Southeast Asians that gave her a feeling where being Southeast Asian was “not Asian enough” as being from an East Asian background. Agmula, a second-generation Filipino American also shared:

When I went to undergrad, I was like, ‘where is everybody?’ It was totally culture shock, I had moved into one of the dorms and all my floor mates were White and East Asian and I didn’t really interact with a lot of White and East Asian folks growing up, so it was really hard for me to connect.

Agmula and Niko attended the same university and both expressed an initial shock with the predominance of East Asian students, with Niko emphasizing her reaction of, “I was REALLY like, ‘man, I am really not Asian enough’” and Agmula asking, “where is everybody?” Agmula added:

As a Filipino American, I think most of, if there is Asian representation, it’s usually East Asian, and I just never really identified with that growing up in (my town).

Agmula described growing up in a diverse community of “Filipino, Latino, Black, and Pacific Islander” and not having much interaction with “White and East Asian folks” until she got to college. She described a “culture shock” when moving into her dormitory because the demographics did not reflect the community she was from. Further, she echoed Niko’s sentiment that there is a “divide” when she commented, “Asian representation is usually East Asian” and as a Filipino American, did not see herself or other non-East Asian groups represented.

Niko and Agmula felt disconnected to other Asian Americans because of a dominant representation that positioned East Asians as being “more Asian” than Southeast Asian and Filipino communities. Both also spoke to the significance of their neighborhood communities in shaping their perceptions, which will emerge in a later section, particularly for Agmula.

**Asian American as Political.** Three of the eight teachers described themselves as different from “other” Asian Americans in that their identity is explicitly political. Though the other five teachers in the group were not as consistently explicit, there was still a sense of agreement among the whole group in the form of non-verbal cues such as head nods, gestures (e.g., pointing

at speaker, snapping fingers), or utterances (e.g., “mm-hmm”). For the purpose of analysis, the focus of this section will be on the three teachers who expressed political views in their stories: Danny, Janet, and Agmula.

Danny, a 1.5-generation Chinese American first suggested a politicization to his identity as an Asian American in his critique of “White Asians” who “can’t step out of that White construct, so they end up being part of that oppressive machine.” Danny explained further through this example:

It’s amazing how many Asians were against affirmative action, it’s amazing how many Asians are just so not into rocking the boat cause they’re comfortable.

At the time of the interviews, a group of Chinese Americans organized to oppose affirmative action policies in admissions to Harvard University, their reasoning being that affirmative action programs were hindering the acceptance rates of Chinese American students. The perspectives and position of Asian Americans with regard to affirmative action in higher education has been an ongoing topic of research (Lee, 2006; Saito, 1998; Wu, 2002). Danny was critical of “White Asians” not being able to “step out of the White construct” in this instance to understand the inequities in college admissions for racial minorities broadly, as well as how Asian Americans benefit from affirmative action policies in other areas, such as employment and leadership. For Danny, Asian American as a political identity meant advocating for Asian Americans, but also a larger sense that Asian Americans are part of a larger people of Color movement. Danny described himself as “woke,” or, being aware of social and political issues and having to “do the schooling,” meaning, teaching or educating friends and family members in issues related to solidarity among people of Color, for example around the significance of the Black Lives Matter movement as opposed to the colorblind narrative of All Lives Matter.



After Leo's explanation in the previous section describing the "interviewing" process to find commonalities with other Filipinos, Janet, a second-generation Korean American replied to him, "actually, I do the opposite" and continued to describe:

If I do see another Asian, the first thing I think is like, 'I'm probably nothing like them,' like, I don't need to talk to them, I'm like, 'we are very different, we probably have very different politics and it's through little snippets of what I hear that I start categorizing them like, 'you probably would get me' or 'yeah, you're just like everybody else.'

Rather than engaging others as Leo did, Janet initially assumed that others are "very different" and that she is "nothing like them." She continued to indicate a differentiation based on political beliefs in stating, "we are very different, we probably have very different politics" and then "categorizes" into distinct groups- one group that she is a part of when she says, "you would probably get me" and another where "you're just like everybody else." Her use of "everybody else" suggested her perception of Asian Americans as a majority group who do not share her political beliefs, similar to her earlier statement that she does not identify with "your *average* Asian American." Janet's distinction between herself and "other" Asian Americans, similar to Danny, was that her identity is explicitly political. However, Janet further distanced herself from the Asian American community in that her commitments are explicitly with other groups of Color. She explained:

The work I was doing (in college) brought me to work with the schools and students in South San Diego and I realized THAT for the first time was when I connected the most with people on a class level versus a racial level and I realized I didn't identify as much with, you know, your average Asian American. And so that's when I started....I sought out these other spaces and it tended to be filled by Brown folks.

Janet's reflections once again spoke to the role of socioeconomic class in shaping her identity. She expressed in the previous section that one of the reasons she was not like "your average Asian American" was because of not "having money to do the cool stuff." Janet's experiences

left her feeling disconnected from other Korean Americans and Asian Americans broadly and she attributed this to growing up in a working-class background and differences based on socioeconomic status. Compared to her Asian American peers, Janet described the only way she was able to attend college was to apply for “scholarships, grants, and working...at one point I had three jobs at one time just to finish school.” It was through one of those jobs that brought her to work with an academic outreach program for youth in South San Diego and with students who were predominantly Latinx. It was there where she first felt connected to others “on a class level versus a racial level,” which laid the foundation for her commitments to the Latinx community. Janet continued:

In my journey, politically as I grew, I found myself leaning more towards the work and mind frame of specifically Chicanos and talking about the work they were doing. I find myself a lot more comfortable in spaces that are dominated by Latinos, I often don't notice that I'm the only Asian in a space of all Latinos cause I feel like I'm just one of them.

Janet described taking Asian American Studies classes, which gave her an understanding of the political origins of “Asian American.” From there, she organized with the Indigenous sovereignty movement in Hawai'i and later with labor organizations in Los Angeles, which gave her a sense of “this pan-Asian identity.” Still, she described “leaning more towards the work” of the Chicax community and feels more “comfortable in spaces dominated by Latinos,” often not noticing that she is the only Asian because she “feels like one of them.” She further elaborated on this feeling:

I think I feel most comfortable with Mexican culture, specifically families who come from Central America, Oaxaca, Guatemala, El Salvador, so like I said, when I'm in a room full of Asians, I'm very aware that, 'oh my God, we're all Asian,' but when I'm in a room full of fellow Latinos, I don't feel that I'm Asian, I feel like I'm home.

We get a sense from Janet's statement above the strength of her feeling connected to the Latinx community that goes beyond a political commitment. Contrast to her reaction when sharing a space with other Asian Americans ("oh my God, we're all Asian"), she described being "most comfortable" with "*fellow* Latinos" to the extent of calling it like "home."

Agmula, a second-generation Filipino American, shared similar sentiments as Janet:

I started taking Filipino Studies classes and they're all in the Asian Am major and so that was when I started to realize that I am a part of this pan-Asian identity and every time we would do student of Color organizing, that's when you would connect to other folks, but still sometimes I would still not feel quite connected to Asian folks because I still felt more connected to the struggle that Black folks experience, Latinos experience or Chicano.

Like Janet, Agmula expressed a political identity as an Asian American and through Asian American Studies courses and organizing work, felt "a part of this pan-Asian identity." Agmula was also like Janet in that despite this work, she still did not "feel quite connected to Asian folks" and "felt more connected to the struggle that Black folks experience, Latinos experience or Chicano." As Agmula continued to unpack her reflection, she attributed the connection she felt with other groups of Color to the community she grew up in, as well as dynamics within the Asian American community:

Growing up in (name of town), it's a really diverse city...my next door neighbor was Samoan, so I participated in Samoan things, next door the other neighbor was Black, across the street they were Mexican, I don't know if it's appropriation or it it's something you participated in your whole life because that's what you know.

We can see the ways Agmula's community was extremely significant in shaping her identity. In her above statement, as well as over the course of the four meetings, she always described her community as "diverse," which often meant cultural exchanges between groups. She problematized the line between authentic sharing of culture as normalized within a diverse community because it is "something you participated in your whole life," "that's what you

know,” or if there are elements of appropriation in then claiming elements of another culture.

She continued to unpack this tension:

Growing up in (name of town), there’s a lot of Pacific Islanders, and with that culture, I think a lot of times we resonated with Pacific Islanders and so I think growing up mistakenly, I would be like, ‘I’m Pacific Islander!’ Until I got politicized and realized it’s not cool.

Because of a shared history of colonialism in the Pacific Islands and the Philippines, Agmula felt her experience at times “resonated with Pacific Islanders” for her to then say, “I’m Pacific Islander!” in a way that was similar to Janet’s experience in “feeling like” she is part of the Chicanx community. Again, though, Agmula critically reflected on this after becoming “politicized” and problematized Filipinos claiming Pacific Islander status (Diaz, 2004). In continuing her reflection, Agmula discussed the role of representation in shaping her identity:

I don’t know if it’s because growing up, what I would see in the media that I kind of related to was Black culture...I grew up with Black folks in my neighborhood, I don’t know what it is, but I think I identified with Black culture and I think a lot of times Filipinos are referred to as the Black people of Asia, so there’s just all these things. I don’t know if it’s because I grew up in (my city), it’s multiracial...I didn’t really interact with a lot of White people until I went to college, and even then, I stayed with the people of Color spaces a lot because that’s where I felt safe, that’s what I grew up in and maybe that’s why I identify so much with the people of Color identity and solidarity work.

Though she discussed a broader people of Color identity, Agmula specified that she related most to Black culture, perhaps because of growing up with “Black folks in my neighborhood” or a greater visibility of African Americans than Asian Americans in the media that she was able to relate to and identify with “another fellow person of Color.” She also mentioned, “Filipinos are referred to as the Black people of Asia,” speaking to the idea that within a Black-White binary, Filipinos may identify closer to Blackness along the racial continuum because of dynamics such as shared interests with African Americans (Chutuape, 2016) and colorism, particularly, being thought of to have darker skin than East Asians (Gambol, 2016). This has shaped Agmula’s

organizing work as she mentioned that despite being a part of a pan-Asian identity, she felt “more connected to the struggle that Black folks experience.” She previously shared she didn’t interact with “White and East Asian folks” until college when she experienced a “culture shock” in moving into her dormitory. She sought spaces that reflected a similar racial and cultural makeup as her hometown where “she felt safe” and she saw her identity as a Filipino American as one in solidarity with a broader people of Color identity. Agmula’s strong notions of solidarity will continue to emerge later as she described her classroom practice with students.

Danny, Janet, and Agmula saw themselves as different from “other” Asian Americans in that “Asian American” is an explicit political identity. Danny’s “woke” perspective as compared to his peers meant he took on a role of having to teach other Asian Americans about current issues, those he perceived as not wanting to “rock the boat” or “step out of that White construct.” For Janet and Agmula, their political identity was one that was in solidarity working with other communities of Color to the extent that they identify more so with other people of Color than with Asian Americans.

**Revisiting “American.”** For the teachers, articulating what it meant to be Asian American involved grappling between ideas of being “Asian,” “American,” and “Asian American.” The way each of these terms was used by the teachers held distinctions that had implications related to language, immigration status, education, or specific images or activities as markers. Being “American” was equated with Whiteness, which first came up in Danny’s description of the “tiers” in his high school, where he suggested that being a “White Asian” was analogous to being “American.” Danny, a 1.5-generation Chinese American, described “White Asians” as being “very Americanized” and were the ones “picking on me like, ‘you’re a fob, you can’t speak English.’” Danny’s reflection that he was picked on because he was “fresh off the boat” or,

“fob” suggested “American” as being native-born and fluent in English. CM, a second-generation ethnic Chinese American whose family is from Vietnam, added:

Growing up, I was consistently confused because I was like, ‘I’m American, no I’m Asian, I’m American, I’m Asian.’ So, compared to my cousins who live in the OC, I’m more Asian, but then compared to my classmates in school who were fobs, I was like, ‘no, I’m not THAT Asian!’

CM’s “confusion” indicated she was grappling between being “Asian” or “American” as identities that were distinct from each other. Her reflection suggested a relational spatial element along with immigration, where she was considered “more Asian” than her “cousins who live in the OC,” or, Orange County, which has the largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam (Vigil, Yun, & Cheng, 2004). Compared to peers in her hometown though, whom she described as “fobs,” or, “fresh off the boat,” she was “not THAT Asian,” where her use of “fob” reflected negative sentiments similar to Danny’s experience and signaled being native-born was of a higher status.

Danny’s description of the “tiers” in his high school also implied being a “White Asian” meant doing things that were “very Americanized,” such as playing basketball, lacrosse, or knowing the latest fashion trends. CM shared markers of what she thought was “American:”

For me growing up, it was watching movies and thinking to myself, ‘this doesn’t happen in my life,’ like, having friends over, thinking about what you’re gonna do after prom ohh-la-la, going to Girl Scouts, so when I watch these things, it’s like watching a documentary, I’m in this country, but yet, I know nothing of this. So then talking to friends, asking like, ‘does your mom make you take your shoes off in the house? Yeah? Ok!’ like, I’m not the only crazy one...what I’m going through is not a lonely road.

Complicating CM’s “confusion” around being “Asian” or “American” was a feeling that although she is not “THAT Asian” because she was native-born and not a “fob” or “fresh off the boat,” she still did not feel “American” because she was “in this country,” but “knows nothing” of it, being more of an observer as if she were “watching a documentary.” CM’s perception of

being “American” meant participating in activities such as going over friends’ houses, going to prom, or being in the Girl Scouts, which conflicted with her “Asian” customs such as taking “shoes off in the house.” CM inquired with peers for similar struggles of negotiating between being “Asian” and “American” as a way of checking that she is “not the only crazy one” and that she is not on a “lonely road.” While CM shared tensions between being Asian or American, Jenny, a second-generation Chinese American, had a different point of view:

When I met the new Asians at my school, I was like, ‘I do not get along with them, they are NOT my people!’ and they were Chinese, and I automatically associated myself with the White teachers and I think that’s just a really interesting reflection on myself.

*Juliet: Can you say more about that?*

You know, I’m trying to think because I am part of a triathlete team and I immediately associate with White teammates, and I don’t know, I think I went to a middle school that was 90% White. Like, when you talk about “Asian American,” I feel much more like, towards my American side.

Jenny, who grew up in the northern California region, presented a different view from the rest of the teachers in that she identified more with her “American side.” She attributed this to growing up with predominantly White peers, which shaped her current interactions such as associating herself more with White teammates on her triathlete team or White teachers at her school. As Jenny continued to unpack her reflection, she added:

I come from a ‘I’m first generation here, I had to get straight A’s’ and because of that, I rebelled, so I think that’s why I associate with Whiteness because I was like, ‘who the heck wants to just work so hard and for what?’

Within the discussion was teachers’ experiences growing up with immigrant parents, particularly expectations around education. Danny characterized this expectation as:

You need your education because we came from wherever we came from without those opportunities, this is why we’re here.

Jenny “rebelled” against that approach and rather than focusing only on school, “associated with Whiteness” instead, meaning, she engaged in social activities such as dating or going over

friends' houses- things that CM previously mentioned as "American" and distinct from her Asian culture. Jenny disagreed with the pressure "to get straight A's" at the cost of not having opportunities for social or extracurricular activities when she said, "who the heck wants to just work so hard and for what?"

In articulating what "Asian American" meant towards the end of one of the meetings, Agmula saw it as a constant negotiation as she shared:

It's like a process of like, resisting and wanting to be accepted...When we think of Asian American, there's these identities that we have to navigate when do we flip one on or off.

Agmula's comment summarized much of the conversation when she described being Asian American as a "process of resisting and wanting to be accepted." In "resisting," she was referring to the ways in which the teachers critiqued "White Asians" and distinguished themselves from "typical" or "average" Asians. At the same time, teachers discussed "wanting to be accepted," for example, when Leo shared his "interviewing" process with co-ethnics to see if he is "Filipino enough," or CM's feeling that being Asian is so distinct from American and checking in with others to confirm a shared experience. With these competing and co-existing layers, she captured the Asian American experience as one with "multiple identities" and "navigating when do we flip one on or off." This tension emerged in Janet's reflections, where a strong political commitment and feeling "at home" with "fellow" Latinos existed alongside the assertion that she was "more Korean" than other Koreans because of her cultural knowledge. Teachers' articulations of "Asian American" as an identity conveyed navigating layers of language, immigration, socioeconomic status, and cultural and political knowledge within the micro context of their neighborhood and schooling and the macro context of intragroup



dynamics within the Asian American community and broader racializations of Asian Americans in the U.S.

**Summary.** Significant insights emerge from teachers' ideas about their identities as Asian Americans, beginning with the way teachers articulate their identity. Contrast to articulating their identities in the affirmative and in ways that describe their "Asian American-ness" in positive ways based on shared commonalities with others, teachers' organizing idea in articulating their identity was through an oppositional frame. Teachers' process in articulating their identity was first, in opposition to "the other," then unpacking their perception of "other" Asian Americans, followed by the ways they saw themselves as different from "the other."

Teachers' articulations speak to sociocultural notions of *positioning* and *figured worlds* operating alongside Asian Critical Race tenets of *Asianization* and *(Re)constructive History*. Teachers' perceptions of larger norms and practices of what it means to be Asian American (i.e., "Asians are *like this*") shaped the oppositional ways they position themselves in relation to others (i.e., "I am *not like that*"). The perceived norms and practices of what it means to be Asian American reflected the dominant racializations of Asian Americans as model minorities and perpetual foreigners. Broadly, "other" Asian Americans had an uncritical acceptance of honorary White status ("White Asians") that comes with a higher socioeconomic status, lack of knowledge of Asian culture and language, and a lack of political knowledge and engagement. At other moments, there was also a tension related to immigration in that teachers' perceptions of "other" Asian Americans included those whom they described as "fobs," or "fresh off the boat." Positioning themselves as different from "the other" were shaped by a range of teachers' individual experiences that conflicted with these perceptions. For some of the teachers, it was a difference in socioeconomic status, others felt they were more culturally authentic than their

peers, while other teachers were explicit about their political orientations and described themselves as “woke.” For one teacher who described herself as “associating more with Whiteness,” she was still grappling with her identity in not identifying with “other” Asian Americans and engaged in a critique of the focus on education as part of the model minority narrative.

Teachers’ perceptions of “other” Asian Americans were situated within the figured worlds of their neighborhood community and schooling environments. We can see the ways the demographics of teachers’ communities and the interactions they engaged in with peers in their neighborhood and schools shaped their ideas around what it means to be Asian American and who “the other” is. For some, ideas emerged around Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners in asserting distinctions related to immigration (“fobs”) that were shaped by living in a community of Asian Americans or predominantly Whites. For others who grew up in diverse communities of people of Color, their ideas of Asian American related to notions of solidarity, which meant the “the other” were those whom they perceived aligned with Whiteness or did not share the same political views. For the teachers, positioning themselves in opposition emerged through their participation across time within these significant spaces.

While teachers engaged in positioning that negotiated individual experiences against larger norms and practices, their reflections speak to an additional layer of positioning in that their oppositional frame is not solely because their individual experiences did not align with their perceived norms and practices, but also positioning rooted in a historical and political context of the ways Asian Americans have been racialized. For some of the teachers, having knowledge of Asian American history, the larger and shared struggles between Asian Americans and other people of Color around labor and civil rights, and a critical analysis to events such as the 1992

Uprisings or affirmative action policies shaped teachers' oppositional frame to reflect a pushing back against the ways Asian Americans are positioned, historically and politically, in relation to Whites, co-ethnics and other Asian groups, and other people of Color. Specifically, teachers' reflections speak to their knowledge of the ways Asian Americans have been positioned as honorary Whites, which shaped their articulations that were primarily organized around pushing back against "White Asians" and a critique of Asian Americans who accept or internalize their status as White.

In articulating their identity in opposition, teachers themselves are engaging in a form of racialization, or *Asianization*. Significant in the ways they are engaging in *Asianization* is that contrast to existing forms of racializations, such as model minorities or perpetual foreigners that have been defined by others, teachers are creating meaning for themselves. This presents theoretical contributions to Asian Critical Race Theory in expanding the ways Asian Americans experiences are shaped. Teachers' process of defining themselves in relation to "the other," though in oppositional ways, is enacting Holland et al.'s (1998) notions of storytelling in that in constructing who they *are not*, they are, in fact, constructing themselves.

This leaves us with larger questions regarding what it means to be Asian American. Given a group of Asian American teachers who had a range of perspectives, their view of "Asian American-ness" is one where they continuously articulate that they are "not like that." More specifically, some of them identified themselves as progressive or "woke," yet do not have language to articulate their racial identity in affirmative ways and primarily organize their identities in opposition. There is a need to expand and deepen understandings around Asian American identity beyond dominant racializations that shaped teachers' perspectives. Teachers may have been engaging in an oppositional way because the model minority and perpetual

foreigner narratives are so prevalent that the language of those narratives is more concrete. That is, it may have been more accessible to distinguish themselves from those narratives as opposed to a lack of language that exists in attempting to articulate the complexities and nuances of their “Asian American-ness.” It is also significant to note that, given the group of teachers, some of whom have historical and political knowledge of the ways Asian Americans have been racialized, the language in their perceptions of “the other,” as well as in distinguishing themselves from “the other” in some ways reify and perpetuate these dominant racializations. For example, in using language to describe co-ethnics as “fobs,” they themselves are reproducing discourses around Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. There is a contradiction in that teachers who have knowledge of the ways race operates and how larger narratives have been historically and politically constructed position themselves in opposition and perpetuate the discourses they are pushing back against. That a group of progressive Asian Americans primarily articulate their identities as “not like that” and further for some, aligning with other communities of Color, may speak to a broader view of how Asian Americans are perceived.

### **Asian American Teachers’ Practice**

The second research question explored Asian American teachers’ practice. Teachers were asked to share experiences around teaching broadly, as well as stories and classroom artifacts that reflected the ways they saw their identities emerging in their teaching. Teachers discussed their practice in three ways: (1) “teachable moments” about Asian Americans, (2) sharing Asian American culture with students, and (3) navigating Asian Americans in a racial in-between space. This section closes with teachers’ reflections for how they would have liked to have been supported within teacher education, which also revealed the ways their identity shaped their practices.

### **“Teachable moments” about Asian Americans.**

I like being an Asian person teaching Black and Brown students because they have to talk about your race....being Asian forces us all to talk about race. –Niko

Niko’s quote reflected many of the experiences teachers shared when discussing their interactions with students. As teachers of primarily Black and Brown students, teachers expressed using differences in racial background as a starting point to address questions and misconceptions about Asian Americans, to have larger conversations about race, and described moments in the classroom where they would intentionally attend to student comments or actions.

Leo, a 7<sup>th</sup> year middle school science teacher recalled a lesson in his curriculum involving an Asian character and his students’ interpretation of the character as one with an “Asian accent:”

That is when I stop everything, ‘alright, we’re gonna stop and talk.’ That’s when it happens, that’s an on the spot teachable moment, but it always happens once a year, I already have this mini-lesson in my head, ‘why do you think I’m not okay with it? Why do you think it’s funny?’ and so on and so forth all those big, general questions.

Leo treated this as a “teachable moment” where he engaged in a discussion around students’ assumptions of an Asian character having an accent and why students might “think it’s funny” to read a character with an “Asian accent.” He further pushed his students to reflect why Leo, as an Asian American, would feel “not okay” with students interpreting Asians in this way. Working with the same curriculum from year to year, Leo anticipated this moment and was purposeful to “stop and talk,” having a “mini-lesson” ready for this conversation based on his experience. Leo described that in addition to teaching science content, his role as an educator was to also address “those big, general questions,” that he was also teaching “social consciousness.”

Janet, a 13<sup>th</sup> year middle school math and science teacher, described a similar moment where she addressed her students’ actions:

When kids do random things like this (pulls eyes), when they go like (bows), I'm like, 'what was that?' and they're like, 'I'm just saying thank you' 'where did you learn that?' I mean, it's not mean spirited, they're children, and then I would tell them, 'culturally Koreans, we don't do that, maybe in another culture, but in my culture, we don't do that, so that really has no meaning to me.'

Janet described, "addressing things as they come up," such as when students bow to her, a gesture they interpreted as "saying thank you." She did not take offense because "they're children" and "not mean spirited" and clarified to her students that bowing has "no meaning" for her. Her statement that "in my culture, we don't do that," is interesting because bowing is a greeting or sign of respect in some Asian cultures, including Korean culture. In the previous section exploring Asian American identity, Janet stated that she felt "more" culturally Korean than peers because of her knowledge of traditions such as the practice of Korean drumming. Janet's perception that Korean drumming is culturally Korean while bowing is not speaks to Lowe's (1991) notions of the ways Asian American culture is continuously constructed and the "messy" process as certain cultural traditions and practices are "refigured and rewritten" (p. 27). Janet's example would require further teasing out of how certain cultural practices, such as Korean drumming, are translated, while other practices, such as bowing, are not, in what ways that process shapes identity, or how her identity has shaped the ways certain traditions or practices are taken up. Janet continued:

When the kids do the eye squint, I would address that, 'do my eyes really look like THIS?' they're like, 'nooooo!' and I would talk about monolids and double eyelids and some scientists have theories about sand flying and stuff and evolution and humans adapt.

When students did "the eye squint," a gesture often done to mock the size and shape of Asian Americans' eyes, Janet described her approach as one where she had to "come back a little more witty" because "they're middle school kids" and responded by exaggerating her students' actions, asking them "do my eyes really look like THIS?" After her "comeback," her strategy

then, similar to addressing students bowing to her, was to follow up by providing information, in this example, of how different physical traits have come to be, specifically with the ways environmental conditions in different parts of Asia have led “humans to adapt” with a monolid to protect their eyes.

Niko, a 4<sup>th</sup> year history teacher, shared a moment where she also had to navigate “the eye pull.” Unlike Leo and Janet who shared their responses and strategies from their years of experience, Niko shared this story from when she was a student teacher:

I remember student teaching and I did this Japanese internment thing, and we did this skit and this kid, a total smart ass, he totally did the eye pull, and I was a student teacher, and I didn't know, and I just flipped out on him, and it was one of those things and it was such a teaching moment, but because I flipped out and the way I talked to him was so aggressive as if he was all racist people in my life or something. Students attacked me like, ‘calm down, Miss! He's not trying to da da da...’ but I was like, ‘it's not okay to do that!’ It was totally like, okay, I'm an Asian teacher and I thought that because I did Southeast Asian activism that I thought I knew how to deal with this and I don't! And I need to learn.

Niko's opening quote that she liked being an Asian teacher because it “forces” students to talk about race reflected a 4<sup>th</sup> year teacher who was stronger in her practice, having learned from experiences such as the one above where she “flipped out” on a student who “did the eye pull” during a lesson on Japanese incarceration. She recognized it could have been a “teachable moment” for her students as Leo described, but did not have the tools to navigate it in a way that would have resulted in a productive conversation that broadened students' knowledge. Contrary to Janet's perspective that students were “not mean spirited,” which shaped her response that continued the conversation about this gesture, Niko instead replied to the student in an “aggressive” way “as if he was all racist people,” leading the rest of the class to “attack” her and defend the student. Significant in Niko's reflection was her thinking that having previous experience with activism would mean she would know “how to deal with this,” but did not and

“need to learn.” Philip (2013) described this tension for prospective teachers who have experience as activists, particularly the need to reframe ideas of learning from the activist as holding and giving knowledge to one where knowledge is constructed alongside students. Niko shared how she now engages students around the topic of Japanese incarceration so that it is a “relatable experience” as opposed to the way she approached it previously where it was about “completely different people.” Niko’s reflection here has implications for how we think about supporting teachers in leveraging their previous experiences specifically within the classroom context as they transition to their roles as educators.

While some teachers were purposeful about their Asian American backgrounds and leveraged “teachable moments” with students, Jenny, a 7<sup>th</sup> year physics teacher who identified more toward her “American” side, had a different perspective:

I didn’t have to think about being Asian American until they (other Asian American teachers) showed up. I didn’t know, like, I grew up White, and then all of a sudden the kids wanna know, ‘are you sisters, are you related?’ Then I was in charge of creating a lesson cause we had a ton of Asian teachers at our school, so I was like, ‘aw, shoot, what am I? What are my traditions?’ and then I had to go figure out....like you said, a lot of Asian Americans identify as White, like we’re part of this White culture, so I didn’t have to figure it out and now when kids ask, I have to look it up, I have to call my parents, ‘so, what do I do? What do I celebrate?’

Jenny expressed “growing up White” in a “mostly White neighborhood” and then “all of a sudden” through working with other Asian American teachers, had to navigate questions from students as to whether they were “sisters” or “related” to each other when she previously “didn’t have to think about being Asian American.” She described creating a lesson for the school’s advisory program about different Asian cultures and being a part of “White culture,” she never had to “figure out” her own background, having to call her parents to ask what her own traditions and celebrations were. CM, Jenny’s colleague, described the advisory lesson as “great” because



it expanded students' knowledge of the diversity of Asian countries and backgrounds. Jenny was able to learn more about her culture, but there were other moments that still made Jenny uncomfortable in discussing her background. When asked if there was a time when teachers could have been purposeful in talking about their identity but chose not to, Jenny shared:

This year I guess in the news, there's a lot of publicity about the dog eating contest festival or something. And so when that came up in the news, the students were like, 'oh, do you eat dog?' and I could have addressed it, but instead, because I'm vegetarian, I just deferred to, 'I'm vegetarian' and I had a conversation about being vegetarian and animal cruelty instead of like, Chinese culture and I chose not to do it cause I'm very comfortable with my vegetarianism versus my culture.

Jenny's reflection referred to the critique of various Asian cultures' consumption of dogs and specifically to the recent attention given to the Yulin Dog Festival in China, an annual event where dogs are prepared and eaten as part of celebrating the summer solstice. When asked whether she ate dog from her students, Jenny explained that while she could have engaged in a discussion about Chinese culture, she chose instead to "defer" to her being a vegetarian, an identity she was more "comfortable" in as compared to her ethnic identity. Through both of Jenny's reflections, we can see the way her identity emerged in her practice, but also the way her practice shaped her identity. When confronted with the "cliched allegation" (Wu, 2002, p. 219) of whether Asians eat dogs, Jenny's discomfort with her Asian American identity resulted in her leveraging her vegetarianism instead in navigating the conversation with her students. In other ways, teaching shifted the salience of Jenny's "Asian American-ness," particularly in learning more about her culture and background through creating the advisory lesson for her school.

For the teachers, student questions, actions, and comments were opportunities to engage in "teachable moments" to clarify misconceptions about Asian Americans and we can see the ways their identities emerged in these moments. Niko's activism background, for example,

emerged in how she initially navigated “the eye pull” with her students or Jenny’s discomfort in her Asian American identity emerged in choosing not to address student questions. More broadly, teachers’ articulations of being different from “other” Asian Americans perhaps emerged in the ways they navigated these “teachable moments” with students, for example, in pushing back against dominant characterizations of Asian Americans as speaking with an accent.

**Sharing Asian American Culture with Students.** Teachers spoke of the ways they shared elements of their cultural background in their teaching. Leo, a 7<sup>th</sup> year middle school science teacher, shared his culture by keeping a jeepney on his desk:

That’s the only evidence in my classroom where they see that I’m Filipino, and they just ask me what it is. Even though it’s not very deep, a surface level connection, superficial, yes, but it leads to deeper conversations.

As the only physical item in his classroom that symbolized his Filipino background, Leo acknowledged the jeepney sparked student questions that are initially “superficial,” but opened the opportunity for “deeper conversations.” One of the ways he built on these initial conversations is through a discussion of his name:

When I bring up my last name and I teach the kids how to say it, how to say it properly, and I know a lot of them wanna just shorten it or just say Mr. M and I go on to talk about it and it leads to a conversation about my last name and why does it mean so much to me, ‘oh because it’s my last name, it’s my identity, I’m not a letter, don’t call me Mr. M,’ and then they laugh and start asking ‘what does it mean, is it Thai, what is it?’ and I talk about being Filipino...and a lot of kids don’t know about exactly what is a Filipino. You know, it’s a casual conversation, ‘oh, I’m from the Philippines’ ‘oh, can you speak Filipino?’ ‘well, Tagalog is what I speak,’ so just getting to know me.

Whereas the jeepney led to conversations if students approached Leo with questions, a discussion of his name was a conversation he initiated. Strongly tied to his identity as a Filipino, Leo was purposeful about teaching his students “how to say it properly” without shortening it to an initial and minimizing his identity and culture. Knowing that many of his students do not

know “exactly what is a Filipino,” opening the discussion through his name was an opportunity to share more about his background, such as the dialect he speaks.

Niko shared the ways her experience as a student teacher where she “flipped out” on her student shaped her approach as a first-year teacher:

So my first year teaching, I decorated my classroom and the first thing I buy is this huge Chinese fan from Chinatown and I was like, ‘I’m just gonna beat them to it,’ I know they’re gonna talk about me being Asian, so I’m just gonna beat them to it and like, Asian up my whole room. I got like, bamboo plants, a money tree, the Chinese calendar, so I get all this stuff, I get all the decorations on my desk, Kpop, that’s not even the same ethnicity, but it’s fine, it’s fine. I need to beat them to it and really like, let my Asian flag fly. It was exactly what it needed to be because then students would ask questions like, ‘where is that fan from? What is that tree about?’ and da da da and then I was in control of the conversation, whereas when that Japanese internment thing happened, I felt like I was completely out of control cause I didn’t think that would happen.

Niko described the interaction as a student teacher leaving her feeling “out of control” of the conversation about her Asian background. Knowing her students were “gonna talk about me being Asian,” Niko’s way of “beating them to it” was to “Asian up” her classroom with various objects reflecting different Asian cultures. Similar to Leo’s jeepney, having those objects on display prompted questions from students that Niko was prepared to answer. She acknowledged the items were not from the same ethnic culture or her own Thai culture, perhaps problematically reinforcing the idea of a “universal oriental” (Goodwin, 2006), but as a first-year teacher who was beginning to develop her classroom practice “it was exactly what it needed to be” after her experience as a student teacher.

Other teachers spoke of the ways they shared their Asian language with students. Danny, a 15<sup>th</sup> year middle school science teacher previously shared his early experiences with “being picked on” by Asian American peers because he was a “fob,” or, “fresh off the boat” and “can’t speak English.” He would later encounter the same scenario with one of his students:

The first time I had an English Language Learner, an ELL kid who was Chinese, spoke not a lick of English, and she just got plastered by the class cause they were making fun of the way she spoke and I didn't know how to deal with it...like really, just had no idea how to deal with it and so I was thinking it over and I just decided- I'm just gonna speak Chinese in class one day and kind of, validate her. Kids are so funny, they just make a 180 turnaround right away, all of a sudden, speaking Chinese is cool. It's like, 'ohhhh we wanna know what you said!' You could just see the energy is different cause she was the only one in the room who understood me and the kids wanted to understand me, too. I was lucky the kids liked me, but if I didn't have that relationship, that would have fallen on my face.

Danny's own experience with being othered because of language emerged in his approach as a teacher to support his student in not having the same experience. Danny's approach was to speak Chinese in front of the class to "validate" his student because she was the only one who was able to understand him. By doing so, he shifted the energy among his students where "all of a sudden, speaking Chinese is cool." He attributed the success of this move to the relationships he built with his students, stating that if they didn't have a good relationship, "that would have fallen on my face." Danny described that from then on, he has made it a point every year to discuss his background, specifically with speaking Chinese and shared his name with his students in both English and Chinese, as his way of "legitimizing" all of his students who "don't quite have that command of English yet."

CM and June also shared stories where they leveraged their Asian languages with students. CM, a 4<sup>th</sup> year chemistry teacher reminisced about a memorable student:

He was in the first advisory class I ever had (in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade). He wanted to have a better connection with his teachers, so he would ask me all these questions like, 'Miss, how do you say shut up in your language?' And I didn't speak Mandarin or Cantonese, the language I speak is Chiu Chow<sup>4</sup>, and his probing made other students aware of, 'oh, just because you're Chinese, there's actually different languages and they're not all spoken the same.' So I taught him how to say shut up in Chiu Chow cause that's what he really wanted to know. Then he comes back in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and he says, 'Miss, miss, remember? (says phrase)' and then he went to Las Vegas (with his mom) for the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and then boom, 12<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Chiu Chow is a regional dialect of Cantonese.

grade he knocks on my door in the middle of class like, ‘Miss, miss! I’m back! And you know what? (says phrase)’ I was like, ‘dang! You went to Las Vegas and you still held onto this phrase?’ and he just had this lasting impression of, you know what- I do need to talk more about my background...trying to find ways in a chemistry curriculum to bring myself in other than just the side conversations.

Through one student’s questions, CM was able to share more about Chinese language with all of her students, specifically the diversity of dialects other than Mandarin and Cantonese. CM sharing her regional dialect and her student remembering a phrase she taught him over the four years of high school was significant to her and a reminder that she needs “to talk more about my background.” This anecdote was CM’s response when asked to share a moment when her identity as an Asian American emerged in her teaching. At the end of her reflection, she realized that sharing her language in this way was a “side conversation” and wanted to be more intentional to “bring myself in.” However, she struggled with ways to do so within a chemistry curriculum.

June, a 10<sup>th</sup> year high school teacher described how she navigated questions about her background during math lessons:

They would ask me, ‘what are you?’ and I’d be like, ‘what do you mean?’ I make it hard on them, and they’ll say like, ‘where were you born?’ and I’d be like, ‘Los Angeles’ and they’ll be like, ‘where were your parents born?’ and I’m like, ‘ok, they’re from Korea’ I go along with it, they’ll be like, ‘can you speak it, say something!’ and I’ll be like, ‘ah! I’ll share something after we get through this lesson!’ and so we’ll finish the lesson and then be like, ‘ok, what do you want to know?’...I’ll show them the alphabet, how things go together, I’ll show kids how to write their name and they get really excited about it. I guess cause it’s new and different...it’s something I know and they want to know, so I share, it’s just kinda like that, but it doesn’t go deeper than that.

June’s technique was to answer some questions about her background and hold off on answering others to keep her students engaged in the math lesson. Knowing students were curious about her Korean background, specifically how to write their names in Korean, June was proud to share her culture as something “new and different.” Similar to CM, at the end of June’s

reflection she said, “it doesn’t go deeper than that,” implying these are also “side conversations” that happen outside of her math curriculum.

Teachers incorporated their backgrounds within their teaching through sharing elements of culture, specifically language or objects. These moments were intentional, such as Leo’s discussion of his name, or more naturally occurring within a lesson, such as students asking how to say or write certain phrases in a different language. Either way, teachers’ stories spoke to the ways students expressed a strong interest in learning more about their background, as June says, “it’s something they want to know.” Interestingly, three of the teachers, Leo, CM, and June described these ways as “superficial,” “surface level,” “side conversations,” or “doesn’t go deeper,” suggesting they did not see their culture and background as integral to their teaching. These reflections are significant in a later section as the teachers discussed how they would like ongoing support as Asian American teachers in being able to more intentionally incorporate their identities within their teaching.

**Navigating Asian Americans in a Racial In-between Space.** I asked the teachers, “does being Asian American matter as a teacher?” Jenny opened this conversation that at her school, she sees herself as a “bridge,” having perspectives from her position as someone having “privilege” as a “model minority,” while also “part of the minority society” and having to “deal with minority issues.” The following exchange between Jenny and Danny reveals the ways they saw this positionality of “in-between-ness” in shaping their experiences as teachers:

Jenny: I feel like at my school, I don’t get as much crap (from students) because I’m not White.

Danny: I agree with that, like, our proximity to Whiteness is our privilege, and I felt the same thing, like, because I wasn’t White, I didn’t get shit from the students, but at the same time, amongst my peers, amongst colleagues, I was not White and because I’m not White, my voice isn’t as valid.

Jenny and Danny perceived they “don’t get as much crap” in relation to their students because they are not White, but not being White also meant not having as strong of a voice in relation to White colleagues. While Jenny and Danny framed their experiences in relation to Whiteness, Niko nuanced this “in-between-ness” from a different perspective:

Niko: The people of Color thing...I don’t think our students do see Asian as part of it until we say it.

Taken together, teachers expressed a perception by others that Asian Americans are “not White,” but also not as a person of Color. Jenny, Danny, and Niko’s statements reflected the ways teachers spoke about how being Asian American in occupying an in-between space, racially, shaped interactions and relationships with students and colleagues. This section first explores the ways teachers navigated the in-between space with students, followed by their experiences with White colleagues, specifically as Asian American women.

***“In-between-ness” in relation to students.*** In the previous section exploring Asian American identity, teachers saw themselves as different from “other” Asian Americans in that they had racial and political knowledge, describing themselves as “woke,” and held strong notions of solidarity with other communities of Color. Though they articulated their identities in these ways, they described a tension of how they are not necessarily perceived by others in the same ways, such as Niko’s reflection below:

I feel like it’s assumed for a Black or Brown educator, they’re down until you find out they’re not and then you’re like, ‘ohhh you’re one of those’ who went against their people, but you assume a Black or Brown educator is down until you find out, but with an Asian educator, like it’s back to us saying, where are they? Are they part of Whiteness, are they part of the Black and Brown movement? It has to be clarified, it’s not just assumed.

Because of the in-between space that Asian Americans occupy, Niko stated that it was often questioned whether Asian American teachers are “part of Whiteness,” something the teachers

strongly critiqued as part of the first research question, or if they are “down,” meaning, more aligned with “the Black and Brown movement,” as the teachers have previously expressed. Niko problematized the assumption that Black and Brown educators are “down until you find out they’re not,” while the reverse is the case for Asian American teachers, who have to clarify it, to which June added:

I hear that...like, Latino teachers (at my school) would say, ‘our students would just benefit better if they were taught by Latino teachers’ and I understand that, but when I hear that, I’m like, do you have to be Latino to make a difference in student’s lives? Cause for me I always feel connected to my students...and there could be a Latino who, yeah, maybe not understand the students, and that I wonder about.

June acknowledged the role teachers of Color play for students who are a racial or ethnic match, but wondered whether teachers of other racial backgrounds can also “make a difference” for students of Color. She questioned whether a meaningful connection with students comes from a shared racial background alone, pushing back that a teacher and student can share the same racial background, but have very different experiences.

Teachers’ perceptions that Asian Americans were not seen as people of Color, coupled with their identities as not like “other” Asian Americans shaped their classroom practice, specifically in feeling they had to be explicit to their students that they were “down,” shared similar experiences, and were in solidarity. For Niko, the ways she navigated the in-between space was more through informal conversations with her students. She first described how her students perceived her:

The one thing, Asian American, you’re invisible...but then you’re foreign, like it’s weird, it’s either you’re not noticed or you’re really noticed. And I feel like as a teacher...I’m always having to like, express my allegiance, like I have to explain how my experience is because they see me as so foreign, you always have to explain, like, I’m not that weird, I swear our lives are not that different, I promise...I feel like that’s how it’s always been as an Asian person, like I’m not White, so they don’t know my life from TV, they totally have stereotypes about



White people, that's a whole other thing! Because I'm not, they're always trying to understand who I am...that's the part about being an Asian teacher to Black and Brown students.

Niko tried to capture the experience of being an Asian American as a polarity between being “not noticed” and therefore others do not know much about your background and culture, while also being “really noticed” particularly, as “foreign,” where students may have the perception of Asian Americans as “different.” As a teacher then, Niko’s approach in relating to her students was to share her experiences, for example, the common experience of being a child of immigrants or in everyday ways such as, “oh, your parents have an Obama Phone? My dad has an Obama Phone,” to assure them “I’m not weird, our lives are not that different.” Making connections to shared experiences was her way of “expressing her allegiance,” building on her previous comment that as an Asian American teacher, she had to be intentional to clarify that she’s “down.”

Niko also spoke to the ways students constructed perceptions based on media and the further invisibilization of Asian Americans because her students “do not know her life from TV,” even if images from television are stereotypes in themselves. Given the lack of knowledge about Asian Americans, Niko continued to describe the ways her students try “to understand who I am” given the knowledge they do have:

That’s what it’s like to be an Asian person, you’re either, White people try to relate to you or Black people try to relate to you, my students do the same shit, they’re like, ‘Miss, you’re totally Black, you listen to rap,’ and I’m just, ‘I am who I am and I know you’re trying to relate to me and figure that out cause Asian is so foreign and you just need to be either Black or White’ and trying to figure it out and we’re not and it’s okay.

Niko’s students tried to “figure” her out through their lens of race within a Black-White binary, concluding she is “totally Black” because she “listens to rap.” She acknowledged her students were trying to “relate to me” through shared interests such as music, but tried to expand their

thinking beyond a Black-White binary and explained that Asian Americans don't "need to be either Black or White," that "it's okay" and "I am who I am." While Niko was purposeful in demystifying the perceived differences between her and her students to "express my allegiance," she continued to share how this can at times be taken out of context:

Here's the thing that happens, I fall into this, I try so hard like, 'we're not that different' and then we all get into this like, my class, everyone is like, 'fuck White people, right Miss?!' and I'm like, 'uhhhhh' I mean, like, it's cool that you feel like we're with it, but like, damn, did I just do that at the expense of a whole other race?

Niko's efforts were successful in creating a feeling of solidarity with her students, as they "feel like we're with it." However, she reflected her emphasis and focus on Asian Americans being "down" was done so perhaps inadvertently "at the expense of a whole other race" by othering White people in the process. Philip (2013) discusses this "reliance on polarization" for teachers who have previous experiences as activists and cautions against approaches to conversations about inequity and injustice as "scapegoating White people" (p. 59). Like the teacher Philip (2013) profiled, Niko came to this moment of realization that she held power in shaping her students' views about other groups and that conversations around race need to be more nuanced beyond "simplistic and dichotomous language" (p. 59).

It was important for teachers to emphasize solidarity between Asian Americans and other communities of Color, particularly for Agmula and Janet, who have both previously shared their identities as political and aligning more with other communities of Color. As a social studies teacher, Agmula did this through her curriculum:

I'm very proud to say that I am Filipino and because of my experience in realizing how invisibilized we are, the contributions of Filipinos in movements or in California, I always made it a point to insert how Filipinos have contributed....I just needed them to know that Asian Americans are in solidarity with a lot of different things and I think that was a lot of my push as a teacher.

Agmula previously shared the ways Asian American Studies was a significant space for her to learn more about her own history and knowing the ways Asian American history is often untold within curricula, she made “it a point to insert how Filipinos have contributed.” Further, solidarity and organizing alongside other communities of Color were strong parts of Agmula’s political identity as an Asian American and her teaching reflected her perspectives. Not only was it important to include Filipino history because of the ways it is “invisibilized,” but also in emphasizing how Filipinos contributed to various activist movements over time so that her students “know that Asian Americans are in solidarity.” Agmula’s notions of solidarity once again emerged when asked to share an artifact that reflected the ways teachers saw their Asian American identities emerging in their practice. Agmula shared a poster that was a gift from her students following a trip to a local library:

This poster says, “Free All Philippine Political Prisoners” and I kept that in my room and it’s like, right when you open the door, you see it and I think it was important to have this to communicate that my people go through struggle and that’s why I’m here, I’m here in solidarity, that’s why I’m a teacher.

This poster was significant in representing Agmula’s emphasis on solidarity between Asian Americans and other communities of Color, particularly a shared history of struggle. Displayed “right when you open the door,” it sent an explicit message that to Agmula, being a teacher was a political act, something she repeatedly stated since my first meeting with her. As a gift chosen for her by her students, the poster was especially significant because she knew her efforts to share Filipino history and emphasize solidarity resonated with them.

In sharing her artifact, Janet, a Korean American who identified strongly with the Latinx community, described an image she learned how to spray-paint from local artists during a trip she took to Oaxaca to support the teachers strike and movement in 2008:

My piece (has) “trouble” in Korean and image of a tiger, which is the national animal of Korea and kind of like, that Zapatista bandana, but for me as a teacher, I feel like I try to shape my experiences really purposefully so that I can understand where my students come from because a lot of them actually come from Oaxaca and just connecting with them on that level really defines who I am as a teacher....I feel like the shared struggles of Asian Americans are very similar to the struggles of a lot of my students, especially when we talk about our past histories.

Janet “defines who I am as a teacher” through the efforts she made to understand her students’ backgrounds, not only politically in her organizing work, but also in cultural ways, for example, becoming fluent in Spanish to be able to communicate with her students’ parents, learning more about her students’ traditions and customs, or sharing her love of fútbol. Janet also described making connections with students through sharing stories to emphasize the similarities between the Asian American and Latinx experiences, for example, patriarchal family structures or issues related to deportation and immigration in both communities. For both Agmula and Janet, we can see the ways the artifacts they chose to share reflected the ways they articulated their identities as Asian Americans who have pride in their ethnic identities, but also with strong political aspects, as well. Agmula’s poster communicated she was both “proud to say I am Filipino” and also that “Asian Americans are in solidarity. Similarly, Janet’s spray-painted image let her students know that “very clearly that I’m Korean,” but also as a “person of Color who is able to connect with them” and is not “so different.”

Knowing the ways Asian Americans can be racialized as White and teachers’ own critiques and pushback against “other” Asian Americans in accepting honorary White status shaped their classroom practice, specifically, in communicating ideas of solidarity and that they were “down” with their students. They did so in various ways either through curriculum, informal conversations, or their commitments to learning about students’ cultures, however, not without bumps along the way, such as Niko’s inadvertent building of her students’ opposition to

White people. Niko's students' interpretation of her efforts is a reminder of the relational aspects of teaching and the need to contextualize teachers' reflections alongside their students, who were youth trying to figure their own identities, understand race relations, learn the language to ask questions or talk about race, and how to relate to their Asian American teachers who they may not have much knowledge about.

***“In-between-ness” in relation to colleagues.*** The idea of not being seen as people of Color shaped interactions with students, while not being White shaped interactions with colleagues, particularly for the Asian American women in the group. Agmula, who had transitioned to an administrator for her school's network, shared that her position puts her “in a lot of White, male spaces” where she is intentional to “break a lot of stereotypes of what an Asian woman should be” by “inserting this voice.” Disrupting the ways Asian American women are stereotyped as quiet and docile, she described that her White, male colleagues react to her “like, woah! It trips them out because I'm not reticent.” Agmula explained the ways her positionality gave her an understanding of the experiences of Asian American women:

As an Asian administrator, I feel like I make an effort to try to bring out the wonderful qualities and share it with everybody else. I think a lot of people recognize that specifically the Asian women, they do real good work, but a lot of times, it's like background work. Like, they're the ones organizing the meeting minutes, they're the ones taking notes, they're the ones making sure everyone is on a timeline (*yeah's! and head nods from the group*) see, people are feeling some type of way right now! I was playing that role, I was that person, shoot, if I wasn't doing it, I don't know how they would have operated to move, right? I always felt like, as an Asian woman, I played that role, and I'm not trying to stereotype, but I notice this and it's like, how can I challenge that, it's almost systemic how that's happening, but it's so deeply ingrained that this is what is expected out of an Asian woman.

Agmula's perspectives informed her role as an administrator where she leveraged her position to empower Asian American women. Because the labor of Asian American women is often invisibilized and viewed as “background work,” such as taking notes or managing meeting

minutes, Agmula was purposeful in challenging those notions to recognize this work as integral in supporting the work of the school as whole. She commented the ways stereotypes and expectations can be so “deeply ingrained” when she expressed frustration that Asian American women teachers in her network often responded with “resistance” to her efforts to highlight and recognize their work. CM added the possibilities for “resistance” as rooted in Asian cultural values. Working on a leadership team in her school, CM described feeling “very uncomfortable” at the idea of “tooting my own horn” rather than recognizing the work of everyone on the team as a whole. CM named this as a clash of “White power culture as me me me me” as opposed to “Asian culture of us us us us.” As Agmula was sharing her reflection, many in the group were nodding along in agreement, particularly Jenny, who realized she and her colleague, CM, were “playing that role:”

Jenny: on our lead team, we (*points to CM*) manage the website, we send the meeting minutes and we organize everything and the guy who leads it, I’m pretty sure he knows less than us...we have to tell him like, ‘hey don’t forget to say this or don’t forget to do this.’ We’re the timekeeper, we manage the logistics...we back him up, we just stand in the back to make sure he looks good. He was freaking out when I wasn’t there at the start of the meeting cause I had another meeting and they sent the principal to go find me

Janet: DAMN!!!!

Jenny: he’s like, the face of our lead team

Janet: wow, but then you guys--

Jenny: we’re the tech support

This conversation occurred at the close of the third meeting. At the start of the fourth and final meeting, Jenny opened by telling the group how the conversation left a lasting impact, prompting her to apply for a leadership opening in her school that would allow her to work with teachers as an instructional coach and teach a reduced course load, which she described as the “perfect spot” between teaching and administration. However, she was disheartened when the position was given to her male colleague, the one she described above as “the face of the lead team,” whom

she perceived to support through her work. While she was upset that she did not get the position, she described feeling empowered after that conversation and accepted an Assistant Principal position at another school. Jenny expressed sadness to leave her school where she had been a teacher for so many years, a place she previously stated she “would never leave.” She was also sad to leave teaching, which she loved and would try to “wrangle” teaching a class in the new school, but was excited to be in a school where she felt her work would be recognized.

Though Danny shared at the opening of this section that “as compared to White colleagues...my voice isn’t as valid,” hearing the experiences of the Asian American women in the group made him reflect on his positionality that as a male, “I’m in a privileged spot.” This conversation sparked him to “go through everything now in the back of my head,” and reflect on the ways “gender plays more of a role than race in some cases.” Whether it is gender more than race or race and gender operating in intersectional ways, there was a perception from Asian American women teachers around assumptions and expectations by others, particularly against norms of Whiteness. Some, like Agmula, were aware of this intersection and were purposeful in disrupting stereotypes of Asian American women, while others, like Jenny, developed a new lens to her experiences after hearing others’ perspectives. While the images of Asian American women as docile, quiet, or passive have been well-documented, CM interpreted her experience through a cultural lens as opposed to one of intersectionality between race and gender. She challenged how “success” was viewed as a cultural clash, preferring to value her Asian perspectives of collectivity rather than conforming to ideas of success within White, male spaces through individual recognition and suggested a shift in school culture where there is more “support within each other” to “promote the great things we are all doing.”

Teachers' perceptions of the ways Asian Americans are racially positioned in an in-between space, "not White," but having proximity to Whiteness, while also not seen as a person of Color shaped their interactions with different groups. In relation to their Black and Brown students, teachers conveyed their identities that they are not like "other" Asian Americans in that they are "woke" or "down" in curricular or informal ways to emphasize similarities and solidarity across groups. Through having this conversation, it emerged that being seen as "not White," particularly coupled with racializations of Asian American women, shaped interactions with White, male colleagues. There is a need to more closely examine the varying "in-between" spaces between teachers in relation to other groups, whether students, other teachers, parents, or administrators and the nuances given the ways race intersects with other social identities.

**Reflections on Teacher Education as a Lens for Identity and Identity in Practice.** While it was not explicit in recruitment, the teachers in the group identified strongly as social justice educators and given the networks the study was disseminated through, they all attended the same teacher education program, though at different times. This was significant because the teacher education program has an explicit social justice focus and mission, which was what largely attracted the teachers to the program. Given this focus, teachers expressed a lack of engagement with issues of race and identity, especially with little attention to Asian Americans.

In previous sections, teachers' stories reflected a wide range of comfort levels with having discussions about race and their identity; from Jenny, who defaulted instead to her vegetarianism when students asked, "do you eat dog?" to Janet's strategy of combining humor and information, or Niko, who has learned lessons from year-to-year. Teachers' reflections on how they would have liked to have been supported in navigating conversations about race and their identities with students sheds light into their identities and their identities in practice.



Jenny, a physics teacher who identified more with Whiteness than other teachers in the group, shared:

It would have been nice to talk about what kind of stuff the kids would have said and what is acceptable and what is not because as a first-year teacher I remember just being like, 'ok, I guess I'm a bad teacher and that's why they're saying these things' and as I became a stronger teacher I was like, 'that's not okay to joke about that stuff,' but at the same time, I don't know cause the general society says it's okay to make fun of Asians....I think it would have been nice to at least talk it out, maybe not necessarily strategy-based, but at least have a group like this before I went into teaching to discuss these issues.

For Jenny, a group such as the one in the study would have been helpful for her in learning how to navigate conversations with students when they make comments or ask questions about her background, such as when they asked, "do you eat dog?" and to talk with others "to see how everyone else dealt with kids talking about our identity." She attributed questions and comments about her background on an individual level to her being a "bad teacher," which was interesting given her perspective of identifying more towards Whiteness, where she "didn't have to think about being Asian American." Other teachers in the group who were more comfortable in their Asian American identity as compared to Jenny did not internalize student questions to mean they were a "bad teacher," but rather, understood students' general curiosity and lack of knowledge about Asian Americans or questions coming from stereotypes about Asian Americans. While Jenny acknowledged the contextual nature of teaching and that the goal in talking with others was "not necessarily strategy-based," having opportunities to "discuss these issues" would have been helpful before entering the classroom. Following Jenny's statement, Leo, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher followed up:

I was gonna say something along the same thing, some sort of training, some sort of awareness. I didn't know how to navigate around the language that was being used or even how to address things that made me feel uncomfortable or I couldn't communicate why I felt that way for a while.

Leo shared similar reflections to Jenny in wanting to have had “some sort of training” on how to “navigate around language” that would be uncomfortable or an “awareness” to be able to name the experiences he was having that made him uncomfortable. Leo, who described growing up in a community of Asian Americans where “people who looked like me,” would have liked “diversity training” in anticipation of being a teacher in a “new environment where everyone’s different looking than me.” He continued to share that he would have been “happier in the beginning” if there were more efforts within his pre-service teacher education program to have these discussions.

While Jenny and Leo had less previous experience with having discussions around race and their identity and wanted to have opportunities before entering the classroom, Niko nuanced the types of opportunities available and whether they necessarily prepared Asian American teachers:

I think that in pre-service, if you have done some Asian American work, it helps, and even that is a challenge because my (previous interaction) was an experience I had in student teaching I was like, ‘oh shit, I was not prepared for students addressing my Asian-ness.’ I think having this general race, class, gender (class), it’s just too general and it’s like you don’t really talk about Asians...but there should be more deliberate, how does your identity affect your teaching and bring Asian Americans into that conversation cause it feels it does go between White and teachers of Color, and I know that we are of Color, but the proximity to Whiteness, it’s fuzzy, and having these conversations would have been helpful for pre-service to have addressed cause it’s very different being a Black educator.

Niko referred back to her story when she “flipped out” on a student after he did “the eye pull” during a lesson on Japanese incarceration. She thought she would have the tools to talk about her “Asian-ness” because of her previous work in activism, and while “it helps,” that interaction was a moment where she realized she was “not prepared.” She critiqued her teacher education program in having only one class that engaged with issues of identity and that it was “too general.” In the previous section, teachers talked about Asian Americans being “in-between,”

Niko spoke to this idea once again in stating the space Asian Americans occupy is often “fuzzy,” being people of Color, but also having a proximity to Whiteness. Within pre-service teacher education, this in-between space meant Asian Americans are invisibilized within conversations and curriculum that focused either on White teachers or teachers of Color, which Niko implied to mean Black educators. This idea of invisibility was significant, as reflected in many of the teacher’s responses when asked why they chose to participate in the study:

“Our voice isn’t out there right?” –June

“There’s just not a lot of anything about Asian Americans.” –Agmula

“I was intrigued because...no one does this study.” –Danny

“(I hope to) have an opportunity to let my voice be heard and to listen to other perspectives with other people who have the same or similar identity.” –Leo

“The reason why I wanted to get into this is one- to explore my own identity selfishly, and two- to contribute to this very necessary study.” –CM

Like Niko, other teachers acknowledged the lack of voice and invisibility of Asian American teachers within teacher education and the need for spaces that focus on Asian Americans and provide opportunities to reflect on and unpack their identities. For the teachers, their participation in the study was their way of contributing the Asian American perspective to education.

Jenny, Leo, and Niko all expressed a desire for their pre-service education program to have provided support in navigating questions that may arise around their race and identity, perhaps through an affinity group that brought Asian Americans together. Each of them spoke to the ways they have learned how to do so over time through trial and error. Jenny, for example, stated above that she learned how to address comments “as I became a stronger teacher;” Leo shared previously that he now has “mini lessons” ready to go about the “Asian accent” or the pronunciation and significance of his name; and Niko as we have seen, has learned lessons along the way. Their reflections suggested a need for teacher education programs to incorporate Asian

American perspectives within curriculum broadly and further, to attend to the particular experiences and needs in preparing Asian American teachers.

Other teachers, specifically Agmula and Janet, who were the most explicit about their political identities, felt less strongly about the need for these conversations within pre-service teacher education, instead, feeling like their life experiences prepared them to be teachers.

Agmula shared:

I think for me, growing up in an area that was really diverse...that cultural piece wasn't as hard for me to navigate. Looking back what I would appreciate, how do we uninvisibilize our identities and how can it be okay for it to be a salient part of our teaching? I struggled with, 'how do I?'

Agmula's reflection spoke again to the significance of her community, where she described it as "really diverse." Agmula previously shared identifying "with Black culture" through her community, peers in school, organizing work, and media. Her perspective then "showed in my teaching" where she felt a stronger "bond" and relationship to her Black students than "my Latino and Chicano students," to the point where she was perceived as an "honorary sistah, all of the sistahs love going to you, their mentor teacher." She problematized that while she was perceived as an "honorary sistah" she also "didn't want people to think I'm trying to be Black, I'm not trying to be Black, I'm proud to be an Asian American." Agmula's reflections here spoke back to the ways she was grappling with her identity between an authentic sharing and understanding of culture based on the community she grew up with the tension of appropriation. While she did not express needing the same type of support as other teachers in terms of relating to students and navigating differences in race or culture, she would have wanted support with understanding her identity as related to teaching, particularly as an Asian American who identified with Black culture.

Given teachers' desire for opportunities to talk about race and identity and since six of the eight teachers in the group were math or science teachers, Janet posed to the group: "were most of your undergrad classes around science and everything? You didn't take any identity, social science?" to which teachers answered that their undergraduate coursework, even electives, were all in the physical sciences. Janet, who previously shared her strong identification with the Latinx community and is also a math and science teacher, shared the ways her previous experiences gave her a foundation for understanding issues of race:

My parents had a store in South Central LA and I grew up after school and weekends there and I heard a lot of the ways Black and Brown folks talked about Korean owners, so I knew there were a lot of racial tensions and racial politics at play, even though I couldn't understand it, I was aware of it. I remember after the '92 uprisings...that made me realize the media also pitted Blacks and Koreans against each other, that's why there was very specific effort to connect the two communities.

The 1992 Uprising resulted from the acquittal of four police officers that were charged with the beating of Rodney King and was a significant moment of racial tension in Los Angeles.

Immediately following the decision, one of the acts in protest was the looting of and damage to local businesses in the South Central and Koreatown neighborhoods. Because many of the businesses were owned by Korean Americans, the uprisings were then portrayed as a conflict between the Black and Korean communities. Janet had a closer perspective of the events through spending time at her parents' store in South Central Los Angeles. Though she was unable to name the "racial tensions and racial politics" as a young person, she "was aware" of tensions between Black and Brown communities with Korean store owners. She was critical of the role the media played in misrepresenting the events to "pit Blacks and Koreans against each other," instead knowing the two communities came together in different ways following the

uprisings to repair their communities. Contrast to the other math and science teachers in the group, Janet had opportunities to continue to learn about race and identity in college:

For me, I was a Sociology major, so all my classes were about identity and a lot of history that I didn't get in high school...it was important for me to see how non-White populations were so connected in their histories and also learning about intersectionality. When I did my work in UC San Diego, I got close to a lot of the students through the residential program...but they would be very frank with me and ask me, 'so, you're not Chinese? You look Chinese' like, alright, let me break it down to you, 'there's a gazillion other countries, here's a map, we're very close to China, we borrowed some of their characters before we came up with our own.' It gave me a lot of pride in knowing my own history and being able to share that with my students instead of being like, 'I don't really know.' So when the kids call me 'china,' I'm able to say, 'my parents and a lot of other Asian people would call anyone who speaks Spanish, Mexican' and they'd be like, 'I'm not Mexican, I'm Guatemalan!' and I'm like, 'exactly, and when you say *chino*, that's what you're saying, not all your families are from Mexico, just like our families aren't all from China.'

Janet credited her classes in Sociology in giving her knowledge of Asian American history as interconnected with the history of other people of Color, as well as the tools and language, such as intersectionality, to understand the ways race is layered with other social identities. We can see Janet's current approach of combining humor with knowledge to address student misconceptions as a strategy that originated while working with youth in San Diego as an undergraduate student. When students assumed she was Chinese, she shared the example that many Asian Americans hold the misconception that speaking Spanish meant being of Mexican background, disregarding other groups with Central and South American origins. This specific conversation is one that Janet has with her students every year and in doing so, her students then "educate their parents," telling them, "you know there's all these other countries!"

Her previous experiences led her to apply to the specific teacher education program because of its strong social justice mission. However, she was disappointed when she got there:

So when I went into the teacher education program, I felt like a lot of the discussions we were having were really rudimentary and it felt weird to see so

many people look so uncomfortable, it was like, ‘what the hell?’ because I was in classes where people wanted to be in those classes and explore further these identity politics whereas people (in the program) were like, ‘why do we keep talking about it.’ I felt like the mission statement (of the program) would have drawn in different kinds of people who would have had those experiences or instructors who were willing to really engage deeply and facilitate conversations in a meaningful way instead of caving to discomfort. So for me, personally, based on my major and my lived experiences, I was prepared, but I still saw how some people, it was their first time talking about it and being blown away like, these social constructions are real, they exist, and I think it is important to talk about and have continued uncomfortable discussions because they are the lived experiences of our kids.

Janet expected to continue the “deep and meaningful” conversations related to race and identity as she had been having in her college years, but instead, found them to be “rudimentary” in the teacher education program. Given the mission and focus of the program, she expected her fellow students and instructors to have had particular experiences and knowledge, as well as a desire to “engage deeply” in issues of race and identity and was surprised instead that they were uncomfortable with exploring “identity politics.” Further, “identity politics” and unpacking the ways race and other identities are social constructions were ideas she viewed as central to being an educator of students of Color. Instead, Janet leaned on and leveraged her life experiences and knowledge from her undergraduate coursework in her work as an educator.

Though teachers expressed various levels of comfort in navigating conversations about race and their identities, Leo described the importance of these conversations:

It clicked in my head how much power and influence I had....and I realized, ‘woah.’ I have some say in how they’re gonna think and what they’re gonna do in the future. There’s a lot of teachers out there who are afraid to bring up those controversial issues into the classroom and to be brave enough to talk about it or to even give kids space to even just ask questions or just to vent it out. I know there’s kids who just want to say something or ask, ‘why does this matter? What can’t we talk about this? Why should we be worked up about it? I don’t understand.’ Who else is gonna do it? There’s so few of us (Asian American teachers), we talked about how difficult it is to just get those issues out and to just let that space be uncomfortable to be in.

Leo's a-ha moment of realizing the "power and influence" he had over the ways his students approach "controversial issues" gave him a sense of responsibility as an educator to provide space for students to ask questions. Because there are so few Asian American teachers, he felt a stronger responsibility to have "uncomfortable" conversations, because if not, "who else is gonna do it?" Leo's reflection here, as well as the teachers' reflections in this section provides insight for teacher education programs to consider the experiences and knowledge Asian Americans bring with them to think about how to prepare Asian American teachers in deepening their understandings of their identity, to leverage their identities, and to engage with students around questions about their culture or stereotypes about Asian Americans in ways that are productive and meaningful. Doing so can have larger implications for both students and teachers to have deeper understandings around race.

**Summary.** In discussing identity in practice, sociocultural notions of *positioning* alongside *Asianization* emerges again, specifically, teachers' knowledge of the ways they are positioned or perceived by others, namely, their students. Teachers' reflections revealed their work was shaped by an awareness of stereotypes about Asian Americans, anticipating comments and questions from students such as "the eye pull," the "Asian accent," or "do you eat dog?" The ways teachers addressed comments and questions from students reflected their comfort with their Asian American identity, where some teachers were intentional and others chose not to be. For those who were intentional, they took these as "teachable moments," being a "data point" to clarify assumptions or stereotypes. Teachers' identity in practice was also revealed through their knowledge of the ways Asian Americans are positioned "in-between" a Black-White binary, where Asian Americans can be perceived as honorary Whites and questioned as to whether they are "down." This tension first arose in teachers' comments that as compared to Black and



Brown educators, Asian American educators are not assumed to be “down,” which shaped their work in having to clarify that they are in solidarity with other people of Color. For these teachers, it was important for them to disrupt dominant narratives and position themselves in ways that communicated solidarity to their Black and Brown students. They did this by positioning themselves alongside their students in everyday ways of communicating similarities across communities. Emerging with the tenet of *(Re)constructive History*, teachers also positioned themselves in solidarity through the ways they approached teaching Asian American history, which they described as a “relatable experience” and to emphasize shared struggle and “the ways Asian Americans are in solidarity with a lot of different things.”

The figured world of the college environment was significant, particularly, opportunities to have discussions around race and identity politics, learn about Asian American history, or engage in activism and brought that experience with them to the classroom. These emerged in curricular ways as discussed above, but also the ways in which they engaged in conversations with students. Specifically, a background in activism shaped their views of teaching as political or the particular ways they attended to students’ comments, however, teachers’ reflections suggest there is a need to think more about how experience in activism translates to the classroom context.

Though the teacher education program could have also been a significant figured world, teachers reflected on the ways their program did not support them in their identities and identities in practice. Instead, teachers credited and leveraged their life experiences in preparing them in ways to work with diverse students. Teachers spoke to a level of invisibility within teacher education curriculum because of the focus on supporting White teachers or teachers of Color, meaning African American and Latinx educators. For the teachers who did not have previous

opportunities to think more deeply around their identities then, they learned how to navigate moments with students in their beginning years of teaching. For these teachers, there was a desire for a space similar to the group created in the study, which could have been a significant figured world for them where they were able to engage in deeper conversations with others around similar questions. Their reflections are significant because despite the explicit social justice orientation of their teacher education program, they still did not feel adequately supported to deepen their identity and understandings of race. This has implications not only in that teacher education programs are not supporting and addressing the unique strengths and needs of Asian Americans, but for all teachers in developing racial knowledge in ways that de-centers Whiteness and provide opportunities for teachers to critically reflect on and leverage their identities.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion and Implications

In this final chapter, I interpret the major findings from this study and discuss the findings in relation to existing literature. In relation to the way a group of teachers have come to understand and articulate their racial identity, findings reveal the contextual nature of what Asian American means to them, particularly as they resist dominant narratives about Asian Americans. Related to practice, their articulations emerge and shape their practice, specifically in leveraging a difference in backgrounds to open conversations with students about race. I then discuss several implications for the field of teacher education to support Asian American teachers and conclude with final thoughts and reflections on this work.

#### Asian American Identity

The first set of themes explored Asian American identity. Aligned with previous literature, teachers framed identity in relation to others and their articulations reflected a negotiation of layers, such as socioeconomic class, language, immigration or native-born status, interwoven with dynamics within ethnic groups and the Asian American community broadly, all situated within broader racializations of Asian Americans in relation to Whites and other people of Color. While previous literature outlines these borders as criteria for membership in defining a sense of “Asian American-ness” through a shared background or commonalities across groups, teachers expressed Asian American as an identity in terms of what they are *not*. That is, to the teachers, Asian American meant *this*, and they were *not that*. Ochoa’s (2004) framework of hypervisibility versus invisibility is a useful lens in interpreting the ways teachers constructed themselves in relation to “the other.” Like the Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Ochoa’s study, teachers’ perceptions of “other” were based on dominant narratives about and stereotypes

of Asian Americans and those perceptions led teachers to disidentify, or distance themselves (Kibria, 2002). Asian Americans are hypervisible in particular ways and while teachers did not name it as so, their articulations of identity were strongly tied to the dominant racialization of Asian Americans as model minorities. Across the interviews, teachers perceived “other” Asian Americans as “White Asians” who were predominantly East Asian in origin, of middle-class status, assumed to lack knowledge of their culture because of being “Americanized,” and are apolitical- all of which are elements of the model minority stereotype. My intention going into the study was not an exploration of the model minority stereotype, as this narrative has been given considerable attention within research. Further, I underscore Philip and Curammeng (2015) that there is a need to move beyond this construct in order to understand the Asian American experience in much more nuanced ways. Even though teachers did not name the stereotype, it was still an organizing construct in the ways they articulated their identity. Though the model minority has been assumed to be a positive stereotype of Asian Americans as highly assimilated and achieving the American Dream, teachers pushed back in critiquing this image as a measure of success, leading them to disidentify with Asian American peers across spaces such as K-12 schooling, the college environment, their organizing work, and their current school contexts. Teachers articulated their racial identity in relation to “other” Asian Americans to express the ways they saw themselves as different. Compared to “other” Asian Americans, teachers were “woke” or “down,” had racial and political knowledge to be critical of honorary White status that co-ethnics accepted or internalized, and aligned more with other communities of Color. However, what does Asian American identity mean when it is framed as what one is *not*? Here, the other side of Ochoa’s framework, invisibility, helps us to make sense of the ways teachers articulated their racial identity. The hypervisible racializations and stereotypes of Asian

Americans, in this case, as model minorities, then provide limited options for the ways Asian Americans *can* talk about their identity. Having these hypervisible images invisibilizes other Asian American identities that teachers are unable to articulate other than in relation to dominant racializations and stereotypes.

Agmula's and Janet's cases in particular are examples that provide opportunities to broaden what is known about Asian American identity. While both named an explicit political aspect to being Asian American and their work as organizers and teachers reflected their strong ideas of solidarity with other communities of Color, their identities were more than political commitments, alone. Both expressed a level of kinship with the African American community in Agmula's case and with the Latinx/Chicanx community for Janet. These were not identities that either took on lightly and both were aware of cultural appropriation, however both felt a strong sense of community, describing it as a feeling of "home" or as an "honorary sistah." Future work can explore these nuanced ideas of identity; what is an Asian American racial identity that is integrated with cultural aspects from other communities of Color?

As this study took place in a large, diverse, urban city in Southern California, the role of geography in teachers' articulations cannot be ignored. Because of the size of the city, teachers grew up, attended schools, and live in different parts of the city that ranged from diverse towns, predominantly White communities, and ethnic suburbs. Molina's (2014) lens of cultural proximity can be useful here in making sense of identity as related to space, where she argues that when communities live and interact in proximity, shared cultural spaces and practices can cultivate relationships that then offer alternatives to the dominant culture. For example, Cheng (2013) found a unique identity that was constructed among Asian Americans and Latinxs in Monterey Park, an ethnoburb of Los Angeles. Naming it a "non-white" identity, Cheng found

that it was constructed in relation to each other, as opposed to being constructed in opposition to Whites, which is often what is considered “normal” or “mainstream” in identity scholarship. One of the ways cultural proximity shaped this unique identity was the opportunity for “cross-racial intimacy” between communities, where this “cross-cultural blending” brought about an emergence of identities that participants named “Mexican Asians and Chino Latinos” (p. 174-175). We can think of cultural proximity in Agmula’s case and the way her town and the level of diversity that she continually spoke about created a sharing of cultural practices that shaped her identity as an Asian American who felt connected to Black culture.

In other ways, we can also think of opportunities with a relational spatial lens, for example, in CM’s articulations, where being culturally Vietnamese in her ethnic suburb was different from the nearby community of Orange County. Further, the Asian American experience within urban cities like the one in the study is vastly different from that in other parts of the country given local communities, cultures, and histories. In addition to the local histories of particular places, taking on a spatial analysis also necessitates understanding the everyday activities and interactions individuals engage in within those spaces that then shape identity. Coupling race with geography, such as Cheng’s (2013) framework of regional racial formation can offer new perspectives, particularly in the ways Asian American identity is negotiated and articulated when local experiences push back or nuance dominant discourses.

Lowe’s (1991) framework of the Asian American experience as one of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity emerges in teachers’ articulations of identity to underscore the highly contextual nature of the multiple options available for Asian Americans. As Agmula posed, “there’s these identities that we have to navigate, when do we flip one on or off?” While all teachers identified as Asian American for the purposes of the study, their reflections spoke to the

ways other labels were more salient at times. For example, Danny talked about being ethnic Chinese from Malaysia when talking about his experiences as a young child and CM as ethnic Chinese from Vietnam when describing her interactions with her family in having cultural practices that are Chinese and Vietnamese, while with students, they both identified as Chinese. For CM, her regional Chinese identity as Chiu Chow was also salient, particularly with relation to language as a way to disrupt notions that Chinese language is only Mandarin and Cantonese. Both Janet and Agmula had this sense of connection to other communities of Color while at the same time, also had strong ethnic identities, with Janet stating she felt “more Korean” than co-ethnics and Agmula’s pride as a Filipino American as integral to her social studies teaching. Similarly, Jenny identified more as “American,” but felt a similar sense to Janet as being “more Chinese” than co-ethnics because of having particular cultural knowledge. Overall, there is a need to deepen our understanding of Asian American identities and move beyond dominant narratives, particularly because of the ways they restrict the ways Asian Americans are able to talk about their identities.

### **Asian American Teacher Practice**

The second set of themes explored the practice of Asian American teachers. Through the lens of hypervisibility and invisibility, teachers were hypervisible, particularly as “foreign,” meaning, “different” to their students. While Gordon (2000) discussed one of the aversions to teaching by Asian Americans as a reluctance or discomfort with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, teachers in the study saw difference as an advantage because as Niko described, it “forces us all to talk about race.” Teachers saw being “different” from their Black and Brown students as an opportunity and much of what teachers shared was around the ways they addressed students’ questions or stereotypes about Asian Americans. Previous work has

focused Asian American teachers' experience with racial microaggressions from students or colleagues and while certain moments described in this study could be characterized in the same way (e.g., "the eye pull"), this study moves forward with what the teachers *do* in navigating these moments. Teachers saw themselves as CM described, as a "data point" to educate students and clarify assumptions about Asian Americans, knowing their students had limited opportunities to interact with Asian Americans in their daily lives, as well as a lack of exposure to Asian American culture through popular media outlets. Teachers acknowledged the problematic nature of student questions and actions, such as doing "the eye pull" or "the Asian accent" and rather than ignore or dismiss them, they chose to interpret these as "teachable moments" and as opportunities to engage students in larger conversations about race. These conversations about their background or race, although seen as "superficial" and "side conversations," were a regular part of their classroom dynamic, whether leveraging elements of their culture to engage students in the lesson or having visual displays around their classroom to spark student questions. It was through these conversations that teachers shared more about themselves, built relationships with their students, and communicated ideas of solidarity with their students and their families or local communities. This was not the case for all teachers, though, as we saw the ways Jenny, in particular, expressed the most discomfort with having to address her background with students. However, by opening and providing space for students to ask questions or have their assumptions challenged, teachers may also have been implicitly communicating to students that questions about race are acceptable to ask and that talking about differences can be a productive conversation when done so in reflective and thoughtful ways. This is especially important given the ways conversations about race has been viewed, on the hand as divisive or on the other,



ignored altogether through colorblind narratives- both of which do not lead to deeper understandings.

While teachers discussed the ways they dispelled stereotypes about Asian Americans, it was interesting that the assumption that Asian Americans are good at math and science was not addressed, especially since six of eight of the teachers taught STEM subjects. This stereotype came up once across the four interviews, within a conversation where teachers were discussing the importance of Asian American teachers as a point of reference for students to “reconfigure” what they think they know about Asian Americans. Jenny posed to the group that as STEM teachers, it might be confusing to students in confirming their stereotypes that “we can only do math and science.” It was surprising that the comment was not taken up further by the group given the focus of discussion around dominant stereotypes, which does not necessarily mean teachers were not aware of this tension or that they did not address this stereotype with their students. However, it leaves us to wonder about this particular intersection of being an Asian American STEM teacher and the ways they are perceived by students, whose racialized narratives around STEM may be very different from that of Asian Americans. The ways Asian American STEM teachers address and navigate racialized STEM narratives with students can be an opportunity for further investigation (e.g., Chao & Kokka, 2014).

The theme of invisibility of Asian American teachers has been continually highlighted within teacher education research and my study echoes this finding. Though it is an important finding, I agree with Huynh (2017) that there is a need to move beyond this portrayal of Asian American teachers as invisible and have a deeper understanding of the work of Asian American teachers. This study relied on teachers’ descriptions and artifacts to represent their classroom practice, defined broadly to include curriculum, pedagogy, norms and expectations of their

classrooms, relationships with students, or interactions with colleagues. This work can be moved forward by examining what Asian American teachers' practice looks like, sounds like, and feels like from within the classroom, including the essential missing component of the perspectives of their students. Moving this work forward in these ways can shed light into the democratic imperative (Achinstein et al., 2010) for Asian American teachers.

### **Implications for Teacher Education**

I was purposeful in wanting to learn from veteran teachers, as they could talk about their practice in detailed ways. What they shared across the interviews reflected their knowledge, comfort, and experience with having discussions around their identity after many years of teaching. As we also saw, this comfort did not always exist and they have learned to navigate these conversations along the way, with some of the teachers still learning. As the nature of teaching is highly contextual, each teacher shared the ways they engage in these discussions and their approaches as a reflection of their own unique personalities and experiences, but the lessons they learned along the way can provide insight for the preparation and support of Asian American teachers. Within the pre-service context, teachers reflected on the invisibility of Asian American voices and experiences within their teacher education curriculum. A driving force for their participation in the study was to contribute their Asian American voice to education. The invisibility of Asian Americans is well documented and beyond the inclusion of literature about Asian Americans within teacher education curriculum, there are other implications from this study that can be considered.

Perhaps most significant from the study is the space that was created for Asian American teachers, which presents methodological and application contributions. Aligned with Critical Race Theory and Asian Critical Race Theory perspectives on counterstorytelling, the group

dynamic allowed the teachers to drive the conversation, bringing their voices to the forefront. Related to Sociocultural Theory, it is also important to note the ways the figured world of the group was significant in shaping the ways teachers articulated their identities and ideas around their practice. The way the space was defined and organized as first focusing on identity provided opportunities for teachers to dig deep into ideas of what Asian American means in relation to Asian Americans in general, but more importantly, in relation to each other. Providing time for teachers to engage with each other created a shared history among the group in that what was discussed in previous meetings shaped what teachers shared in subsequent meetings. This included the types of artifacts that were brought in that reflected the ways teachers had been talking about their identity within the space. Bringing a group of teachers together over time allowed them to talk to each other in detailed ways that captured their Asian American identity before delving into the details of their practice and their identities in relation to their practice.

Teachers expressed it was the first time they had an opportunity to come together with other Asian American educators, as many did not have Asian American colleagues at their school sites. It became a significant space to unpack and reflect on issues specific to the Asian American and Asian American teacher experience, such as the in-between-ness within a Black-White binary, feeling the need to “prove you’re down,” and hearing about others’ practice. Jenny reminded us that talking to other Asian American teachers is not necessarily to come up with “strategy-based” responses, but a space dedicated to the experiences of Asian American teachers can be a place to share experiences and hear others’ perspectives.

Dedicated spaces can be incorporated at the pre-service level, such as a course offering for Asian American educators specifically (e.g., Philip & Curammeng, 2015) or as ongoing

professional development such as Leo's suggestion of a weekend retreat. The latter can be a broader opportunity for Asian American teachers to come together who may be the "only one" (Teranishi, 2010) at their school site, those who are in areas of the U.S. without a critical mass of Asian Americans, or those who teach in similar schooling contexts (i.e., rural, suburban, urban). While much attention is given to supporting teachers at the pre-service level, this study sheds light on the ways ongoing support may be equally important. As teacher candidates, experiences in the classroom as student teachers may not reflect authentic teaching, as they are working within the norms or curricula of their cooperating teachers' classrooms. The stories teachers shared reflected moments they were confronted with in their own classrooms or questions around teaching they are thinking more deeply about as veteran teachers. Further, while my intention was to explore the ways identity emerges or shapes practice, teachers' stories shed light into the reciprocal process of practice also shaping their identity, which underscores the need for support in ongoing ways. There is a need to think about how spaces be created for Asian American teachers to continue to be supported in their beginning years as issues arise or as they grow in their practice.

Though a dedicated space is an important implication of this study, Philip (2012) reminds us that it is not simply a matter of bringing Asian American teachers together around content focused on Asian American teachers, but more about engaging in deep and critical reflection around race, positionality, and power within the context of being a teacher. Critical spaces are important for educators to continually reflect on their work, challenge their assumptions and positionality, and dig deeper into what it means to be an Asian American educator in a multiracial society. In thinking about how to engage Asian American teachers around the type of critical reflection required of teachers in urban schools (Howard & Aleman, 2008; Rodgers &

Scott, 2008), we must consider who the teachers are and the diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives they bring to education and teaching. The group of teachers in the study reflected a range of identities and experiences that have shaped their understandings of race and teaching and such spaces need to think about how to support a diversity of perspectives, despite assumptions that they may not be needed. For example, Philip (2012) argues that Asian Americans who hold de-racialized and de-politicized meanings of their identity, such as Jenny who did not think about her racial background and identified as White, may benefit the most from a critical space for Asian American teachers, while also being the least aware of the need for such a space. On the other hand, Philip (2013) notes that teacher education presumes candidates' experiences as activists, such as Niko, means they do not need support in translating their activist work to the classroom context, resulting in their skills and knowledge that are perceived to be strengths to becoming liabilities, instead. While teacher education programs draw candidates who already share a level of similar perspectives and commitments (Zeichner & Conklin, 2008), such as the teachers in the study who hold a social justice orientation to their work, there is still a need to think about varying perspectives within broader categorizations of "social justice educators" or "Asian American educators."

It may be challenging for teacher education programs to create dedicated spaces such as a new course or affinity groups given organizational structures, requirements, and time limitations. The implications of this study, however, speak to the need for teacher candidates, in particular, Asian American teachers, to have opportunities to engage in critical conversations. As an alternative to creating separate spaces, these ideas can be incorporated throughout coursework. As other scholars have called for, one way of thinking about how to leverage teacher candidates' identities and engage teacher candidates in having deeper understandings of race is to weave

ethnic studies within teacher education (Kiang, 2004; Ng et al., 2007; Rodríguez, 2018; Urrieta, 2007). While the intention of this project was not to make any direct associations between identity and practice, there were differences between teachers who took Asian American Studies or other coursework that provided opportunities to have a deeper understanding of race, Asian American history, and identity politics and those who did not. For example, Janet, Agmula, and Niko had understandings about the micro and macro social constructions of race and other identities and desired to have deeper conversations with and learn from others. This is in contrast to Jenny, for example, whose discomfort with questions around her background led her to internalize and attribute to her being a bad teacher. Weaving ethnic studies within teacher education may have particular importance within STEM teacher preparation, where teacher candidates may be from traditional STEM backgrounds and like CM, have taken all their coursework in the physical sciences, not having prior opportunities to engage in issues of race and identity. STEM teacher education coursework further marginalizes these conversations, where there is typically more of a focus on building content or pedagogical content knowledge. This is not to suggest ethnic studies as a singular solution, but for teachers who intend to serve students in urban communities, who may or may not share a similar racial, ethnic, or cultural background, ethnic studies can provide opportunities to have deeper understandings of one's own, as well as students' rich histories and cultures and the historical, social, political, and economic circumstances that shape their everyday lives.

### **Conclusion**

This project originated, selfishly, from a personal interest in exploring my own identity as an Asian American and as an Asian American teacher, or what Dr. Tyrone Howards calls *ME*search. Like the teachers, I came into the study unable to articulate my identity other than a

feeling that I was not like “other” Asian Americans and though I could not name it, I reflected whether that had something to do with the ways my students and I were able to build relationships and felt we could relate to each other as they described in the Introduction. These questions around my identity and practice, coupled with gaining the knowledge and tools to name my experiences through Asian American Studies left me with a sense of repoliticization and a desire to continue to explore these identity politics. Further, seeing the lack of Asian American voice within teacher education and more specifically, not seeing my experiences as an Asian American teacher of Black and Brown students sparked my desire to connect with other Asian American teachers to share our stories.

Even though I did not participate in the space in that I did not share my stories, listening to others was selfishly, reaffirming for me and my own perspectives as an Asian American and Asian American educator. When I share this work, others attribute the ease and comfort teachers felt in sharing their stories to my rapport building and facilitation, but my perspective is that there is such a strong desire for connection among Asian American teachers, which speaks to the need to continue this work in deeper ways. At our last meeting, Janet shared her reflections of how much she enjoyed being in a space with other Asian Americans, commenting on the ways we have implicit shared practices, such as making various chopstick holders from the paper wrapper or that we all politely left the last portion of each dish on the table. Despite the various perspectives we all brought to this group, I believe the group was affirming for the teachers, as well.

What I hope is that this project reflects the beginning of taking what was once *ME*search to Dr. Howard’s call for *WE*search, meaning, the ways my work can contribute more broadly to understanding the Asian American experience. When thinking about the “so what?” question we

are often asked about our work, I am reminded of Mari Matsuda's emphasis on the role that Asian Americans play and the responsibility they have in dismantling White supremacy by forging alliances with Black and Brown people rather than reinforcing it by ascribing to Whiteness. Her words from 1990 have never been more important given today's racial and political climate and our work requires ongoing and deep reflection, engagement, and interrogation as we continue to strive for racial and social justice.



Table 2.

*Categories and Sub-categories of Themes*

Racialization	Asian American Identity	Asian American History	Figured Worlds	Significant Narrators	Pedagogy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Model Minority</li> <li>-Perpetual Foreigner</li> <li>-Intersectionality (class and gender)</li> <li>-Positionality</li> <li>-Marginality/Invisibility</li> <li>-Asian Americans as “different”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Ethnic: intragroup (colorism, language, cultural knowledge)</li> <li>-Geographical</li> <li>-Cultural</li> <li>-Political</li> <li>-Intergroup: East Asian as “dominant,” “hierarchy” of Asians, “spectrum” of “how Asian you are”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-History of oppression, violence, discrimination</li> <li>-Role of Asian Americans in United States</li> <li>-History of solidarity with other groups of Color</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-K-12 Schooling</li> <li>-College/University: coursework, clubs/organizations</li> <li>-Teacher Education</li> <li>-Previous and current teaching contexts</li> <li>-Neighborhood community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Parents/Family</li> <li>-Former Teachers/University Professors</li> <li>-Friends/Peers</li> <li>-Colleagues</li> <li>-Mentors</li> <li>-Students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Modifying curriculum</li> <li>-Visual displays in classroom</li> <li>-Norms of classroom</li> <li>-Interactions or relationships with students</li> <li>-Sharing culture</li> </ul>

## Appendix A

### Individual Interview Protocol

1. Brief review of study and obtain informed consent.
2. My background/experience and how I come to this work.
3. Interview questions:
  - Please choose a pseudonym.
  - Where do you teach? What subject(s) and grade level(s)?
  - How long have you been teaching?
  - Why did you decide to participate in this space?
  - Have you ever been in a space with other Asian American teachers before?
  - What are you hoping to experience in this group?
4. Any questions for me?

## Appendix B

### Timeline and Protocol for Asian American Teacher Focus Group Meetings

Meeting	Goal	Questions
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summary of study</li> <li>• Schedule future sessions</li> <li>• Choose location(s) for future sessions</li> <li>• Getting to know you</li> <li>• Exploring Asian American Identity</li> </ul>	<p>Tell us about yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Where did you grow up?</li> <li>-Where do you live now?</li> <li>-Do you have any hobbies/extracurricular activities?</li> <li>-What were your schooling experiences like? (K-12 and higher ed)</li> </ul> <p>Why did you decide to participate in this space?</p> <p>Have you ever been in a space with other Asian American teachers before?</p> <p>What are you hoping to experience in this group?</p>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring Asian American Identity</li> </ul>	<p>How do you identify racially, culturally, and ethnically?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways do you identify as other racial/ethnic/cultural identities?</li> </ul> <p>What does being Asian American mean to you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What has influenced this meaning for you?</li> </ul> <p>What do you think Asian American means, in general?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you think there is/are shared Asian American experience(s)? Why or why not/in what ways?</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asian American teachers</li> </ul>	<p>How did you become interested in teaching?</p> <p>When did you decide you wanted to be a teacher?</p> <p>What subject do you teach and why?</p> <p>Tell us about your school and students.</p> <p>Does being Asian American matter as a teacher? Why or why not?</p> <p>What is it like to be an Asian American teacher with other students of Color?</p> <p>What are the advantages/disadvantages to being an Asian American teacher (in general)? In your school context?</p> <p>Is it/why is it important to have Asian American teachers in general, and working with communities of Color?</p>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asian American teachers</li> </ul>	<p>What are your strengths as a teacher, and does it relate to being an Asian American teacher?</p> <p>Where do you meet challenges as a teacher and/or as an Asian American teacher?</p> <p>Was there ever a moment where you were purposeful in talking about your Asian American identity? Or, a moment where you could have talked about your identity and chose not to? Why did/not you decide to do/not that at that moment?</p> <p>What types of support do you think is needed for teachers of Color? For Asian American teachers, specifically?</p>

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