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# “Greasy Grinds” and “Quasi-Robots:” Rhetoric of Exclusions against Jewish and Asian American Students in American Universities

Jillian Liesemeyer

## Abstract

This study examines the historical comparison between exclusionary quotas against Jewish students in American universities and the recent similarities with the controversy over Asian American enrollment. Through an analysis of historical discourse from within the administration, in the public realm, and from students, parallels are seen between the two incidents. With a more complete understanding of the historical trends in exclusionary practices in universities, policymakers can recognize the current controversy with Asian American enrollment and take on the problem at the source.

In 1922 Rabbi Louis I. Newman published an editorial in *The Jewish Tribune* to articulate his frustrations with increasing restrictions on Jewish admissions to American universities. Newman argued that Jewish students were becoming increasingly “unwelcome” in public universities and openly restricted through quotas of several elite universities. In response to dissenters, Newman stated that Jewish students were not being too sensitive to the issue but rather were being “undersensitive” to the oppressive forces that left them outside the university gates (Newman, 1923, 10). Unexpectedly, the newspaper received dozens of responses from readers, many of whom were university administrators. Inspired by the general interest in the public, Newman held a symposium the following year to debate the issue of a voluntarily segregated Jewish university and published the results in one volume.

Sixty years after Newman openly critiqued the quota system of the 1920s, the Asian American Students Association at Brown

University exposed similar discriminatory admissions policies against Asian American applicants with an official statement in 1983. Following these allegations, in 1992 the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights held a series of roundtable conferences and issued a 245-page report about the obstacles facing Asian Americans. Seventeen years after the release of the commission's report, allegations of restricted admissions of Asian American applicants are still seen across the country. Though not identified by name, the "quotas" that were seen in the early half of the century were reappearing for Asian American students (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992, 114). Leading the restrictive trend against Asian American students were several elite universities—Harvard, Princeton, and Yale—and the trend was trickling down to several public universities. To the victims of this discrimination, it appeared that they were the new minority group to be left outside of university gates.

Just as Ellis and Angel islands are the "gates" to the "land of opportunity," universities are the second set of "gates" to American power and prosperity. Elite universities have evolved from wealthy social clubs at the turn of the century to prestigious educational institutions in the post-World War II era at a time when the GI Bill made public higher education available to record numbers of Americans and made higher education more akin to a right than a privilege. Despite this evolution, these universities—by providing prestigious academic pedigrees and access to powerful social and professional networks—have consistently produced leaders of American society. One only needs to open a history book to find evidence of this in the number of presidents, Nobel Prize winners, CEOs, and diplomats who call these institutions their alma maters. The changing immigrant landscape has produced new challenges for these relatively white, Gentile, homogeneous universities whose prestige depended, in part, on maintaining their role as the "gatekeepers" to the upper rungs of American prosperity. The practice of strictly limiting the number of Asian American students in elite universities threatens to artificially limit their upward mobility, much as it did for Jewish students in the first half of the century. In both cases, their talents were evident, but so too were their ties to the kinds of immigrant groups that mainstream Americans found most threatening. Fearful as established Americans were about newcomers unequipped to "make it" in the United States, immigrant communities on the ladder to prosperity appeared, to

many, poised to wrest success away from the “real” Americans. In leaving these groups of people outside the “gate,” universities are able to maintain white Gentile hegemony not only within the institution but also in the larger American society. The consistency of the two separate issues distanced by time, historical situation, and ethnicity reveals that the two incidents are the same institutional anxieties of a perceived “invasion” by “successful” minority groups.<sup>1</sup> These anxieties, as they harden into defensive admissions policies, threaten to limit the academic, professional, and personal horizons of thousands of Asian American students, just as they did Jewish students prior to World War II.

### Early Exclusion

The exclusion, or restriction from privilege, of Jewish students from universities during the first half of the twentieth century was an extension from larger sentiments of the American public. Nativism and xenophobic fears led to restrictive immigration policies and subsequent university admissions policies. Marcia Graham Synnott states plainly in *The Half-Opened Door* that the “decision to limit enrollment and to impose quotas on Jews [in university admissions] should be seen in the light of parallel national trends that resulted in the Immigration Quota Laws of 1921 and 1924” (Synnott, 1979, 14). The anti-Semitic sentiments behind immigration and later university admissions policies were exacerbated by the presence of a large number of relatively successful Jewish immigrants. Historian Roger Daniels estimates that in 1924 nearly four million Jews resided in the United States (Daniels, 2002, 223). The influx of these Jewish immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe led to reactionary fears of an “invasion” by a foreign, religious, racial, and political influence. During the same time period large numbers of Irish Catholics and non-Jewish Eastern and Southern Europeans immigrated to America. These immigrants also experienced discrimination; however, they did not incite the same fears of the academically driven Jewish populations from the same regions.

Immigrant Jews were members of the social class of the working poor, which resulted in their concentrated settlement in ethnic enclaves that were, consequently, “breeding grounds for disease and crime” (Daniels, 2002, 226). Popular perceptions of Jewish immigrants were influenced by Jacob Riis’s illustration of

the living conditions of Eastern European Jews in his book *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis characterized Jews as money-hungry “rats” who would work beyond physical exhaustion just to make a few dollars (Riis, 1901, 83). Riis’s caricatures augmented preexisting anti-Semitic stereotypes. These perceptions, which were amplified by the eugenics movement, nativism, and xenophobia, influenced Congress to pass the Reed-Johnson Immigration Act in 1924, which severely limited the number of Eastern European Jews immigrating to American cities.<sup>2</sup>

While Congress was restricting Jewish immigrants from entering the country the nation’s elite universities were restricting Jewish students from enrolling in their institutions. By 1922, popular discourse on the “Jewish problem” shaped thinking about admissions policies, even among the upper ranks of university administration. In a 1922 letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, sociologist Stephen G. Rich justified excluding Jews from American universities on the claims that Jews were, by their birth, not American: “the mere fact of having been born into the Jewish Church makes a man an alien and not a part of the American people. It is this attitude, combined with the sect-clannishness of the Jews, that has led to the idea of discrimination against them in the colleges” (Rich, 1923, 33).

The importance of maintaining “Americanness” in universities was vital to their function at the turn of the century as “social clubs” for the wealthy in which the white upper class replicated itself. Rabbi Newman commented on this reality, “Today some colleges are becoming merely glorified fraternities, the social toy of a few favored Maecenases; the obligation to public, to community, and to state is being forgotten in a fanatic desire to preserve the ‘American’ tradition of the institution” (Newman, 1923, 14). Although education was important, social status reigned supreme at elite universities. Jerome Karabel explained the university atmosphere in *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*: “the competition for social position and the leadership of extracurricular activities could be—and often was—ferocious; in scholastic matters, however, the ‘gentleman’s C’ reigned supreme” (Karabel, 2005, 17). It was vital for the university to protect its prestigious image because an aspiring president or diplomat would not want to attend an institution that was “soiled” by the presence of undesirable ethnic populations.

In order to safeguard the universities' prestige and control membership in the "club," certain groups of students were determined to be "socially undesirable" and screened from admission (Karabel, 2005, 1). Highly subjective determinations about the "character" of the applicant quickly became the most important criterion for admission in the early twentieth century. The presence of large numbers of Jewish immigrants in the slums that Riis illustrated in *How the Other Half Lives* reinforced the general attitude that Jews lacked "character" (Karabel, 2005, 2). This mindset provided justification for scathing personal attacks on the mannerisms and hygiene of Jews which, subsequently, were considered valid reasons to restrict this believed homogeneous group of undesirable people from universities.

By singling out Jewish people as the "problem," Americans categorized Jews as "outsiders," on the margins of society, and in direct opposition or even a threat to the interpreted characteristics of established "Americanness." Leading these discussions in the public sphere were the academic institutions that were the gatekeepers to American social prestige. A professor from Tufts University articulated his perceptions of these "un-American" Jews in 1928: "The social characteristics of the Jews are peculiar. The subtle thing which we call *manners*, among them differs from the manners of Americans generally" (Steinberg, 1974, 18). The professor argues that Jews are disconnected from the American public because of their lack of apparent social etiquette; this imaginary separation of "Americans" from the "Jews" reinforced the perception of Jews as inherently unassimilable, even with the benefit of the best American education. The list of "character deficiencies" continues with even more absurd claims. A professor at Harvard articulated further unfavorable qualities of Jewish students: "Many Jews have personal and social qualities and habits that are unpleasant. . . . Most Jews are socially untrained, and their bodily habits are not good" (Steinberg, 1974, 18). Not only did Jewish people lack manners, they also lacked proper "bodily habits." Racial pseudoscience theories of the time period, mainly promoted by Samuel Morton in America, alleged that people with less civilized traits were less evolved and therefore a lower form of human being. By characterizing Jewish people as lacking manners and proper hygiene university officials were advancing their claims that Jews did not belong in universities because they were a lower class of people. To add to these disagreeable traits

were allegations that Jewish students were antisocial hermits who held unwavering dedication to their studies, not unlike the immigrant “rat” or “grind” who would work beyond exhaustion to save a dollar. Dean Frederick Jones of Yale referred to Jews as “the greasy grind” (Synnott, 1979, 15) and a Harvard student reiterated the sentiment: “He does nothing but grind. It is surprising that he should make better grades than those of us who have broader interests” (Ham, 1922, 225). By homogenizing Jews as greasy grinds, unclean, or hermits, university administrators were perpetuating fears of an invading influence that would permeate the moral fabric and destroy the social prestige of the Gentile university.

This double standard of studiousness influenced opinions within universities—many Gentile students exhibited strong aversion to the large number of successful Jews. Walter Eaton, a noted drama and culture critic, posited that Gentiles resented Jewish students because they challenged their established academic prestige: “In the last few years . . . a class of Jew has grown up, who by his innate cleverness and ambition and will-to-power, has reached our universities, but brings with him . . . unpleasantly aggressive manners, and in general, an atmosphere disturbingly at variance with the spirit of the place he enters” (Eaton, 1922, 464). Jewish ambition and discipline were seen as aggressive actions ultimately aimed at usurping Gentile prestige; these fears kept non-Jewish students on the defense. A student at the Columbia School of Medicine commented on this problem in 1922: “The Jews set the pace. They keep the scholastic standards high and make the rest of us work harder than we have ever worked before in order to keep up with them” (*American Hebrew*, 1922, 530). Many Gentile parents felt that the Jewish students were “ruining it” for their children by taking the success that they perceived were rightfully theirs (Feingold, 1988, 544). In order to please parents and donors, universities had to minimize the “Jewish problem” on their campuses. George S. Davis, president of Hunter College, rationalized that restricting Jews from universities was the best solution given their “existing condition.” He stated in 1923:

The situation with regard to Jews in American universities and colleges grows inevitably out of existing conditions which all fair-minded persons must deprecate. Everyone of intelligence must see that the traditions of many of the endowed institu-

tions of liberal learning in America have become so strong, and are so deeply rooted in their early sectarian origin that, however much we condemn it, they construe the growing Jewish influence as *threatening these traditions* to their possible extinction. I do not say that the situation is justified; but I do say it is one that might logically be expected under existing condition (Davis, 1923, 25).

Hunter College, like other universities, could not tolerate the Jewish threat to white Gentile hegemony. Restricting Jewish students from a university, administrators believed, would “regain its former status as an elite institution for native American sons of downtown business and professional men” (Synnott, 1979, 17).

With this pernicious idea of the eternally foreign and cunning Jewish “other,” Harvard President Lawrence Lowell was able to take anti-Semitism in universities to a new level in the 1920s. During that time period Harvard enrollments of white Gentiles declined in response to prospective students’ refusals to be a “minority in a group of . . . Jews” (Jones, 1922, 15). The increasing number of Jewish students heightened anti-Semitism on these campuses. Harry Starr, president of the Menorah Society in 1922, realized that the “Jewish problem” was a problem of numbers. He posited, “We learned that it was numbers that mattered; bad or good, too many Jews were not liked. Rich or poor, brilliant or dull, polished or crude—too many Jews” (Starr, 1922, 546). Rabbi Newman quoted an anonymous dean of a women’s college in 1923 who expressed tremendous fear that too many Jews would “make our college a Ghetto” (Newman, 1923, 11). Reminiscent of the Jewtown “ghettos” described by Riis, universities employed this imagery to reinforce notions of Jewish “otherness” and their “uncivilized” nature as theorized by Morton. Such images led to blatant anti-Semitism among universities officials who feared an invasion that would ultimately undermine Christian ideals and the social prestige of the school (Dinnerstein, 1994, 85).

In order to protect the institution from the negative influence of Jewish students, Lowell led Harvard to be the first to openly restrict Jewish students from the institution.<sup>3</sup> He did this through a quota system which was initially enacted in 1922. Harvard cut its admissions of Jewish students to 25 percent and reduced that number to 15 percent by 1926 (Synnott, 1979, 110). Harvard University influenced other elite universities and eventually public



universities. *Boston Globe* columnist Scot Lehigh articulated this trend, which is still seen today: “What happens at Harvard doesn’t stay at Harvard, but rather reverberates throughout the academic world” (Lehigh, 2009). Across the nation the trend continued; the quota was set so that anywhere from 3 percent to 16 percent of the admissions could be Jewish students (Dinnerstein, 1994, 86). They enacted the quota system through the screening of students during that application process. The applicant would be asked questions such as place of birth, religious affiliation, and father’s name (Synnott, 1979, 18). If a student was not identified as Jewish from these questions, a personal interview would have also been used to determine eligibility for admission.

In order to bypass these restrictive measures some Jewish students tried “passing”—the act of imitating the dominant culture in dress, speech, behavior, and lifestyle—in order to be admitted into the university. Rabbi Newman wrote on the problem of anti-Semitism in universities and the ways Jewish students were coping with this problem: “Young Jews are preparing themselves in chicanery, in deceit and even falsehood in order that their Jewishness may not block attainment of the coveted goal” (Newman, 1923, 14). He continued, “I know of a lad whose elders advised him to say in the psychological test that he was not a Jew, but a Christian Scientist; of a girl who gave German rather than Jewish names as recommendation, and then attended college on Yom Kippur in order to continue the pose” (Newman, 1923, 15). The extreme measures taken by these students show the seriousness of the situation—they would go to great lengths to succeed at an institution that did not want them.

Many from the Jewish community viewed these drastic measures to be a threat to the Jewish tradition. Newman cautioned against assimilating completely and losing the Jewish identity: “In the breakdown of Jewish self-respect, the Gentile exclusionist finds his most satisfying vindication: if Jews hold themselves so cheaply, is not the Gentiles’ policy of disdain justified?” (Newman, 1923, 15). Even if Jewish students completely disregarded, in essence, their “Jewishness,” they still would be considered “others” by the dominant culture. This essentially forced Jewish students to create what WEB DuBois described as a double consciousness—living in two different worlds but never really belonging to either (DuBois, 1907). Jewish students were forced to assimilate and keep their

heads down in order not to attract attention, because invisibility—not hybridity—garnered Jewish students a place among their Gentile counterparts. This quest for invisibility created tension between the cultural value of attainment of knowledge and the pressure for acceptance by the dominant culture. Newman continued, “If they are content with hiding their light under a bushel, remaining an obscure, mediocre, inoffensive minority, then their fellow-students will tolerate them” (Newman, 1923, 13).

Even though Jewish students were trying to walk the tight-rope between the two conflicting worlds, universities remained unwilling to award them the full benefits of their academic and personal merits. In addition to classifying Jews as less civilized “others,” they were also viewed negatively as a “model minority.” Understood as prosperous, intelligent, and successful, “model minorities” are viewed as the “picture perfect” minority group—assimilating and achieving at the level of the white middle class. A backlash against the success of students and academics who identified as Jews led Jewish philosopher and author Horace Kallen to declare in 1923: “They [the white Gentile mainstream] do not want Jews to be assimilated. . . . What troubles them is the completeness with which Jews want to be and have been assimilated” (Steinberg, 1974, 28). Although Jews attempted to assimilate, the entirety to which they did conform was what frightened Americans. It was a “catch 22.” If they resisted assimilation they were seen as an invading threat to American culture, if they did assimilate they were considered dangerous because of their perceived duplicity. Rabbi Newman commented on this double standard:

If we are too brainy, we capture a disproportionate number of scholarship plums. If we enter into college activities, particularly athletics, complaint soon is whispered abroad that the personnel of the teams, representing the good repute of the college, contains too many Jewish names. If we are unable to donate largely to endowment or loyalty funds, we are accused of being ungrateful; if our contributions as alumni are generous, it is feared that we will seek to establish a “Judaizing control” over the finances and policy of our Alma Mater. . . . We are damned if we do, we are damned if we don’t; we are damned if we will, we are damned if we won’t (Newman, 1923, 12).

Jews were “damned” from higher education during the first decades of the twentieth century. The quotas had a debilitating ef-

fect on Jewish students' access to higher education and perpetuated American anti-Semitism. By limited enrollment of Jewish students to as little as 15 percent, universities were excluding Jews from an opportunity to climb the ladder to American prosperity. Despite efforts to curb the effect of these quotas, the exclusion trend was not ended until the ethnic landscape of the United States shifted in the middle of the century.

### The "New Jews"

In 1965 the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act which abolished the national-origin quotas that had restricted immigration to primarily skilled workers and immigrants from Western Europe since 1924. The new act allowed visas to immigrants on a first-come, first-serve basis, which included many Asian immigrants. This immigration act led to increased numbers of Asian immigrants. During the years of increased Asian immigration anti-Semitism was losing its luster among white Gentile Americans with the revelation of Nazi crimes perpetrated against European Jews during World War II. These important changes led to a shift from overwhelming anti-Semitism to anti-Asian sentiments in the general public and in universities.

In post-World War II America into the late 1960s, Asian immigrants became the new "other" in almost identical fashion to the creation of the Jewish "other." The process began with the changing immigrant demographic profile. Asian immigrants who gained admission to the country were largely skilled workers or professionals. In the years immediately following 1965 more than 52 percent of Asian immigrants were professionals prior to immigrating to America—doctors from India, nurses from the Philippines, and engineers from Taiwan (Min, 2006, 18). In the mid-1970s, a language requirement was placed on foreign-born medical professionals, which drastically limited immigration of these skilled professionals from entering the United States. However, during the same time period many refugees entered the country after the fall of Saigon. Asian immigration saw an increase again in the 1980s that has continued to climb for more than twenty years. A shift occurred in the early 1990s toward international students as many were permitted to take permanent residence after finishing studies in America. These changes in immigration and natural proliferation increased the population of Asian Americans from

one million in 1960 to more than fifteen million today (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Like Eastern European Jews, Asian immigrants who often settled in ethnic enclaves, popularly referred to as Chinatown, Little Tokyo, and Koreatown, were considered “clannish” and were held in suspicion for being unusually hard working (Le, 2009). These terms render an image parallel to that of the Jewtown from years past. As second- and third- generation Asian Americans improved their economic condition and moved up the socioeconomic ladder they physically moved to suburbs in regions, as geographer Wei Li observed in Los Angeles, known as *ethnoburbs*. Defined as “suburban ethnic clusters of residential areas and business districts in large American metropolitan areas,” ethnoburbs were evidence that Asian Americans were entering the upper rungs of American prosperity (Li, 1998, 479). Even though the ethnoburb “model minority” evidence was used to justify the Asian American invasion of white Gentile space, the large numbers of lower-class Asian American workers were overlooked and even ignored when these claims were being made. Furthermore, Asian immigrants were held in suspicion because many often returned to their country of origin. Many consider sojourning an impediment to assimilation and a threat to “Americanness.” The same fears of a successful minority “invading” the prosperous realm of the established white majority have arisen in the past thirty years. Instead of “too many Jews” there were “too many Asians.”

Many stereotypes that existed during the years following World War II are seen in present-day American popular culture. The classification of Asian Americans as distinct “others” was explored by authors Stacey Lee and Sabina Vaught: “Asian Americans of any generation are constructed and perceived by White Americans as Asians—foreigners, non Americans, Others” (Lee and Vaught, 2003, 458). Not unlike the Jewish “rats,” Asians have been caricatured as “snakes” or “dragons” in order to reinforce notions of menacing foreignness. The construction of Asian American “otherness” stems from, as Yen Le Espiritu argued in her book *Asian American Women and Men*, the “precondition of their cultural marginalization, political impotence, and psychic alienation from mainstream American society” (Espiritu, 1997, 88). Undergraduates David Ho and Margaret Chin along with the East Coast Asian Student Union commented on the negative influences these stereo-

types have on Asian Americans in 1983:

The truth is that Asian Americans are suffering not only when it comes to college admissions; they are also being dealt blows in media, entertainment, business, politics, law, government, decent housing, and virtually every aspect of life in American society. In order to right these imbalances, we need to collectively question the trends and actively challenge the problems facing us. Otherwise, we may lose all that we have worked so hard to gain. And perhaps the first step toward long-term justice comes through quality education (Ho and Chin, 1983, 51).

This new threat to white hegemony was perceived to be most critical in higher education. Just as Jewish students experienced restrictive quotas from prestigious higher education institutions, Asian American students found themselves left outside the gates of the same universities. Journalist Daniel Golden commented on this connection in his book *The Price of Admission: How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way into Elite Colleges—and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates*: “Asian Americans are the new Jews, inheriting the mantle of the most disenfranchised group in college admissions. The nonacademic admissions criteria established to exclude Jews . . . are now used to deny Asians” (Golden, 2006, 199-200). Just as Jews were deeply resented because of their academic prowess, Asians were immigrating to America with high levels of education and had a tendency to foster academic development in their children (Muller and Espenshade, 1985, 15). While universities were shifting from “social clubs” at the beginning of the century to institutions that could become “great equalizers” it was apparent that Asian American students were excelling in the academic realm and their success needed to be curbed if white privilege were to remain the status quo.

Although universities do not openly refer to the restrictive measures against Asian American enrollment as “quotas,” the policies and rhetoric of admissions staff are almost identical to the methods used for exclusion in the past. Currently, university admissions policies reflect the utilization of “subjective” judgments concerning aspects of “demeanor” as significant criteria for college admission. Though not official quotas, these intangible factors such as “appearance, speech, social skills, affect, and personal presence” are used in much the same way as they had against Jews by enabling

schools to discriminate against students who do not fit with the social behaviors of the white majority (Karabel, 2005, 484). These qualities often put Asian American applicants at a disadvantage because of evaluators' cultural biases and stereotypes (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992, 112).<sup>4</sup> Golden reported that a 1990 Office for Civil Rights investigation found that Harvard admissions evaluators scored Asian American applicants below white applicants in terms of "personal qualities" (Golden, 2006, 202). Comments on several applicants' files described prospective Asian American students as "science/math oriented, quiet, shy, reserved, self-contained, and soft spoken" (U.S. Department of Education, 1990, 24). One specific admissions counselor stated "[the applicant's] scores and application seem so typical of other Asian applicants I've read: extraordinarily gifted in math with the opposite extreme in English" (U.S. Department of Education, 1990, 8). By generalizing Asian American students as quiet number-punching machines, admissions evaluators downplay the importance of individuality of each applicant. Harvard University's restrictive admissions policy trickled down to other universities—again, Lehigh's declaration that "what happens at Harvard doesn't stay at Harvard, but rather reverberates throughout the academic world" was seen again with Asian American admissions (Lehigh, 2009). Harvard's restriction of Asian American students from elite universities had reopened the debate of admissions policies in universities.

The 1992 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights revealed a statistical trend in a report released after a series of roundtable discussions on discrimination against Asian Americans in all sectors of society, including in education. Among the concerns were "alleged discriminatory admissions policies against Asian American applicants to elite colleges and universities" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992, 104). The report affirmed these claims stating, "At most selective colleges, the enrollment of Asian American students did not rise in proportion to the rapidly increasing number of Asian American applicants" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992, 107). The universities at fault were Harvard, Brown, Princeton, Yale, Stanford, and the University of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles. The University of California at Berkeley claimed that it was limiting Asian American enrollment because (according to Berkeley's Research Coordinator for Admissions), "Asians are overrepresented by three times their high school population.

How will the university justify over representing Asians at the expense of others?" (Takagi, 1990, 582). David Gardner, president of the University of California system from 1983-1992, reiterated this idea in 1986: "Asian Americans are in the university well above their representation in the high school graduation pool because the Asian American rate of eligibility is the highest in the state. So guess who is underrepresented in the freshman class? The Caucasian student" (Takagi, 1990, 583). These attitudes toward the rising numbers of Asian American students in universities were transparent to many of the faculty. Linda Mathews quoted Ling-Chi Wang, professor of ethnic studies at Berkeley, on this problem in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*:

As soon as the percentages of Asian students began reaching double digits at some universities, suddenly a red light went on. Since then, Asian-American admissions rates have either stabilized or declined . . . I don't want to say there's a conspiracy, but university officials see the prevalence of Asians as a problem, and they have begun to look for ways to slow down Asian-American admissions. Are they scared of Berkeley's becoming an Asian university? They're shaking in their socks (Mathews, 1987, 22).

This statement parallels the administrators' fears of an invasion by Jewish students; in 1990, however, this problem seemed to have been resolved. However, incidents in recent years have reopened the debate about the "fairness" of restrictive admissions policies against Asian American students.

Almost twenty years after the study and allegations, the same elite universities still battle this problem. This issue surfaced in 2006 with Jian Li's civil-rights case against Princeton University. Jian Li, son of Chinese immigrants, achieved a very high SAT score, attained a stellar GPA in the top 1 percent of his class, and maintained extracurricular involvement throughout high school. With this solid application Li applied to Princeton, Harvard, Stanford, MIT, University of Pennsylvania, California Tech, Rutgers, Cooper Union, and Yale. Despite his achievements, Li was rejected from five of these nine universities. Cognizant of the ongoing discrimination in university admissions, Li filed a civil-rights complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. He argued that Princeton's admissions process was biased because it benefits minority groups such as African Americans and

Hispanics at the expense of Asian American applicants (Carroll, 2006). Within that report, Li also made note of the historical use of racial preferences for admissions, including biases against Jewish students in the early part of the century (Alaya, 2008).

Li's mention of not only Asian American discrimination but also the restriction of Jews from universities was further explored by the media. Marilyn Henry of *The Jerusalem Post* reported on this issue in "Asian-Americans, the New Jews." Commenting on her own family's history as American immigrants, Henry looked at the "model minority" characteristics that were placed on Jews and are currently being applied to people of Asian descent: "They are all seen as the same studious, self-sufficient high achievers" (Henry, 2008). Henry contended that many of the stereotypes, though oftentimes "laughable," are typically hurtful. The "model minority" myth is the assumption that that Asian American students, "only pursue degrees in science, technology, engineering, and math" (Henry, 2008). Furthermore, Asian American students have come to be defined as the "'good' minority that seeks advancement through quiet diligence in study and work and by not making waves . . . [who] other American minorities should seek to emulate" (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2008, 1). Asian American students are uniformly characterized as being "quiet diligence in study" and softly treading through college without "making waves." Just as Jews were referred to as "greasy grinds" that were exceptional in their studies, Asian students are stereotyped as "quasi-robots programmed by their parents to ace math and science tests" (Golden, 2006, 201). In reality, Henry argues, "as they [Asian American students] are not monolithic in national origin, language, and culture, they are not single-minded in their interests" (Henry, 2008). Stereotyping Asian American students as exceptional students with little social character has had serious consequences and encourages discrimination as universities claim they want "well-rounded" individuals as opposed to Asian American "robots."

The intolerance for Asian American students on college campuses is apparent in the rhetoric that mirrors the discrimination against Jews during the early half of the century. Princeton professor Uwe Reinhardt served on the admissions board in 1985; he recalled this memory: "We were going over the applicant list and we came to a clearly qualified Asian American student. And one committee



member said, 'We have enough of them.' And someone else turned to me and said, 'You have to admit, there are a lot'" (Reinhardt as quoted in Winerip, 1985). By emphasizing the Asian American population as a homogenous group, the admissions board was placing every individual in the group into the category of "other." Henry commented on the use of "othering" Asian American students in order to justify the "invasion" fears of university administrators: "'They' are taking over—overrunning American college campuses. 'They' are concentrated in selective universities. 'They' are a homogeneous group, uniform in educational and financial achievement and culture" (Henry, 2008). By emphasizing "othering" rhetoric, Henry is able to compare it to the arguments made against Jews. She continues, "Once upon a time in the not-so-distant past, these were the stereotypes, the myths, the canards about Jews, who were subjected to unofficial quotas that limited their access to some of the finest American universities" (Henry, 2008).

University administrators are not the only ones who are perpetuating these "Asian invasion" fears—students are commenting on these issues in classrooms, newspapers, and blogs. In response to Jian Li's lawsuit against Princeton *The Daily Princetonian* published an op-ed piece under the pseudonym "Lian Ji" that exposed many of the underlying racial sentiments on the campus. The article, written in broken English, "parodied" racist stereotypes to bash the school for "Ji's" rejection: "Hi Princeton! Remember me? I so good at math and science. Perfect 2400 SAT score. Ring Bells? Just in case, let me refresh your memories. I the super smart Asian. Princeton the super dumb college, not accept me" (*The Daily Princetonian*, 2007). This "parody" was criticized for exposing racist sentiments of *The Daily Princetonian* editorial staff. Likewise, the emergence of such phrases as "Made in Taiwan" to refer to MIT and "University of Caucasians Living among Asians" to refer to UCLA also render a sentiment of resentment of the rising numbers of Asian American students in elite universities (Takagi, 1992, 60).

Racialized rhetoric, as seen in the "parodied" *Daily Princetonian* piece and "revised" acronyms, reinforces Asian American anxieties about acceptance in universities. Just as Jewish students hid their identity under false surnames and attending school on Yom Kippur, many Asian American students find themselves succumbing to white hegemony in universities. In Douglas Park's essay on Asian Americans at Harvard one student who was interviewed

was quoted as saying, "If we [Asian Americans] keep trying to push for rights, whites will hate us like the blacks who get Affirmative Action and other special benefits" (Park, 1991, 6). In order to be successful, Asian American students, as Daniel Hyukjoon Choi stated in his article on Asian American identity, walk the tightrope between cultures: "Asian Americans, arguably, have succeeded not only because they work hard, but also because they follow the rules, stay inconspicuous, and never question authority" (Choi, 1992). As if heeding Rabbi Newman's call for Jews to remain under the radar, Asian American students are attempting to steer clear of public scrutiny. One student commented on the inconspicuous or nonthreatening image that Asian American students must emit on campus: "You look anti-white or anti-American . . . Americans won't like that and might start resenting Asians more than they already do" (Park, 1991, 5). Although Asian American students may make it past the rigorous and restrictive admissions process, they encounter informal discrimination barriers created by their peers. Derald Wing Sue, professor of psychology and education at Teacher's College, Columbia University, has analyzed this sort of everyday discrimination as *racial microaggression*.<sup>5</sup> Simply defined as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group," Sue declares that microaggression is as harmful as outright discrimination by perpetuating the "foreignness" and "invisibility" of Asian Americans (Sue et al., 2007, 72). The stubborn persistence of white hegemony within universities often restricts admitted Asian American students from expressing themselves and participating as full members of the campus community.

Today many California universities are composed of significantly large numbers of Asian American students. In 2006, Asian American students at the University of California at Irvine constituted 56 percent of the student body (Egan, 2007). This trend, however, is likely to change. Like many Ivy League schools, these universities will again place restrictions on the admission of Asian American students. "Unintentional Whitening of U. of California?" an article from *Inside Higher Education*, addressed this very issue. In February 2009 University of California administrators were debating dropping the SAT II tests as admissions criteria in an attempt to diversify the student population. However, it was feared that this policy would "lead to a significant drop in the numbers of Asian-American ap-

plicants who are admitted—with the major gains going to white applicants” (Jaschik, 2009). A high school counselor contradicted these claims stating, “The intention is to broaden black and Latino eligibility.” Referring to the prediction that Asian American admissions will decrease while white admissions will increase he added, “that is what in the military they call collateral damage” (Jaschik, 2009). Referring to decreased Asian American admissions as collateral damage implies that in the quest for “racial diversification” Asians will be sacrificed for the “greater good.” This collateral damage reveals that “racial balancing” supersedes the mission of American higher education as the “great equalizer.” The Asian American students who are victims of this “collateral damage” would undoubtedly feel the effects—dreams and ambitions crushed, as Asians are again restricted from entering these elite universities.

## Conclusion

In early-twentieth-century universities, Jewish students were constantly characterized in absolutes—deceitful assimilators, greasy grinds, or covetous grade thieves. Similarly, Asian American students are portrayed as number-crunching robots with little social character. The restrictive admissions systems for both groups were designed to keep Jews and Asian American students, as they were understood through these characterizations, at a low enough number in order to lessen their threat to white Gentile privilege not only within universities but also within the American social ladder of prosperity. Even though there are significant populations of Asian American students on many campuses, the practice of calibrating their numbers based on racial balance instead of merit indicates that there is a fundamental belief about Asian American students similar to those of Jewish students that persists in current admissions practices. The basic problem is that admissions policies concerning Asian American students are based on racist premises, which can never, by racism’s very nature, be fair. Claims of reverse discrimination are typically unfounded but, nevertheless, fuel the debate over conspicuous populations of Asian American students on campus and say more about the level of racial anxiety than about equal access to education. Although universities may also feel that they are “damned if they do and damned if they don’t,” the rhetorical consistency between the two incidents indicates that they are quelling racial anxieties by defaulting to a well-worn his-

torical pattern of limiting admissions of model minority students to universities in order to ensure that their ethnic group retains only a minority share of power in the wider society. By restricting these minority groups from elite universities, administrators were also barring talented individuals of Asian descent from an equal opportunity to enter any area of American life where their merits might take them. Understanding this underlying motive will force policy makers to confront their own motivations for restrictive admissions policies and arm those who fight these exclusionary policies. By closing their gates to qualified minorities, universities are not only protecting white hegemony in American society, but also they are giving life to the dehumanizing image of the quasi-robot and call into question America's heritage as a "land of opportunity" for all. With a greater understanding of this effect, advocates for the Asian American community can tackle this problem with full force. The dehumanizing images of the greasy grind and quasi-robots can be eliminated from the American consciousness but not until universities keep the gates open for good.

## Notes

1. The term "Asian American" is employed in this article insofar as it is used by institutions. It is not meant to be a generalizing mechanism, but rather will be employed because that is how institutions view people of Asian descent—as a homogeneous group. The author is fully cognizant of the fact that this term is not all-encompassing of every person of Asian descent.  
Furthermore, the problem of Affirmative Action shall not be addressed in this article. The author is aware of the issue and its current place in the public debate. Many opponents of affirmative action claim that the policy hurts Asian Americans because they are perceived to be a uniform "model minority." The underlying problem of this argument is the assumption of a white majority in universities. If that is the goal of education then affirmative action does disadvantage Asian Americans. However, once universities get past the need for a white majority, this author believes Asian Americans will not experience the negative effects of affirmative action. Because of limited space, this argument will proceed no further and will focus on the racialization and otherization of successful minorities in order to sustain the white status quo.
2. This act stated that immigration would be restricted by country of origin. Immigration policy configured the number of immigrants allowed per country based on their numbers in the United States in 1890. Only 2 percent of the group's population in 1890 would be

allowed to immigrate after the Reed Johnson Act was passed. Because the large numbers of Eastern European immigrants came closer to 1900, the act limited their numbers severely. Furthermore, the act completely excluded Asian immigrants. The strong anti-Chinese sentiments in the West influence their complete exclusion from the act.

3. The first university to restrict admissions to Jewish students was Columbia University in New York City. They disguised their discrimination through character tests and regional quotas in order to restrict Jewish students from the university.
4. The same language was used in the investigation of Brown University's Corporation Committee on Minority Affairs.
5. Sue defined *racial microaggressions* as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2007, 72). Sue applied racial microaggressions to the Asian American experience in his article. However, the term was originally coined in 1970 by Harvard psychiatrist Chester Pierce to explain everyday subtle racism experienced by African Americans.

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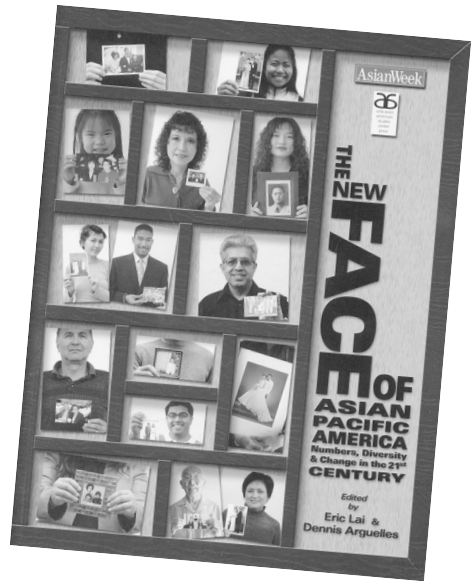


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