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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

ASIAN AMERICAN ENGAGEMENT IN RACIAL JUSTICE: JOURNEYS THROUGH  
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY

MEGAN S. SEGOSHI

CHICAGO, IL

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this dissertation research is to explore how Asian Americans develop a critical racial identity consciousness (Accapadi, 2012; Osajima, 2007), with special attention to how some Asian Americans' experiences led to their decision to engage in racial justice work beyond seeking justice for only Asian Americans. The recent murders of numerous unarmed Black men in the U.S. at the hands of police officers have garnered significant public attention, forcing many Americans to reexamine their racial positionality in relation to the systematic oppression of Black Americans. Furthermore, the election of Donald Trump as President and the rising visibility of White supremacist groups demonstrate a growing sociopolitical movement that embraces racism, xenophobia, and sexism. While Asian Americans have faced institutionalized discrimination throughout their history in the U.S., the current, highly publicized, and highly contentious debates around race and racism continue to complicate their positionality as people of color who have been depicted through dominant narratives as model minorities, yet have and continue to face racial discrimination (Museus & Park, 2015).

#### **Problem Statement**

Social constructions of race have served as mechanisms to distribute power and enact oppression in the U.S. since White European settlers arrived, but became particularly relevant in social organization through colonialism (Omi & Winant, 2015). Omi and Winant described this process as racial formation, or “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created,

lived out, transformed, or destroyed” (p. 109). Racial formation can be manipulated in a number of ways and is situated within the power structures of the U.S. Dating back to efforts to exterminate Native Americans and the development of the slave trade, racial formation has persisted through the creation of racial projects. Racial projects are “interpretation[s], representation[s], or explanation[s] of racial identities and meanings, and effort[s] to organize and distribute resources ... along racial lines” (p. 125).

As a result of centuries of ascribing social meaning and relevance to race in the U.S., as well as ongoing demographic shifts in the U.S. population, Asian Americans today occupy a unique racial position (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Kim, 2006; O’Brien, 2008). This study examines how Asian American college graduates decide to align themselves along racial lines with other people of color, and engage in racial justice work, as opposed to those who perpetuate racism through a vested interest in whiteness. The following sections provide context for ideological divides within Asian American communities, reflecting the unique racial positionality assumed in this study.

### **Context: Asian American Ideological Divides**

Four contemporary examples stand out as demonstrative of divisions among Asian Americans in their support for racial justice issues. First, ongoing debates over affirmative action exemplify a deep ideological divide between and among groups of Asian Americans. As actors engaging in the reformation of their own racial narratives, Asian American individuals and organizations were involved in the affirmative action debate at the Supreme Court level through their submission of amicus briefs (Poon & Segoshi, in press). Second, the response of some Asian Americans in the support or condemning of New York Police Department (NYPD) Officer

Peter Liang, who shot and killed Akai Gurley, an unarmed Black man in the stairwell of a New York City housing project, demonstrates yet another ideological rift between Asian Americans. Third, the emergence of the #APIs4BlackLives and #Asians4BlackLives hashtags as signs of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement are public showings of racial solidarity and antiracist activism. Fourth and finally, the election and presidency of Donald Trump serves as important context in understanding engagement in racial justice writ large.

### **Affirmative Action in Selective College Admissions**

Asian Americans have long been subjects of affirmative action debates (Chung Allred, 2007; Kidder, 2005; Poon & Segoshi, in press). While some scholarship suggests that Asian Americans actually support affirmative action (Park, 2009), recently filed federal complaints suggest otherwise. The year 2015 saw multiple complaints filed against almost every single Ivy League institution, alleging discrimination against Asian Americans in their admissions processes. While this is not the first time an Asian American student alleged discrimination in admissions (Liu, 2006), these highly publicized complaints contribute to the manipulability of racialized narratives of Asian Americans in the U.S. (Poon & Segoshi, in press).

The 2015 rehearing of *Fisher vs. University of Texas* upheld the use of race in selective college admissions processes, a major victory for supporters of affirmative action. Amicus briefs submitted by and on behalf of Asian American organizations demonstrated an ideological rift between the two sides (Poon & Segoshi, in press). Poon and Segoshi described those briefs against affirmative action as engaging in a racial libertarian ideology, and those in support of affirmative action as engaging in a racial egalitarian ideology (Moses, 2016). Both sides, however, demonstrated attempts by Asian Americans to engage in the construction of narratives

about Asian Americans to either perpetuate or disrupt affirmative action policy. Given that Black Americans have strong support for affirmative action policy (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; O'Brien, 2008), and that affirmative action was initially created as a reparative program to amend the lasting effects of past racial injustices, Asian Americans in support of the policy can be regarded as acting in solidarity with the interests of Black and Latinx Americans.

The division of Asian Americans on the issue of affirmative action in selective college admissions appears to be, in part, along ethnic lines. While Chinese Americans (both those with long family histories in the U.S., as well as recent immigrants) are represented on both sides of the debate, they represent the vast majority of Asian American constituents who oppose affirmative action (as demonstrated by organizational sign-ons to amicus briefs submitted in *Fisher vs. University of Texas*) (Poon & Segoshi, in press). This same ethnic division can be seen in the case of support for Peter Liang.

### **Peter Liang**

In 2014, Officer Peter Liang shot and killed Akai Gurley. Unlike other, White police officers who have not been indicted on any charges in their murders of unarmed Black men in recent history, Liang was indicted on second degree murder charges in 2016. This led to an outpouring of activism from the Chinese American community to free him of said charges. Chinese Americans, in particular, mobilized to lead the charge in claiming Liang should not have been indicted, and that he was being unfairly charged due to his racial identity. Although they may have had an argument in that he was being treated differently than White officers because he is Asian, these activists advocated for his exoneration rather than for the indictment of the other White officers who had committed the same crime. They were essentially arguing that

Asian Americans should enjoy the same racial privileges as White people, rather than arguing for *justice* in the indictment of any officer who commits such a crime. This event, once again, demonstrated a divide within the Asian American community, given the outspoken and politically active, predominantly Chinese American faction that was actively supporting Liang. Other Asian Americans aligned themselves with Black Americans in this movement, through their use of “hashtag activism” (Fang, 2016).

### **#APIs4BlackLives and #Asians4BlackLives**

The Black Lives Matter movement emerged in 2012 in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin. Martin, a 17-year-old Florida resident, had been walking unarmed down his neighborhood street when he was followed by a fellow citizen in a car, engaged in a physical altercation, and subsequently shot to death (Helm, 2017). The murder of the unarmed teen thrust the killings of Black men into the public eye. Martin’s death served as a critical incident in the effort to “(re)build the Black liberation movement” of the 1970s (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). Following this highly publicized killing, numerous incidents of unarmed Black men being shot and killed by police officers have been brought into the public eye, largely through social media (Chockshi, 2016). Black Lives Matter has been strategic in publicizing these murders through social media as a platform to draw attention to this pressing issue and inspire activism around the country. Black Lives Matter is now a very common phrase used in the fight for racial justice, highlighting the ongoing oppression of Black people while attending to intersections of identity.

Of course, like many movements for justice, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was met with backlash. One form of this backlash was the development of the #AllLivesMatter hashtag.

Paraded as a way for advocating for equality (Victor, 2015), the phrase “all lives matter” actually engages in color-evasive racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) by failing to acknowledge or recognize experiences with racism, and the impact that racism continues to bear on society. Specifically, it erases the history of tension between police and communities of color, especially Black communities, not to mention the history of systemic oppression enacted against people of color in the U.S. It minimizes and distracts from the experiences of Black people.

The #APIs4BlackLives and #Asians4BlackLives hashtags emerged as a way for Asian Americans to demonstrate solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement on social media and build relationships and support between their communities in practice (Wong, 2015). The #APis4BlackLives hashtag has over 2,000 Facebook “likes,” as well as a blog and Tumblr account. #Asians4BlackLives, a formal organization that emerged in 2014 following the failure to indict officers in the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, has engaged in actions such as sit-ins and community organizing efforts to promote positive partnerships between Asian and Black Americans. These hashtags are reflective of racial justice work being done by some Asian American activists and political organizations, such as 18 Million Rising and ChangeLab, which produce research and organize to demonstrate their commitment to racial justice beyond self-interest.

### **Racial Justice and the Election of Donald Trump**

In November 2016, following a controversial and divisive campaign, Donald Trump was elected president of the U.S. Not only had he admitted to sexual assault, but he had been accused by 16 women of sexual harassment or assault, as well as made a barrage of discriminatory remarks about women, people with disabilities, immigrants, Muslims, and racial

minorities (Associated Press, 2016; Carmon, 2016; Davis, Stolberg, & Kaplan, 2018). Upon being sworn into office, his erratic and belligerent rhetoric continued with verbal and policy attacks on transgender Americans, Black Americans, and specific immigrant groups, such as receivers of temporary protected status from El Salvador and Haiti (Davis et al., 2018). At the time of writing, he has put the lives of young undocumented immigrants known as DREAMers in limbo (Edelman, 2017). He has put the country's relationships with foreign allies and adversaries alike in jeopardy with continued insults, racist remarks, and a demonstrated inability to deescalate international tension (Killough, 2018). His disinterest in policymaking combined with the dangerous but influential ideologies of White House advisors like Stephen Miller and Breitbart founder and right-wing fascist extremist Steve Bannon have come together to create a perfect storm for the creation of oppressive policies targeting racial minorities, Muslims, women, low-income Americans, immigrants, refugees, Americans with disabilities, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community, and older Americans (Davis et al., 2018; Edelman, 2017; Killough, 2018; Shear & Savage, 2017).

### **Research Questions**

This study builds upon existing scholarship, explored in Chapter Two, on Asian American solidarity with Black Americans and racial identity development. It also contributes to a growing body of research on Asian American racial identity development, which spans several fields, including higher education (Jones & Abes, 2013). Extant research also suggests that Asian American critical consciousness may be related to one's propensity to engage in antiracist work alongside other people of color (Ho, 2008), and that higher education can be an ample setting for the emergence of a critical consciousness (Osajima, 2007). Therefore, this study



explores how Asian Americans' life experiences, including attending a four-year university, have led to their decisions to become engaged in racial solidarity or racial justice work. The overarching research question for this study is: how do how do Asian American college graduates connect their identity development journeys to their involvement in racial justice work?

### **Defining Core Concepts**

This study utilizes terminology that requires some clarification. The terms Asian American, critical consciousness, and racial justice work are defined below to ensure mutual understanding on behalf of the researcher, participants, and readers.

#### **Asian Americans**

Asian Americans are a diverse racial group in the U.S. who vary greatly in a number of different ways, so it is important to emphasize that ascribing a panethnic identity to a group does not ignore the diversity within it. Panethnicity is defined as “the bridging of organizations and solidarities among subgroups of ethnic collectivities that are often seen as homogenous by outsiders” (Lopez & Espiritu, 1990, p. 198). Lopez and Espiritu stated that a panethnic Asian identity emerged in the 1960s as a result of the Civil Rights Movement’s institutionalization of ethnicity. Although Asian Americans vary greatly in their ethnic identities, their relatively similar socioeconomic status and geographic concentration in California and the U.S. west coast played a role in shaping the panethnic, Asian American identity (Espiritu, 1994; Lopez & Espiritu, 1990). More recent demographic shifts in immigration and differences in educational attainment challenge Lopez and Espiritu’s (1990) claims that socioeconomic status and geographic location continue to shape a pan-ethnic Asian American identity (Teranishi &

Nguyen, 2011); however, public failure to distinguish Asian Americans from one another and a shared experience of discrimination persist to shape the Asian American identity.

For example, In 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man, was beaten and murdered in Detroit, Michigan, after being misidentified as Japanese American and blamed for stealing jobs from the U.S. (Lopez & Espiritu, 1990). This event clearly demonstrated the American public's confusion about Asian American ethnic identities, and revealed that potential utility in a panethnic Asian identity. More recent examples of public misidentification of Asian Americans resulting in hate crimes and murders abound; in 2017, an Indian American man was shot and killed in Kansas after being mistaken as Iranian by his assailant (Young & Hackney, 2017). Unfortunately, the shared experience of discrimination among Asian Americans persists regardless of their ethnic identity (Museus & Park, 2015), and the fact that they are continually mistaken for one another contributes to the continued relevance of a panethnic Asian American identity.

Curiously, Asian American panethnic identity was also strengthened by the Census Bureau's 1990 push to include "Asian American" as a racial identity in the national census, without disaggregating ethnic data (Lopez & Espiritu, 1990). Asian Americans, noting persistent differences within varying Asian American ethnic communities, collectively lobbied for continued recognition by the Census Bureau of different Asian American ethnic identities. Therefore, the push for disaggregation resulted in the strengthening of the Asian American panethnic identity (Espiritu, 1992; Lopez & Espiritu, 1990)

This is a study on Asian Americans, a panethnic racial group. Participants in this study will likely identify with a number of different ethnicities. Despite these ethnic differences,

though, the continued significance of panethnicity contributes to their experiences within the U.S. Asian Americans, as a racial group, have been studied extensively in a variety of fields, especially higher education (Poon et al., 2016). However, Asian American critical consciousness remains underexplored (Osajima, 2007). The concept of critical consciousness is explored in the following section.

### **Critical Consciousness**

Critical consciousness, a term coined by renowned educational philosopher Paulo Freire, refers to the “process by which oppressed and socially marginalized people critically analyze their social and economic conditions and take action to improve them” (Watts & Hipolito Delgado, 2015, p. 848). Critical consciousness can be conceptualized as an ongoing developmental process that requires engagement in critical reflection and dialogue (Freire, 1974). Consistent with other research (i.e., Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015), for the purposes of this study, critical consciousness is treated as a prerequisite to engagement in racial justice work.

### **Engagement in Racial Justice Work**

As previously explored in this section, racial justice work can be exhibited in a number of different ways by Asian Americans. For the purposes of this study, racial justice work can manifest as affiliation with a racial justice movement (i.e., Black Lives Matter, Stand with Standing Rock), participation in marches, protests, or other social actions for racial justice, or holding a professional role that requires critical examinations of race and power in the U.S. These examples of racial just work borrow from Watts and Hipolito-Delgado’s (2015) definition of sociopolitical action, referring to the “full spectrum of action for liberation and social justice”

(p. 848). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, racial just work necessitates *action*, however so defined by the participant.

Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) defined sociopolitical action as a final and integral component of critical consciousness. Although there is flexibility in how someone could identify as acting in racial solidarity with people of color, participants in this study should consider themselves engaging in “the promotion of change in social and institutional policies or practices that maintain an inferior status for members of marginalized groups” (p. 850). Although “sociopolitical action may lead more directly to systematic change ... actions at the personal or group levels contribute as well” (p. 850). Therefore, my definition of acting in racial solidarity with people of color necessitates action, however large or small.

Several scholars have contended that the development of a critical consciousness was integral in Asian Americans’ historical engagement with the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements (Ho, 2008). This study bridges research on Asian American racial identity development, critical consciousness, and racial solidarity, explicitly exploring ways in which these concepts are connected for Asian Americans engaging in racial justice work.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

This dissertation consists of this introduction (Chapter One), a literature review (Chapter Two), a methodology section (Chapter Three), the presented findings (Chapter Four), and a discussion that includes implications and conclusion (Chapter Five).

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explores how and why some Asian Americans college graduates' experiences led them to engage in racial justice work. Drawing from several distinct bodies of literature, I argue that for Asian Americans, identity development coupled with the development of a critical consciousness can result in acting in racial solidarity with other people of color. Racial identity development alone, a largely passive process in and of itself, will not lead to engagement in efforts of racial solidarity because "organizing by people of color must be premised on making strategic alliance with one another ... [predicated] not just around oppression, but also around complicity in the oppression of other peoples as well as our own" (Smith, 2010, p. 3). Therefore, I posit that the development of a critical consciousness can be the catalyst for true racial solidarity between Asian Americans and other groups of color within the U.S.

Part one of this literature review provides a historical overview of precedent and context for the current study. Historical accounts of both solidarity and division between communities of color in American activist movements abound, although conflicts between groups of color are often the result of a strategic White supremacist agenda (Ho, 2008; Kim, 2006; O'Brien, 2008; Poon et al., 2016). This study is theoretically informed by historic examples of solidarity between Asian and Black Americans, which provide examples of Smith's (2010) conception of a commitment to racial justice that crosses racial lines.

Part two explores the social construction of Asian American identity through a look at some scholar's conceptualization of Asian Americans' racial positionality, as well as a presentation and critique of Asian American identity development and identity consciousness models. These models form the basis of my overarching argument that racial identity development, combined with the awakening of a critical consciousness, can lead to racial solidarity.

Part three of this literature review focuses on identity and critical consciousness. In discussing the activism of Yuri Kochiyama and Richard Aoki during the Black liberation movement, Ho (2008) stated, "it was the black liberation movement that triggered the development of a radical consciousness" (p. 166). In agreement, Espiritu (1992) described the emergence of the Civil Rights movement as the spark for Asian American activism and a collective, panethnic Asian American movement. Furthermore, because mounting scholarship in higher education suggests that cross-racial interactions on college campuses are associated with some positive outcomes related to understanding structural oppression (Bowman & Park, 2015), this study bridges a gap between critical consciousness and racial solidarity, using higher education as a context for which these connections are made (though I do not make the claim that the emergence of a critical consciousness and subsequent engagement in actions for racial solidarity can *only* happen in the context of institutions of higher education). Kabria (2002) found that Asian American college student activists usually developed a critical consciousness as a result of interactions with a particular individual or class they took, thereby justifying higher education as a likely context for this study. I argue that today's Black Lives Matter movement is providing a "trigger" for the development of Asian American activist solidarity, as evidenced by

the emergence of the #APIs4BlackLives hashtag, which may be further encouraged by the influence of higher education.

### **Part One: Solidarity between Asian Americans and Black Activist Movements**

Frustrated with modest gains from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, the Black liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s embodied a more radical, anti-imperialist resistance to white supremacy (Fujino, 2008). In fact, the Black liberation movement, characterized by the work of the Black Panther Party and revolutionaries such as Malcolm X, was greatly inspired by the rise of Mao Zedong and the Communist party of China (Kelly & Esch, 2008; Ho, 2008). Although highly visible and oversimplified media reports and pop culture representations would have the public believe that relations between Asian and Black Americans have always been tense and even hostile (Kim, 2006; Okihiro, 2006; ya Salaam, 2008), some examples serve as counterstories, exemplifying partnerships and alliances between Asian Americans and Black activists (Ho, 2008; Mullen, 2004; Okihiro, 2006). The rise of communism internationally, coupled with the insurgence of Japanese American activism in response to calls for “legalistic, integrationist” approaches to social change by national organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, created a foundation of common frustration and experience upon which activists could unite and fight (Fujino, 2008, p. 169). ya salaam (2008) stated that it was the “anticolonial struggle,” along with the recognition that “we within the United States were equally, if not more so, colonial subjects” (pp. 206-207), that united people of color in the fight for equity in the post-Civil Rights era.

Fujino (2008) delved in to the partnerships between some prominent Asian American activists and their roles in the Black liberation movement. Japanese American activists Richard Aoki and Yuri Kochiyama were highly involved with well-known activists, namely Huey P. Newton and Malcolm X, respectively. Their partnerships with the activists of the Third World Liberation Front and the Nation of Islam are demonstrative of cooperation, understanding, and ally ship between Black and Asian Americans. Despite the lack of visibility in these partnerships today, alliances and collaborations between Asian and Black Americans in activist efforts are not new and continue to persist. Serving as another prominent example, the revolutionary philosopher Grace Lee Boggs' involvement in the Black liberation movement and persistent solidarity with movements for racial justice into the 21<sup>st</sup> century continue to influence revolutionary thought and philosophy today.

Ho (2008) contended that “the struggle to unite oppressed peoples must proceed from an informed consciousness first as victims of oppression, and subsequently with clarity about the target of the struggle: the system of colonialism, white supremacy, and monopoly capitalist imperialism” (p. 29). Even though examples of division between Asian and Black Americans throughout history exist, and contemporary examples are easy to come by, the emergence of Asian American solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement is visible and growing. ChangeLab (2012) found that among Asian Americans actively involved in social justice organizations and movements, building alliances with other people of color “demanded organizing, and political education in particular, to counter mainstream messages about race” (p. 52). This finding assumes that so-called mainstream messages about race are divisive and must be challenged to be conducive to racial solidarity. Working towards solidarity through



anticolonial education and challenging dominant narratives around race and racism in the U.S. through research and teaching were key takeaways from ChangeLab's report.

This rich historical context lends itself to an understanding of Asian Americans as existing within a polarized racial landscape that privileges whiteness and oppresses blackness. This unique racial positionality of Asian Americans has been interrogated by some scholars seeking to complicate the social constructions of race in the U.S. In the following section, I present some scholars' conceptualizations of the U.S. racial landscape.

### **Part Two: The Social Construction of Asian American Identity**

Asian American identity in the U.S. must be understood within the context of the polarized social constructions of whiteness and blackness (Kim, 2006). In fact, a panethnic Asian American identity did not always exist within the U.S.; it was intentionally constructed as a tool to leverage political power following the Civil Rights Movement (Espiritu, 1992). Influenced by a growing population of native-born Asian Americans, the decline of hostile relationships between Asian countries, and decreasing residential segregation between Asian Americans, the panethnic Asian American identity arose (Espiritu, 1992).

The following sections describe some ways in which scholars have conceptualized the positionality of Asian Americans in the U.S. While some of them describe Asian Americans as a monolithic group, others acknowledge persistent differences, such as socioeconomic status and phenotype that influence the experiences of Asian Americans. A thorough analysis of Asian American positionality in the U.S. necessitates a complex understanding of differences between Asian American ethnic groups as well as the meaning of Asian American panethnic identity.

### **Asian Americans and the Black-White Binary**

Asian Americans have been in the U.S. for centuries, and have faced institutionalized racism along the way. As the Asian American population changed over the years, so have stereotypes and narratives about them (Chung Allred, 2007). Often these narratives present Asian Americans in ways that uphold white supremacy by pitting minority groups against each other, such as the case with the model minority myth (Kim, 2006; Poon et al., 2016). However, because of the history of the enslavement of Black people in the U.S. and its impact on the development of a Black-White racial binary which has been reinforced unrelentingly by white supremacy (Omi & Winant, 2015), Asian Americans occupy a unique racial positionality (Chung Allred, 2007; Kidder, 2005; Poon & Segoshi, in press). Despite the continuing racial diversification of the U.S. and the shrinking White population, Kim (2006) argued that the Black-White binary not only persists but remains relevant to Americans' understandings of race and racism and the persistence of structural racism. This claim is consistent with Sexton's (2010) assertion that racial oppression must be understood in relation to the Black experience, because the Black experience serves as the ultimate expression of racist oppression in the U.S. Sexton stated that the creation of a false equivalence of oppression between different groups of people of color serves as an erasure of the Black experience. Therefore, the relevance of the Black-White binary persists and serves as an effective framework for also understanding the oppression of people who are not-Black and not White. Some scholars, however, presented new, alternative conceptualizations of an emerging racial order in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; O'Brien, 2008).

## **The Racial Middle**

O'Brien (2008) referred to Asian and Latinx Americans' position in the U.S. Black-White binary as the "racial middle." She contended that Asian and Latinx Americans occupy the middle ground, which is neither Black nor White, because some characteristics of their experience distinguish them from either category. O'Brien pointed to the fact that Asian Americans and Latinx Americans have more positive perceptions of White people than of Black people, yet are characterized as a racial other. They earn fewer returns from investments in education than do White people, and are less likely to support affirmative action and vote Democratic than Black people. Yet, they both remain grossly politically underrepresented. These examples demonstrate the unique racial positionality of these groups, and distinguish their experiences from White or Black people. O'Brien argued that how people perceive themselves and others, though, is not as important as how they are treated by institutions and social structures set up within the U.S., thereby adding somewhat of a power analysis to her claim.

Through a qualitative research study in which she interviewed both Asian American and Latinx American individuals, O'Brien (2008) found some evidence for both "whitening" and "browning" theses (p. 201). The whitening thesis suggested that Asian Americans and Latinx Americans tend to identify more with markers of whiteness, and have more positive perceptions of White people than Black people. Their higher rates of intermarriage and interracial relationships with White people rather than Black people is also indicative of this thesis. However, O'Brien also found evidence for the browning thesis, which posits that Asian Americans and Latinx Americans gravitated towards a "people of color" identity, which included Black Americans, and was distinct from White people (p. 202).

Despite evidence supporting these two theses, O'Brien (2008) concluded that the recognition of a racial middle was distinct for both Asian American and Latinx American participants. As such, O'Brien argued for moving beyond the Black-White binary, since Asian Americans and Latinos in her study were likely to become a new reference group all together, existing outside of both the Black and White categories. She pointed to examples of her participants who actively resisted whiteness not through their identification with a "collective Black" identity (described next), but with a strong non-White, racial middle category. O'Brien claimed that in doing so, these individuals were creating their own referent group that resisted the Black-White binary and proved that antiracist work and anti-white supremacist work could be done without the polarized White and Black categories. Bonilla-Silva (2014) complicated O'Brien's (2008) presentation of the racial middle with his Latin Americanization thesis, which is presented in the following section.

### **The Latin Americanization Thesis**

In what he referred to as the Latin Americanization of the U.S., Bonilla-Silva (2014) argued that a new American racial order is emerging. This new racial order, he contended, will emerge as a result of a few key events. First is the increasing racial diversity of the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). In contrast with Kim (2006), who argued that the Black-White binary remains a relevant framework *despite* demographic changes, Bonilla-Silva (2014) contended that the new racial hierarchy will create a distinct middle racial group to "buffer" racial conflict, and designate some immigrants as White while relegating most of them to a "collective Black" category (p. 231). Second, Bonilla-Silva claimed that the U.S.'s turn to a color-blind racist ideology, wherein racism is practiced in covert, non-obvious, and non-explicit ways, is evidence

of the emergence of a Latin American-like racial order. Third, the globalized nature of racism, wherein White nations hold more power, and even in nations of people of color, colorism and the valuing of whiteness persists, is cited as evidence of the new racial hierarchy. Fourth, Bonilla-Silva pointed to the movements against collecting racial data in the U.S. as an effort to obscure racial disparities and create a climate in which discussion of racial inequities becomes more difficult and perceived as less acceptable. Such a movement can be seen in California, where some groups are opposing the collection of disaggregated data on Asian Americans (Fuchs, 2016). Fifth and finally, Bonilla-Silva (2014) pointed to the impending end of affirmative action policy as the last remaining legal, race-based social policy. He argued that the end of affirmative action would signal, in legal terms, the end of the recognition that race has an impact on one's life chances in the U.S.

Within this alleged new racial order, Asian Americans of East and South Asian descent, as well as light-skinned Latinx Americans, will occupy the position of "honorary Whites" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p. 228). Bonilla-Silva contended that they will maintain the position of honorary White through continued anti-Black and anti-Latinx racism. Recent research suggests that many Asian Americans and Latinx Americans already hold anti-Black viewpoints, with Asian Americans holding White people in higher esteem than White people themselves do (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; O'Brien, 2008). Through the upholding of White supremacy, this new category of honorary Whites will not have access to all of the same resources or privileges that White people do, however, they would serve the purpose of maintaining a racial order in which White people remained at the top by never being actually allowed to be considered in the White

category. This buffer group is reminiscent of O'Brien's racial middle, although its purpose to uphold white supremacy is made more explicit in Bonilla-Silva's (2014) analysis.

The new category of "collective Blacks" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p. 228) would not only include Black Americans but those of Native American, Latinx American, and Southeast Asian descent. According to Bonilla-Silva, the collective Black category is maintained in two ways. First, White and Asian Americans both hold negative views of Black and Latinx people. Second, Black and Latinx people, presumably through internalized racism, also hold some negative views about themselves and each other in regards to welfare dependency and gang involvement.

Though perhaps not fully realized, Bonilla-Silva's (2014) conceptualization of a new racial order is compelling in that it acknowledges and tends to the power differences and dynamics between racialized groups. Colorblind racism is the mechanism through which racial order persists, on both the institutional and individual levels. Unlike Kim (2008), Bonilla-Silva's (2014) framework posits that the U.S. is moving beyond a Black-White binary, and that race is beginning to be understood in a more complex manner. However, because the Latin Americanization framework rests on the polarized assumption of whiteness being good and blackness being bad, I argue that it is still rooted in the Black-White binary and does not negate its continued significance in understanding race in the U.S.

### **Asian American Activism and the Racial Middle**

Through 82 in-depth interviews with Asian American activists and political leaders, ChangeLab, Inc. (2012) presented a number of Asian American attitudes, perspectives, and reflections on the social justice work of Asian Americans as they are positioned as a racial middle. Aptly titled "Left of Right of the Color Line?," their report outlined nine key findings:

divergent definitions of justice; that many Asian Americans don't think about race; internalized notions of racial superiority among Asian Americans; racial attitudes impeding on solidarity with other people of color; a waning progressive movement among Asian Americans; the decreasing significance of "Asian American" as a political identity; factors contributing to whether or not one identifies as Asian American; and the need for progressive, race-conscious organizing for racial justice.

Unlike Bonilla-Silva (2014) and O'Brien (2008), ChangeLab's (2012) analysis incorporated an intersectional approach. Although many of their respondents recognized that there was a racial hierarchy within the U.S., they also noted that other factors, such as socioeconomic status, religion, and skin color, had a strong impact on the way the racial hierarchy operated (ChangeLab, 2012). The consideration of these other identities points to the fluid ways in which the racial hierarchy is experienced, but does not necessarily challenge its existence or the presence of white supremacy. Particularly of note, and consistent with Bonilla-Silva's (2014) Latin Americanization thesis, several participants in ChangeLab's (2012) study contended that Asian American's skin tone would determine their place within the racial hierarchy and whether or not they could access the privileges that came along with being associated with honorary Whites.

These conceptualizations of the racial middle, or the Latin Americanization of the U.S. racial order, provide rich context for understanding Asian American identity. Asian American racial identity models are necessarily situated within a complex history of racist structures and carefully manipulated racial narratives. The next section of this literature review delves into

models of racial identity development of Asian Americans from psychology and student development scholarship.

### **Part Three: Asian American Identity Development and Consciousness**

Student development theory has been a subject of scholarly interrogation since the 1960s when the U.S. saw a dramatic increase both the numbers and diversity of students attending higher education institutions (Jones & Abes, 2013). Though early student development models focused solely on homogenous student populations with dominant social identities, a turn towards centering the experiences of students with marginalized identities importantly brought forth *experience* rather than *oppression* (Abes, 2016). Early racial and ethnic identity development models borrowed from the fields of psychology and social psychology to examine the racial and ethnic development of specific groups of students, for example, White students (Helms, 1993), Black students (Cross, 1995), Latinx students (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001), and Asian students (Kim, 2012), but were not necessarily related to higher education. Other models have emerged to draw clarity about the racial identity development of multiracial students (Renn, 2008).

While most identity *development* models are composed of stages that an individual can move through or between, other models that focus on identity *consciousness* consider the various layered and intersecting components of identity that may contribute to an individual's race consciousness (Accapadi, 2014). Critical models of developmental theory have the "...potential to expose more discretely the historical context that contributes to the distorted views of power that shape the identity of those from privileged groups" (Abes, 2016, p. 10). Below, I present and critique some of the most well-known models of Asian American identity development,



before moving into more contemporary and complex understandings identity consciousness, which informed my study.

### **Kim's (2012) Asian American Racial Identity Development Model**

Kim (2012) first proposed an identity consciousness model for Asian Americans in the 1980s based off of her research on Japanese women. Her model, which has since been updated but never empirically validated, consists of five stages, designed to be fluid. The first stage of the model is *ethnic awareness*, in which Kim claimed Asian American children who have not yet entered school will feel a sense of ethnic attachment in their home environment. According to Kim, in stage one, an Asian American child who lives in a predominantly Asian neighborhood will experience what it's like to be in the majority, while an Asian American child who lives in a predominantly White neighborhood will experience ethnic indifference.

Stage two of Kim's (2012) model is called *White identification*. Kim claimed that this is a "painful" (p. 146) stage in which Asian American children will realize that they are different from their White peers. Kim described that active White identification occurs when Asian American children attempt to erase or downplay their Asian identity in favor of adopting White values, traditions, and beliefs. Meanwhile, passive White identification could occur for an Asian American child who does not identify or want to identify as White, but still normalizes whiteness through accepting white norms, traditions, and beliefs.

Stage three of the model is *awaking to social political consciousness*. In this stage, Asian Americans become more positive in their Asian racial identity, while becoming increasingly aware of structural oppression and its effects on Asian Americans. Additionally, their desire to identify with whiteness diminishes as they form a stronger Asian American identity.

The fourth stage of Kim's (2012) model is *redirection to an Asian American consciousness*. Kim claimed that with the support of peers and family, Asian Americans at this stage will develop a resistance to White systems of dominance that oppress Asian Americans. Their increased awareness of the discrimination that Asian Americans face will result in racial pride and a more "political understanding of what it means to be Asian American" (p. 148).

The fifth and final stage of the Asian American Racial Identity Development model is *incorporation*. In this stage, an Asian American person resolves any preexisting racial identity conflict and is able to relate to other groups of people without "losing" their own racial identity as Asian American (Kim, 2012, p. 148). They will no longer feel a need to socialize exclusively with other Asian Americans, as they will recognize the salience and relevance of their other identities to their experience.

Kim's (2012) five stage model offers a fairly limited understanding of the fluidity and intersectionality of identity. Although some of these stages are likely experienced by many Asian Americans, the model overall fails to account for diverse Asian American experiences while making a number of problematic assumptions. First, Kim assumed that Asian Americans will begin their life immersed in either Asian American or White communities, or some combination thereof. This automatically limits the first stage of the model by accounting only for interactions between Asian Americans and White people. Although it would be an astute observation to note the pervasiveness of whiteness in any American's social environment regardless of their race, Kim failed to do so and therefore is confined to defining Asian Americans in relation to *White people* instead of whiteness.

Second, even with the descriptions of active and passive identification with whiteness in stage two, Kim (2012) once again assumed that Asian Americans interact mainly with Asian and White people. Although racial segregation remains a persistent reality in the U.S., many Asian Americans may be raised in communities that are very racially diverse or in which they interact primarily with Black or Latino individuals. Presumably, the socialization of these Asian Americans might differ given the cultural differences in their social environments.

A third critique of Kim's (2012) model is that it assumes that racial identity is necessarily the most salient identity for Asian Americans, with an understanding of multiple identities (let alone intersecting multiple identities) being unaccounted for until the fifth and final stage. An Asian American person may very well experience their other identities more saliently. If an Asian American person is also transgender, has a mental or physical disability, or comes from a working class background, for example, their Asian American identity may not necessarily be the most salient to them. That being said, it is important to note that no one single identity is likely to always be the most salient for any person, and that social identities can be understood through the complex ways in which they intersect and interact with systems of power and oppression, which are often context-dependent (Jones & Abes, 2013).

### **Ibrahim, Ohnishi, and Sandhu's (1997) Model of South Asian Immigrant Identity Development**

Ibrahim, Ohnishi, and Sandhu (1997) offered an ethnicity-specific look at Asian American identity development by examining the factors contributing to the racial identity development of South Asian American immigrants. Their model builds upon Kim's (2012) model by accounting for the influence of colonialism on South Asian immigrants' sense of self,

as well as by specifically considering South Asian Americans rather than blanketing all Asian Americans into a single, monolithic group (Museus, 2014). Like Kim (2012), Ibrahim et al. (1997) approached identity development from a psychological lens.

Ibrahim et al.'s (1997) model accounts for sociohistorical cultural characteristics that many South Asian immigrants may have in common. These include: self-respect, dignity, and self-control; respect for family and filial piety; respect for age; awareness and respect for community; fatalism; and humility. All of these stages are mediated by generational status; Ibrahim et al. claimed that the more recent the immigrant status, the more likely someone will be to begin with stage one of the model. The first stage of the South Asian immigrant identity development model is *dissonance*, when South Asian immigrants realize that hard work is not enough to achieve success in the U.S. They also realize that their lived realities in the U.S. are not congruent with the American Dream, and that interacting with Americans and other ethnic groups in the U.S. does not come easily (Ibrahim et al., 1997).

The second stage of this model is *resistance and immersion*, in which the South Asian immigrant experiences a sort of crisis that results in steadfast rejection of mainstream American culture and more complete identification with their South Asian identity (Ibrahim et al., 1997). In this stage, they may be likely to reach out and form fragile alliances with other oppressed groups in the U.S., however, these alliances are delicate due to “conflicts” with other races (p. 43). This stage can be compared to Kim's (2012) fourth stage, *redirection to Asian American consciousness*, in which an individual reverts back to their ethnic or racial identity after initially embracing or attempting to embrace the values of mainstream, White American culture.

Third, Ibrahim et al. (1997) claimed that South Asian immigrants may experience *introspection*, in which they maintain and acknowledge their South Asian identity, but also begin to balance it with some identification with mainstream culture. Comparable with Kim's (2012) fifth and final stage, *incorporation*, this stage requires an acceptance of one's position as a person of color, and particular identification with race or ethnicity within the dominant system of whiteness in which they live.

Finally, Ibrahim et al. (1997) posited that South Asian immigrants will experience *synergistic acculturation and awareness*. In this stage, the individual develops a positive sense of self and either rejects or accepts the values of the dominant society. They may also become less ethno-centric in their recognition that other racial and ethnic groups also have positive attributes.

As previously noted, Ibrahim et al.'s (1997) model builds upon Kim's (2012) model in important ways. Namely, it acknowledges the effects of colonialism and incorporates the assumption that South Asian immigrants are coming to the U.S. from countries that have experienced the collective trauma of imperialism and revolution. Their model is flexible in its recognition of the impact of generational status on immigrant identity development. This flexibility is important in acknowledging that racial or ethnic identity is not always the most salient identity for an individual, and may be more or less salient depending on the individual's generational status. However, Ibrahim et al. (1997) leave little room in their model for an analysis of the impact on multiple or intersecting identities, which may have a tremendous impact on someone's identity development.

## **Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee's (2002) Psychosocial Model of Asian American Student Development**

Unlike previous models of Asian American identity development, Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee (2002) presented a psychosocial model of Asian American *student* development, based on Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of student development. Their model simultaneously critiques and builds off of the assumptions made by Chickering and Reisser, while offering insight into the differences and challenges faced specifically by Asian American students. Unlike Kim (2012) and Ibrahim et al. (1997), Kodama et al.'s (2002) model focuses specifically on college-aged students, because it builds off of existing student development literature rather than scholarship specific to the realms of psychology and counseling.

This model is nonlinear; that is, it centers a student's identity (and its subsequent development) within multiple contexts and forces that may influence it. Kodama et al. (2002) borrowed from Erikson's (1968) definition of identity development, stating, "there is increasing congruence between one's own sense of self and external feedback" (p. 49). The authors contended that Asian American student development should be contextualized in two external domains: Western values and U.S. racism; and Asian values that stem from family. Western values and U.S. racism likely impact a students' identity, and can be viewed as conflicting with Asian cultural values and influences, such as collectivism and respect for elders. They recognized that any given student's multiple identities may impact the degree which they are influenced by either of these forces (Kodama et al., 2002). Additionally, Kodama et al. acknowledged the various identities that compose a person's singular identity. They emphasized the diversity of Asian Americans and how those who are multiracial or identify as members of

the LGBTQ community, for example, may experience a more complex or nuanced understanding of their Asian American identity.

Kodama et al. (2002) posited that *purpose* plays a central role in mediating Asian American college students' identity. Purpose, for the sake of their model, refers mostly to career aspirations and attachment. This is particularly unique to Asian Americans given research that demonstrates they feel a higher amount of pressure to succeed in a given career in comparison to their non-Asian American peers.

*Competency* and *emotions* are two related “developmental tasks” for Asian Americans in this model (Kodama et al., 2002). When considering Asian American students in particular, competency relates mostly to academic competency and intellectual development, rather than other forms of competency (i.e., physical and manual) that may be more relevant for other, non-Asian American students. Relatedly, emotional exploration is a core developmental task for Asian Americans, rather than emotional *management* that is considered a task in Chickering and Reisser's (1993) initial model. Due to the Asian cultural norm of placing others' emotions and needs above one's self, Kodama et al. (2002) posited that Asian Americans may experience more emotional *exploration* and *development* in college, rather than the management of unruly or uncontrollable emotions.

*Interdependence, relationships, and integrity* represent three more developmental tasks in this developmental model. Kodama et al. (2002) considered interdependence a core developmental task to Asian American identity development. Because family responsibility and support are critical components of many Asian American cultures and norms, Asian American students are more likely to maintain ties and connections to their families throughout college.

They may differ from other students who may be more likely to detach from their family in search of developing a stronger, independent identity. The development and maintenance of relationships may also look different for Asian American college students, who are less likely to interact with faculty (Kim, Chang, & Park, 2009) or struggle with choosing between Asian or other-raced friend groups (Kodama et al., 2002). Finally, integrity is a developmental task for Asian Americans in this model and refers to the negotiation of integrity of self-versus the integrity of family, whereas for other, non-Asian students would refer to just integrity of self. Because of the importance of family and close connections to family, Asian American students may navigate integrity differently than their non-Asian peers, especially based on Asian cultural norms and values that stem from their families (Kodama et al., 2002).

Kodama et al.'s (2002) psychosocial model of Asian American student identity development accounts for the ways in which Asian American students may differ from their non-Asian peers in their developmental college journeys. Specifically, they evaluate the ways in which the influence of Asian values and cultural norms may influence the college identity experiences of Asian American students. Their model is flexible in that it accounts for the negotiation of other salient identities, and acknowledges the important contextual and often conflicting influences of U.S. and Asian societal norms and expectations. A major assumption of this model is that Asian American college students are developing their identities at traditional college age (18-22) and in traditional four-year college settings, whereas around half of Asian American college students are actually enrolled in community colleges (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2011).



### **Accapadi's (2012) Polycultural Model of Asian American Identity Consciousness**

Accapadi (2012) proposed a model of Asian American identity consciousness, rather than development, in response to the relative lack of non-stage models in Asian American identity development theory. Congruent with the recommendations made by Johnston-Guerrero (2016), Accapadi (2012) drew upon the tenants of Critical Race Theory (expanded upon in Chapter Three) and intersectionality to understand the development of Asian American student consciousness. Accapadi's model advances older models of Asian American identity by building from a polycultural perspective. Polyculturalism requires us to "acknowledge that our notion of cultural community should not be built inside the high walls of parochialism and ethno-nationalism" (Prashad, 2001, p. 65). Prashad continued, "therefore, no cultural actor can, in good faith, claim proprietary interest in what is claimed to be his or her authentic culture" (p. 66).

The polycultural foundation of Accapadi's (2012) model manifests in the six categories that influence consciousness: ethnic attachment, familial influence, immigration history, external influences and perceptions, self as other, and other social identities, each of which contributes to Asian American identity consciousness. For any given individual, these influences may be more or less salient and more or less related. For example, a student who is Korean but was adopted at a young age by a White family may experience less ethnic attachment than someone who recently immigrated to the U.S. from Korea.

*Ethnic attachment* refers to the degree to which someone's ethnicity plays a central role in their life. It can consist of markers such as language, religion or spirituality, or other norms and customs. Ethnic attachment can also be used to refer to attachment to a pan-Asian American

identity, which may be more salient for second or third generation Asian Americans who identify less with the culture of their parents or older generations (Accapadi, 2012). It also may be more salient for Asian American adoptees who may feel cultural congruence with their adoptive family's non-Asian identity.

*Familial influence* is also considered to be a core component of many Asian Americans' identity development. Consistent with previous models (i.e., Ibrahim et al., 1997; Kim, 2012; Kodama et al., 2002), Accapadi (2012) emphasized the role of the family in contributing to Asian American identity consciousness. However, she took a less presumptive approach by acknowledging that regardless of how connected to their family an Asian American student feels, this level of attachment will still have an effect on their identity consciousness; other models assumed that Asian Americans necessarily had high levels of familial attachment.

*Immigration history* is a factor in Asian American identity consciousness that was mostly acknowledged by previous models. By engaging CRT in this category, Accapadi (2012) accounted not only for generational status as an important influence on identity, but also the diverse histories of Asian Americans in the U.S. While some Asian Americans are descended from families who immigrated to the U.S. in the 1800s, others share the more recent experience of being refugees or asylees. Accapadi emphasized that it is not only *when* someone or their family immigrated to the U.S., but under what circumstances, that can indeed shape their identity.

The *external influences and perceptions* category contextualizes this model within structures of power and oppression. It also accounts for more specific social environments, such as the wave of hostility towards South Asian and Middle Eastern Americans following 9/11

(Accapadi, 2012). Today, one might consider social movements like the Black Lives Matter movement as informing the context under which people of all races are developing their identity consciousness. Unlike previous models, Accapadi did not assume that one must ever identify strongly with White norms and values in order to be affected by external influences and perceptions. Instead, the development of awareness of them is perhaps more meaningful, rather than an active or passive engagement with whiteness.

Accapadi (2012) accounted for phenotypical appearance as one potential point of entry for Asian American identity consciousness in the *self as other* category. This category complicates assumptions about how Asian Americans are supposed to look or act, since it necessitates situating their experience in others' perceptions. Despite the fact that race is socially constructed, assumptions about people continue to be ascribed to them through characteristics associated with skin color and other phenotypical features (Omi & Winant, 2015). This category might be particularly salient for multiracial Asian Americans who are often presumed to not be Asian based on the way they look. It may also be salient for Asian American adoptees for the opposite reason, because they are assumed to be from a given culture that they may not actually strongly identify with.

*Other social identities* rounds out the list of categories that influence Asian American identity consciousness, although the categories are not connected in any linear fashion. This category uses intersectionality theory to consider the ways in which multiple identities intersect within the context of structural oppression (Jones & Abes, 2013). Accapadi (2012) acknowledged that other social identities can influence how each of the categories of influence on Asian American consciousness are experienced. For example, the ways gender identity

influences standards of beauty, which are White dominant norms, could change the way an Asian American woman experiences the *external influences and perceptions* category of influence.

The categories of Accapadi's (2012) model all contribute to Asian American identity consciousness. Accapadi noted that this is not a racial identity *development* model. By allowing flexibility between the many categories and situating the model in the context of Critical Race Theory, Accapadi offered a nuanced way of understanding Asian American identity. This model is discussed in Chapter Three, and informs the methodology for this study.

### **Critique of Existing Models**

Kim (2012), Ibrahim et al. (1997), and Kodama et al. (2002) all presented models for understanding Asian American identity development. Identity development is related to but distinct from identity consciousness. On the whole, these models collectively did not explicitly incorporate a critical understanding of race and racism into their models (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016; Museus, 2014; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). Additionally, they did not clearly delineate the differences between racial and ethnic identity, therefore operating from assumptions that these two factors are the same or hold equal weight in Asian American identity development.

I argue that scholarship should move beyond an identity *development* framework and toward an identity *consciousness* framework to understand how Asian Americans (or other people, for that matter), understand their own identity within the context of structures of oppression that have deep historical roots. Accapadi's (2012) model is an example of this next step for understanding identity development. Furthermore, identity development can, and often does, happen unconsciously to a person as they move through life. Identity consciousness

requires a heightened awareness of one's identity and the various experiences, contexts, and influences that impact it. Through the development of a critical consciousness (Freire, 1974), people may become more aware of oppressive social structures and more likely to engage in activism (Osajima, 2007).

With the exception of Ibrahim et al. (1997) and Accapadi (2012), these models largely fail to clearly distinguish race from ethnicity. Race and ethnicity should be understood as distinct concepts in order to fully grasp the differential impacts one or both of these components have on Asian American identity. Racial identity is situated within the context of racial oppression and the recognition that race is socially constructed, and is “concerned with how individuals abandon the disenfranchisement and develop respectful attitudes toward their racial group” (Sadawsky, Kwan, & Pannu, 1995, p. 133). Racial identity is broader than ethnic identity; it refers to a shared oppression within the context of greater society (Accapadi, 2012). Ethnic identity, on the other hand, refers to a more specific affiliation with the culture one shares with people who share that ethnicity. It can be experienced through language, food, religion, and other culturally-specific rituals associated with a given identity. Examples of Asian ethnic identities include Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, or Cambodian.

Johnston-Guerrero (2016) argued for a more complex understanding of how race and ethnicity can and often do interact with one another. In acknowledging the tendency of racial and ethnic identity models to focus on one or the other, Johnston-Guerrero encouraged scholars to “embrace the messiness” of identity, given its inherent complexity (p. 43). He contended that an intersectional approach to race and ethnicity in identity development situated within the context of racial oppression in the U.S. is needed to advance our understanding of student racial

identity development. Johnston-Guerrero imagined the interaction of racial and ethnic identity as being represented by a zipper, with each concept on either side. This way, “student[s], researcher[s], or educator[s] [have] control over how to make sense of the constructs and whether it is best to distinguish and focus on one aspect of development or to combine them” (p. 48). In the following section I discuss critical consciousness and its relationship with Asian American identity.

### **Critical Consciousness: The Catalyst for Racial Solidarity**

Educator and philosopher Paolo Freire (1974) claimed, “critical consciousness represents things and facts as they exist empirically, in their causal and circumstantial correlations” (p. 41). In other words, critical consciousness requires an interrogation of causality in considering what we know and assume to be true. In a comprehensive literature review of critical consciousness, Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) identified three core components of the phenomenon: awareness of sociopolitical circumstances (through reflection); encouraging critical questions; and fostering collective identity. They suggested that in addition to these key elements, critical consciousness also necessitates “sociopolitical action”, which can be defined as “the promotion of change in social and institutional policies or practices that maintain an inferior status for members of marginalized groups” (p. 850). Although sociopolitical action is a key component of this study, it remains under-included in existing scholarship on critical consciousness (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

Critical consciousness can be cultivated through the process of dialogue in education, which relies on mutual trust, love, faith, and hope between two people or two groups. Intergroup dialogue courses are an example of higher education efforts to raise critical consciousness among

college students (Gurin, Nadgda, & Zúñiga, 2013). Rooted in Freire's (1974) conceptualization of dialogue, they are a growing presence on college campuses, and aim to trigger an understanding of students' identities within power structures and lead to action for social change (Gurin et al., 2013). In agreement with the aims of intergroup dialogue programs, Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) stated that alliances (between groups with different identities) should be the goal of critical consciousness development.

Osajima (2007) also offered support for the idea that higher education can have a strong influence on the development of a critical consciousness. Through a qualitative study, he found that taking particular courses, or meeting a particularly influential individual, often produced an understanding of identity within social power structures. He noted that Asian American studies courses were the most common source of this knowledge. Supporting Freire's (1974) work, Osajima (2007) also found that dialogue was an important factor contributing to participants' development of a critical consciousness. Additionally, Osajima emphasized the affective dimension of the development of a critical consciousness, the importance of being able to translate knowledge into action, and the recognition that multiple factors contribute to one's critical consciousness, rather than a single incident or experience. Osajima explicitly connected the development of a critical consciousness to racial identity and activism, thereby laying the groundwork for more complex understandings of identity consciousness, as presented by Accapadi (2012).

### **Conclusion**

This study contributes to existing literature on Asian Americans by highlighting the ways in which they are actively engaging in alliances and partnerships with other people of color for

social justice. Although Asian American activism is not new, and Asian Americans have engaged across race in movements for racial justice in the past, limited research has explored these relationships within the current context of a new wave of white supremacy sweeping the nation and the emergence of grassroots activist movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement. Extant studies on Asian Americans have not explored in-depth contemporary relationships between Asian Americans and other people of color, instead focusing more on their positionality in relation to other people of color (O'Brien, 2008), or how they might be positioned within the U.S. racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Adding to these concepts, I expand on the experiences that inform Asian Americans' perspectives on and decisions to engage in racial justice movements. I posit that the bodies of literature examining Asian American racial identity development and critical consciousness suggest that a heightened awareness of one's racial identity and the development of a critical consciousness are foundational to the engagement of Asian Americans in racial justice movements.



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

This critical constructivist qualitative study was guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT) critical race methodology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This foundation assumes that the participant experiences occur within the context of structural racism, and that the multiple, intersecting identities of participants are affected by oppression in complicated and nuanced ways (Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012). I used a narrative method to construct the stories of the participants in an effort to more accurately respond to the research question, which required a chronological understanding of life events. This chapter outlines each component of the methodology, as well as the protocol, for completing this study.

#### **Rationale for Qualitative Approach**

CRT's emphasis on counternarratives, stories that challenge dominant or normative perceptions of a given racial group, lends itself well to a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is characterized by its focus on meaning and understanding, the use of the researcher as the primary instrument, an inductive analysis process, and rich description (Merriam, 2009). Focusing on meaning and understanding was a critical component of this study, which required participants to share their stories, interpreting their experiences through their unique lenses. Furthermore, an inductive approach to research allowed for themes and ideas to emerge from the interviews that perhaps were not considered before data collection. As opposed to a deductive approach, which would begin with a theory and collect data to test that theory, this study was

exploratory and sought diverse stories of individual experience, tied together through the foundational theoretical paradigm of racial solidarity. Finally, this study relied on rich description of experiences to understand the connections participants make between the factors influencing their racial identity consciousness and their propensity to act in racial solidarity.

### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory**

CRT, as a theoretical approach to research, necessitates that scholars center the voices of people of color and connect their identities and experiences to broader structures of systemic racism (Delgado Bernal, 2002). With its roots in critical legal studies (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Jones & Abes, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2012; Parker, 2003; Parker & Lynn, 2002), CRT has served as a framework for higher education research on the experiences of students of color on college campuses (Gay, 2010; Museus, Ravello, & Vega, 2012; Quaye, 2012; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). It is a particularly useful methodological lens given higher education's history of whiteness and systemic exclusion of people of color and other marginalized groups (Brunsma, Brown, & Placier, 2012; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Patel, 2015).

CRT is guided by five core tenants: the ordinariness of racism; interest convergence; social construction and differential racialization; intersectionality and anti-essentialism; and counterstorytelling (Jones & Abes, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso et al., 2009). The ordinariness of racism tenant assumes that racism is a historical and present truth, which operates on a systemic level to oppress people of color (Jones & Abes, 2013). Given the pervasiveness of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014), this tenant enables scholars to uncover the ways systemic oppression continues to operate despite

some claims that we live in a post-racial society. Interest convergence refers to the assumption that progress often does not happen unless White people can also see the benefit for themselves in the change (Bell, 1980; Jones & Abes, 2013; Kow, 2010). The third tenant, social construction and differential racialization, considers the need for scholars to recognize that racial identity is socially constructed and therefore is ascribed meaning; being White does not inherently have privilege, but it is ascribed privilege through socially constructed systems of power (Jones & Abes, 2013). Furthermore, differential racialization refers to the ability of socially constructed concepts, like race, to change over time and in reaction to shifts in society (Jones & Abes, 2013; Omi & Winant, 2015). Intersectionality and anti-essentialism require scholars to recognize the diversity within a given identity and acknowledge that any individual's experience is rooted in multiple intersecting identities that in any given context are also shaped by structures of dominance (Jones et al., 2012). Finally, counterstorytelling refers to the honoring of people of colors' stories and, I would argue, existences, as challenges to White, normative experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical Race methodology, guided by the tenants of CRT, requires the researcher to center race and racism throughout the research process, challenge dominant, normative ways of explaining the experiences of people of color, suggest a liberatory solution to the many, intersecting forms of oppression in society, highlight the raced, gendered, and classed experiences of participants through an assets-based (rather than deficit) lens, and draw from diverse fields of study to understand participants' experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Solórzano and Yosso outlined five elements that tie CRT and methodology together to form

critical race methodology: “the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination; the challenge to dominant ideology; the commitment to social justice; the centrality of experiential knowledge; and a transdisciplinary perspective” (p. 26). These principles are deeply rooted in my decision-making process throughout the protocol of this study.

An additional critical component to critical race methodology is the use of storytelling through counternarratives (Hylton, 2012; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Solórzano and Yosso defined a counter-story as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)” (p. 32). Given that academic research writ large has historically told the stories of experiences of those with systematically privileged identities, Solórzano and Yosso reiterated the critical importance of highlighting the experiences of people of color and people with other marginalized identities. They also cautioned that just because a person holds a racially marginalized identity, they may buy into and tell a majoritarian story. By interviewing only Asian Americans who are actively engaged in anti-racist work, I hoped to protect the data against this pitfall; however, it was important for me to stay aware of the use of deficit language when participants talked about other people of color, as well as other ways that they could buy into dominant narratives about themselves or other people of color.

CRT provides a theoretical lens for this study and influenced the development of the research questions, construction of the protocol, and analysis of findings. This study assumed that inequitable power structures shape participants’ identity development, took into account participants’ multiple intersecting identities, and presented findings in such a way that honors the narratives and histories of an oppressed group of people (in this case, Asian Americans).

### **Epistemological Approach**

This study borrowed from both constructivist and critical epistemological approaches, culminating in a critical constructivist lens (Kincheloe, 2008). Although these epistemological lenses differ, Merriam (2009) suggested that categories of epistemologies are not rigid and can be blended to support a given study depending on its purpose and guiding research questions. Elements of constructivism are apparent in the current study's relationship between the researcher and participants (the researcher is a facilitator, rather than a participant), and that the view of knowledge is co-created with the participants, rather than cultivated through discourse (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Because this study focused explicitly on racial identity development and racial solidarity, inherently social phenomena, a constructivist approach was appropriate because it suggests reality is created through social interactions while assuming that societal power inequities influence participants' experiences.

A subjective, critical approach was also used for this study because the research question and interview questions are guided by CRT. By imposing an existing theory onto the study to "promote critique and analysis for the purpose of increased understanding, improved praxis, and ultimately liberation" (Jones et al., 2014, no. 560), this study took a subjectivist lens. A critical epistemological approach also assumes that truth "can be flawed due to the oppressive nature of the world" (no. 626). This study therefore took on this lens through the assumption that structural inequalities, especially racial inequalities, exist in the U.S. and affect participants' worldviews and lenses.

## Methods

This study's methods are guided by narrative inquiry. Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin (2013) defined narrative inquiry as "the intimate study of an individual's experience over time and context(s)" (p. 577). Combined with the guiding framework of critical race methodology (Jones et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2014; Martin, 2013), this study's protocol was designed to understand participants' racialized experiences relative to their time and place. Narrative inquiry is particularly concerned with the relationships between participants' "stories, identities, and meaning making" (Jones et al., 2014, no. 1973). Therefore, the protocol for this study was intentionally designed to elicit counternarratives from the participants that were intimately tied to their identities, and highly dependent on a number of contextual factors including time and place (Caine et al., 2013). As such, the interview protocol walked participants through various stages of their life, asked them to describe experiences relevant to the research question, and draw connections between sociopolitical contexts, identity, and social action. Therefore, narrative inquiry served as both "the phenomenon under study and the methodology for its study" (p. 584). Through narrative inquiry, participants interpreted themselves; they articulated how they made meaning of their lives and experiences (Josselson, 2011a). Their counternarratives were subsequently analyzed through narrative analysis.

Josselson (2011b) laid out four steps for narrative analysis. The first step, requires the researchers to read through all interview transcripts and identify general themes that emerge among them. In this step, the researchers should connect specific elements of the transcripts to the broader emergent themes. The second step is to identify the different narratives – or in this case, counternarrative – being told, and relate them to one other. Third, the researcher should be

able to identify a whole, broad narrative that encapsulates the various patterns in the participants' stories. Fourth and finally, the researcher reflects on and identifies how the themes from the participant narratives speak to the existing literature on the phenomenon under study.

This study response to the research question: how do Asian American college graduates connect their identity development journeys to their involvement in racial justice work? This section outlines the ways in which the researcher identified and recruited participants, generated answers to the research question, and analyzed data.

### **Sample**

A total of ten participants were interviewed for this study, with each participant being interviewed once. Merriam (2009) suggested that there is no clear way to know ahead of time the minimum number of interviews needed to reach saturation, however, given the practical timeframe for this study and the in-depth nature of the interviews, I found that ten interviews sufficed. Other scholars recruiting participants for dissertation research studies with very specific, participant criteria recruited 14 (Simmons, 2016), 19 (Jourian, 2016), and 14 (Squire, 2015), to reach saturation.

The study participants all identified as Asian American, with some differentiation in ethnic identity. They also all held advanced degrees and were engaged in racial justice work. Such engagement could be formally organized, like the Black Lives Matter or Stand with Standing Rock movements, or lesser well-known, smaller scale actions. The criteria for this study were intentionally broad, allowing for a diverse array of experiences to be shared. Participants had the flexibility to define engagement in racial justice work themselves, however, were made aware that for the purpose of this study, they should be engaging in sociopolitical

action, no matter how large or small, or what the impact (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

Table 1 contains information about the study's participants.

Table 1. Table of Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Ethnic Identity	Sex	Field of Study/Work
Timmy	Filipino American	Male	Student Affairs
John	Chinese American/multiracial	Male	Student - Education
Rohan	Desi American	Male	Student - Education
Hope	Korean American	Female	Student - Education
Jessica	Ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese American	Female	Student - Education
Jenny	Cambodian American	Female	Student - Education
Wei-yi	Chinese American/multiracial	Male	Community Organizing
Chris	Vietnamese American	Male	Student Affairs
Emily	Korean American	Female	Student Affairs
Takuya	Japanese American	Male	Academic Affairs

*Note:* Participants listed by pseudonym, ethnic identity, sex, and field of study/work.

**Parameters.** Asian Americans are a diverse group of people, spanning a number of different ethnic identities with varying experiences and immigration histories within the U.S. (CARE, 2015; Espiritu, 1992; Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, & McDonough, 2014; Teranishi & Nguyen, 2011). Additionally, Asian Americans could be U.S.-born or foreign-born, and vary in their immigration status. Because the goal of qualitative research is not to produce generalizable results, leaving this already broad category open for interpretation by the participants invites a diversity of perspectives and experiences to the table. This study was made more impactful by having multiple ethnic and other identities represented among participants to



identify different points of entry to Asian American identity consciousness for different individuals. Additionally, given the current context of division between Asian American ethnic communities on various issues, having multiple ethnic identities represented can play an important role in the presentation of counternarratives, as consistent with CRT.

Interviewing alumni of four-year institutions is another important criterion for participant recruitment. Because extant research demonstrates that events unique to attending college can impact the development of one's critical consciousness (Osajima, 2007), there may be particular value in being able to reflect on one's experience *after* having time to understand its impact (Kelly, Segoshi, Adams, & Raines, 2017). Limiting the participant pool to individuals who have completed a two- or four-year degree within the last 15 years ensured that individuals are not so far removed from their college-going experience that they would not be able to provide ample details and stories from that time frame.

Study participants were currently engaged in some form of racial solidarity with other people of color. Ways in which individuals demonstrated racial justice work was through formal and informal affiliation with a racial justice organization that work towards racial justice not specific to Asian Americans, participating in marches, protests, or other forms of activism in solidarity with other people of color, or holding a professional role that involves racial justice work. This criterion was met in a number of ways but required that the participant had actively sought out the opportunity to engage in racial justice work with other people of color and is *currently* engaged in that action.

**Recruitment.** The researcher recruited participants through intensity sampling. Intensity sampling (Patton, 2015) enabled the researcher to intentionally recruit individuals who have

participated in a very specific experience (in this case, engagement in racial justice work). Given the specificity of the study's participation parameters, I recruited participants through individuals with whom I have personal and professional relationships. This was conducted in an effort to avoid solely interviewing participants that I already know, with the hope of capturing the richest data possible. Once one of my contacts shared my study information with a potential participant, the participant reached out to me via email expressing interest. I then emailed them a formal invitation to participate (see Appendix A). The criteria for participation outlined in the previous section guided recruitment for this study. No public recruitment messages were used for participant recruitment in this study. participate in this study.

### **Data Generation**

In-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted for this study. These interviews allowed for participants' diverse experiences to emerge. Semi-structured interviews consist of broad, open, pre-established questions, and pre-established probes to generate more information from participants (Jones et al., 2014). They also allowed some flexibility for the researcher in answering follow-up questions for clarification, slightly altering phrasing and order of questions, and encouraging participants to clarify answers (Jones et al., 2014).

Merriam (2009) stated that "the purpose of interviewing ... is to allow us into the other person's perspective" (p. 88). The majority of the questions asked in this study, then, were largely experience and behavior questions, which "get at the things a person has done or did" (p. 96). Consistent with the narrative method, the questions also elicited reflections on past experiences. The questions for the semi-structured interviews can be found in Appendix B. Interviews with participants lasted approximately one hour to one hour and a half and were

audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist prior to analysis. They were conducted online via Google Hangouts or Skype.

### **Protocol**

Once an individual agreed to participate in this study and it was determined by the researcher that they meet the necessary criteria, they signed a consent form (see Appendix C). Participants were considered eligible after email correspondence confirmed that they identified as Asian American, were engaged in racial justice work, and had graduated from a two or four year college or university. The consent form reminded them of the purpose of the study, protected their identity by ensuring their name and participation in the study were confidential, and gave them an opportunity to ask questions. The consent form also reminded the participant that the interview was to be audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service. An oral consent was also audio recorded, while a physical copy of the consent form was emailed to the participants.

Audio recording began before the oral consent (remote interviews). Following the interview, participants were thanked for their participation and given the opportunity to ask questions of the researcher. After each interview was completed, it was sent to Rev.com, a reputable transcription service. The researcher then engaged in creating a memo for each transcript and in a member-checking process (described later), before moving on to data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Coding is a way for the researcher to organize and interpret data and requires the researcher to continually analyze the data by identifying emergent themes and asking questions about how the data respond to the research question (Schwandt, 2007). The researcher first

analyzed the data through an axial coding process, whereby codes are created through relating different concepts to each other in the transcripts (Jones et al., 2014). Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis software, was utilized to ease the coding and analysis process.

Merriam (2009) set guidelines for the development of codes, noting that they should be responsive to the research question, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent. Furthermore, incorporating narrative analysis requires the researcher to continually revisit parts of participant stories and relate them to broader themes identified across transcripts (Josselson, 2011b). To ensure that codes were responsive to the research question, the researcher constantly referred back to the research question and asked if each code, though it might be interesting, was relevant to the current study. All data relevant to the research question was included in a code, ensuring that the categories were exhaustive (Merriam, 2009). In developing the codes, the researcher ensured that they were mutually exclusive by noting when some data seemed to fit into two or more codes; in this case, a revision of the categories was necessary. To create sensitizing codes, the researcher ensured that each code's name accurately described the phenomenon that it captured. Finally, conceptual congruence between codes was ensured by the researcher's attention to the "level of abstraction" of each code, by checking periodically that the codes were in line with one another at each level of analysis (i.e., parent code, child code, etc.) (p. 186).

Consistent with the narrative method, the researcher then compiled narratives using the participants' own language from the interviews to exemplify their journeys through identity development and critical consciousness. The researcher paid careful attention to not manipulate any of the words used by the participants to create alternative meanings. The constructed

narratives represent the participants' life stories and experiences and were edited only as to not reveal individuals' identities.

### **Establishing Trustworthiness**

Strong qualitative studies rely on internal validity, also referred to as credibility (Merriam, 2009). This study utilized the methods of member-checking and researcher reflexivity to ensure credibility. Trustworthiness is an important component of qualitative research that is intended to minimize the impact of researcher bias through continual reflection. Therefore, I was cognizant of my own identities and experiences, and how they may have influenced this study, from its development through analysis and discussion.

**Member-checking.** Once all interviews were completed and transcribed, and the researcher felt that a point of saturation had been achieved, the researcher created a memo for each interview that summarized the researcher's interpretation of the interview. Memoing is an analytic process in which the researcher summarizes the data and notes particularly relevant parts of each interview (Schwandt, 2007). After creating each memo, both the interview transcript and memo were sent to the participant for an optional member-checking process, wherein the participant had the opportunity to make comments, add to, or validate the researcher's perceptions (Merriam, 2009). Member-checking gave participants the opportunity to verify whether they feel the transcript accurately captured the interview. Of the ten participants, eight of them responded to the member-checking process with positive feedback; the other two did not respond.

**Researcher reflexivity.** Researcher reflexivity is another way to ensure validity in qualitative studies (Merriam, 2009; Schwandt, 2007). Through a critical analysis of their own

biases and experiences, researchers can analyze how their own worldview may affect their study (Merriam, 2009). In this section, I explore how I personally arrived at this study and how that might have affected my approach to the study and analysis of findings.

Throughout the interview and analysis processes, I continually kept track of my personal reactions to the data. My responses were generally positive and in agreement with the participants' perspectives, but it was important to remind myself repeatedly that the interview was intended to elicit data from the participant, and that my participation in the conversation should be minimal. Because the interviews were all conducted via online video chat, I was able to actually see my face and reactions to the participants in real time, so I was conscious of how my reactions may be perceived as agreement or disagreement with what they were saying. I continued to reflect on my reactions to the data throughout the analysis process as a read and re-read transcripts and constructed my presentation of findings. Even though I have very personal connections to this research, my own story and reactions were not to be included as data themselves. The epilogue will explore some of my own reflections at the end of this paper.

This study consists of three main components: racial identity consciousness, critical consciousness, and racial solidarity. It was undoubtedly constructed this way in part due to my own experiences with racial identity development, my own emergent critical consciousness, and my confrontation with anti-blackness within Asian American communities. For me, these three phenomena were inextricably connected, and I therefore see my own experiences reflected in the construction of the study and in the assumptions that these ideas are in some way connected to each other. Although the connections between these concepts are bolstered by current research, it was my own hunches based on my own experiences that led me to this study.

I identify as multiracial and Asian American. My mother is White and my father is Japanese, and I was born in Tokyo and lived there for seven years. I have known I was multiracial ever since I realized my mother and father were not of the same race, which I learned through their different accents, the fact that there was a language barrier between my Japanese grandparents and myself, and through looking in the mirror and realizing that I did not look like either of my parents. My racial identity development started young; I have distinct memories of asking my mother “what am I?” as a small child, and chatting with my first-grade friends, trying to make sense of racial identity (“You’re not Black, you’re Brown,” “I’m not yellow, my dad isn’t yellow,” “Why is your skin dark if you’re Japanese?”).

At age seven my family moved to a homogenous, White suburban town in Massachusetts, where I lived until college. Even at a young age, I knew that I hated it there, though I doubt I could have articulated why. Moving from the racially diverse school environment I had experienced at my American school in Tokyo, to a completely White environment in which I was being mistaken for Chinese, Korean, and every other Asian ethnic identity, undoubtedly had an impact on my desire to be in a more diverse setting. My racial identity as Asian American had never been more salient to me.

When I finally made it to college and had the opportunity to study what interested me, I jumped at the chance to take courses in sociology that focused on racial diversity and structural inequality. Although I did not have many opportunities to interact across difference growing up, I believe that the seven formative years I spent in Tokyo had already shown me that the world is big, peoples’ experiences are diverse, and there was more to life than the structured, suburban reality of my home town. Two critical events stand out to me that contributed towards the

development of my own critical consciousness: taking courses in social inequality and diversity; and living in a multicultural living-learning community. For the first time since my early childhood I was surrounded by a diverse community of people of color willing to engage in tough conversations about identity. As I continually explored and reflected on my identities, I was taking courses alongside classmates from this community about structural racism and inequality. This unique coupling of events made me more self-aware of who I am and, more importantly, how I participated in and perpetuated various systems of oppression.

Because my college experience was very diverse and I kept a very open-minded, close-knit group of friends, I do not think the reality of anti-blackness within communities of color was apparent to me. Even though I continued to develop my own identity and awareness, I was less aware of how anti-blackness operated on mezzo and macro levels of society, especially among other people of color. In 2012, I began working in multicultural affairs at a large, public university, and was faced with numerous challenges in adapting to the culture of the institution, which happened to also be in the deep South.

The entire story of how tensions rose between students of color at this university is perhaps too long and detailed to recount here. Unfortunately, because of the ways the university distributed funding, many of our identity-based student organizations were competing for money from the same small pool. On top of that, the staff in the office proposed the idea of a multicultural graduation ceremony instead of the Black student graduation ceremony, which was funded and run through our office. Our perspective was that a multicultural ceremony would be more inclusive for our other students of color, who often felt invisible and unrecognized as “diversity” by the university. These two factors – competition for funding and the introduction



of a new graduation ceremony – created tension between students of color, particularly student leaders. As a staff member, I saw firsthand how the inequitable structures of the university and repeated failures to keep up with the changing demographics of the region (and therefore the university) resulted in between-group fighting among students of color. I understood that the White legacy of the university and its resultant hegemonic power structures were not conducive to the success of students of color.

Anti-blackness within Asian American communities was not something I encountered directly or on a large scale until I started my doctoral journey and became aware of the amicus briefs authored by Asian American organizations against affirmative action in the *Fisher v. University of Texas* Supreme Court Case. Although anti-affirmative action efforts had been made by Asian Americans in the past, because these efforts were largely centered on the west coast and among Chinese Americans, they were not on my radar. As I delved more into these issues through my doctoral research assistantship, it became apparent that anti-blackness was rampant in Asian American communities, and was perpetuated within Asian American communities as well, through colorism.

The current study was therefore in part shaped by my own personal and professional experiences. Although objectivity is arguably impossible to achieve in social science research (Schwandt, 2007), continual reflection throughout the construction, implementation, and analysis of this study was integral in ensuring that my personal biases had minimal impact on the final product. Furthermore, as previously noted, other methods of ensuring the internal validity of the study minimized researcher bias.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

The presented findings respond to the guiding question: how do Asian American college graduates connect their identity development journeys to their involvement in racial justice work? The answers to this question were elicited through semi-structured interviews that sought to prompt stories about racial identity development, poignant moments in their lives that affected their development of a critical consciousness, and their subsequent engagement in racial justice work. I begin my presentation of findings with three participant narratives, each constructed using their own words from our respective interviews. Each narrative encompasses some of the overarching finding themes: critical incidents in identity development, including curricular and co-curricular experiences, critical incidents in developing a critical consciousness, including unlearning anti-blackness, and connecting identity development to racial justice work. Consistent with the narrative method and guiding framework of Critical Race Theory, these narratives serve as counterstories as they highlight the voices of Asian Americans, a minoritized population within the U.S. Following the presentation of narratives, I then present stories, quotes, and anecdotes from other participants that align with the aforementioned themes, which round out the rest of the chapter.

#### **Featured Narratives**

The following three narratives were constructed using participants' own words from their interviews. The narratives are not composite; each one consists only of stories from one

participant. They have been edited to remove identifying information and for clarity (for example, removing “like,” and “um”). These narratives demonstrate some of the core themes from the findings, which are explored in more depth following their presentation.

### **Narrative One: Identity Rejection, Ethnic Attachment, and Finding One’s Voice**

The first narrative comes from Takuya, a Japanese American man who grew up in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city. His story was guided heavily by ethnic attachment; throughout his childhood and through his college years, Takuya always felt more connected to his Japanese ethnic identity than an Asian American identity; however, that changed once he started his master’s program in student affairs. Takuya currently works as a full time academic advisor with a very diverse student body and is involved in mentorship programs and social justice programming at his job. He shared:

There's a Japanese saying, it's something along the lines of, “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” I was taught very young just listen to the authorities, don't stick out. Just blend in. Don't cause any trouble. Both my parents are from Japan. They moved here, met here, got married, started a family. I grew up in the suburbs, it was a mostly White town. And for school it was mostly ... there were a handful of Asian students. I was the only Japanese student. There were four Korean students in my grade and that's pretty much it. Then everyone else was White. So yeah, not a very diverse area, but every Saturday I went to Japanese language school. So that was nice, because there were a lot of other Japanese students there, also other Asian ethnicities learning Japanese. It was very drastically different being in the White environment versus the more Asian environment. I actually hated being different in grade school, junior high, high school, even college. But when I was in Japanese school from first grade up until eighth grade, in that environment I was very much a troublemaker and I was really loud. I would make jokes. Kids would beat me up because I was too rambunctious at times. At Japanese school I was totally able to be myself. I don't think I was aware of that at the time but looking back I was very comfortable being Japanese and being comfortable in that identity versus grammar school and the other schools where I just wanted to be White. I didn't want to be different. Kids would make fun of my name, stuff like that. I think I had that lunchbox moment that a lot of Asian Americans have where my mom would pack me onigiri rice balls and kids would be like, "What are you eating?" And I'm like, "Oh, I'm never bringing this again." I just want Lunchables and I just want salami sandwiches. I just wanted to be "normal." I just wanted to eat up all their culture, all the

TV shows that people are watching, buy the food they're eating. The smells, I didn't want to smell like my parents' house. I wanted to smell like my friends' house that smelled like apple cinnamon or like stuff like that. My clothes would smell different than theirs. So I was very ashamed of that and felt like I didn't want that part of me to be present in front of my White friends.

I actually didn't embrace my Asian identity until my graduate program. By the end of those two years in graduate school, I didn't realize that I had hated my Asian identity until that point. So it wasn't until age ... what am I now? Am I 33? Until like age 32 where I started to really, really begin embracing myself and my Japanese and Asian American identities. The first class in the first semester was student development theory and we started learning about racial identity models, all these other identity models. We got to the Asian one and like oh wow, I never really thought about myself as Asian until that point. This is an identity that ... I think I felt like I didn't want to think about it if that makes sense. I didn't want to really reflect back on my experiences in grade school or even in college. I didn't really want to think about that at all, but I think being in that class forced me to ... I think that was the first step in me kind of going on this journey of fully embracing my identity. I also worked at the Inclusive Excellence Center and their mission was to run programs and hopefully change policies to make the campus more inclusive for a lot of different populations on campus. When I first started that internship, my supervisor said, "Oh, you're a person of color." No one had ever said that to me. And that really struck me as wow, I am a person of color? I thought I was White this whole time. I knew I wasn't White, but because I wanted to be so much of that and that was so ingrained in my upbringing, that I didn't even consider myself as a person of color consciously until I guess that moment.

In graduate school I think I interacted more with Black people than I had in the past. So while learning my own identity development and learning about other people's identity development models and how they are oppressed in this society, it definitely uncovered that I definitely had prejudices about Black people that I didn't even think about. I learned more about anti-blackness in Asian communities, how even my parents ... I know how my mom would talk about Black people. I didn't even think about it until graduate school and I'm like oh wow, that's really racist. I mean I love my mom, but I know there's theories of why Asians can adopt anti-blackness, because they're trying to assimilate into this culture as well, where White is equated to success. I just didn't realize how much of that was ingrained in me and how much I was taught, and I started dismantling that while in grad school, while also learning my own identity development.

I know there was ... I think there was one moment where I was waiting for the bus and a Black gentleman was walking down and I just had that instinct to be cautious and I definitely was aware of that. I was like oh my God, why ... this has been so normal for me my entire life and now I'm finally noticing that I have this reaction of like "Oh, I need to be cautious of this person," versus if a White person came up I wouldn't blink an eye. It wouldn't matter. So definitely dismantling anti-blackness started happening at the

same time while learning about my identity development. So that's one example, one big example.

I think I knew that I needed to be challenged more. It probably ties back to me being younger and not having any ... like in college I didn't have any resource like the Inclusive Excellence Center. I think if I had some resource like that it would have maybe changed my whole experience. I knew I would be challenged. I knew my own biases would be challenged with different student populations and I knew it would be really difficult, but knew I had to do that. And now looking back I'm glad I did that, too.

I think after graduate school, I was still learning to find my voice and trying to ... because I think I'm still constantly in battle of, like oh, I just want to go back to being quiet. And I think because of what's happening in this country now it forces me more to speak up because this is such a historic time in our country and if you are quiet now, then you're basically doing nothing. You're not helping anything. So I have friends and family who call me self-righteous, or tell me I talk about race too much. And that does kind of hurt me because I know them personally and I think my old self would be like, "Oh no, friendship is more important. Family's more important." But with my new identity, and learning about oppression in this country, and because I am a proud Asian American and I know the history of how we were oppressed, I feel like we can't go back to ... I just think about, yeah, I can't go back to just being quiet. I have to speak up. There's no choice in it.

I think knowing why I acted the way I did when I was younger, and rejecting my Asian American identity, I just find that to be super sad. I find it to be really ... because I know I'm not the only one that went through this, other people may still be going through rejection of their own Asian identity or other identities. So I think working in higher education, I want to be a resource for these students and just know that I can have these conversations with these students if need be. On a personal level that's a big reason why I got into racial justice and wanting to talk about it more. That sucks to hate yourself and to not be able to embrace who you are as a person. I think there's so many other ... whether it be your sexual orientation or your race or your religion... There's so many different ways that people are oppressed. I also want to do something in a professional capacity and in other ways. I'm sure I'll find other ways to get involved. But on a personal level, it's mostly because I now know why I acted the way I did, I don't want that to happen to other people.

Takuya's narrative demonstrates how he came into a critical consciousness through exploration of his identity development in graduate school. He was challenged to unlearn the anti-blackness and white supremacy that had been ingrained in him from his childhood. Takuya grew up with strong but siloed ethnic attachment that he only experienced while at Japanese school. It was not

until he entered his second graduate program that he began to understand race on a systemic level and began to critically examine the power and privileges of his identities. Takuya also expressed the ongoing tension he feels between socio-cultural expectations of what it means to be Japanese American with his commitment to racial justice and refusal to speak out on issues of social justice. In his identity development journey, Takura experienced several critical incidents that led him to develop his critical consciousness, which in turn strengthened his commitment to racial justice.

### **Narrative Two: The Impact of Academics on Activism**

The second featured narrative comes from Jenny, a daughter of Cambodian refugees whose story centered her educational journey and its impact on her racial and activist identity development. Numerous curricular and co-curricular experiences throughout high school and college careers challenged Jenny to think more critically about her own identity.

My mom was a feminist even before I knew the word feminism, because she demanded space, and she reclaimed her time, she survived through spaces that were predominantly White, and male, and she was doing it just because she had no other option. When she filled out her paperwork to come to the United States I think that she put down her age as two years younger, so that she could start high school in the United States, because I think if she was two years older they wouldn't have allowed her to start high school. I was actually born when my mom was finishing up the last year of her bachelors. She would just tell me small experiences that she had in high school, and in college, where she had to work as a janitor in her high school in order to support her family, and people would make fun of her, or they'd say things like, "Oh, I've never seen a female janitor before, you should be at home doing whatever female things..." Because I had those conversations with her, when I was real young I was really aware of my racial identity, although, I didn't yet claim Asian American as a racial identity, I knew I was different.

Reflecting back, I think it's always interesting reflecting back on your childhood, because as a daughter of refugees I had no conception of what that meant. I felt like I had everything I needed. I don't remember going hungry. I don't remember getting any services from the community, or anything like that, but as I reflect back I realize that my family didn't really have a lot, and yet they made it seem like we had everything we needed. I was really lucky, I think, to have grown up in a community that was really,

really generous, so I primarily grew up around Latinx folks, and Black folks, in a very low-income area of the city. I went to elementary school and middle school with people of color, and then all of a sudden, my family gained access to some wealth, so we became lower-middle class when I was in middle school, and I was moved to the suburbs with a completely different experience.

I was the only person of color, and something always felt like it was missing. I didn't realize it at the time, but when I reached high school I really wanted to go back to school in the city, instead of the suburbs. I couldn't explain it then, but now I realize that I wanted go back to the city because I missed being around people who could at least understand the experience I had. I was lucky to go to a public magnet school, where I think the really cool thing was that you took extra social science classes. Once I moved back to a more diverse community in high school, most of the people I surrounded myself with, even teachers, were people of color, non-API people of color, and I just felt that they validated my existence more than many other Asian Americans. I think that they encouraged me to be critical, whereas I think when I interact with Asian Americans, it was more of a "Let's figure out what college we get to go to," rather than "Let's figure out how to survive through high school" conversation.

I got to take intro to ethnic studies in high school. I got to have conversations with teachers who were teachers of color, and they allowed us to do independent projects. I got to do a project on my family, which was probably the most life changing experience I've ever had, it has kind of been my trajectory since then. It woke me up into understanding how much is missing, or not necessarily missing, but purposely excluded from this narrative of the United States. My senior year was kind of my radical awakening, because I had to do an assignment on my family. It was a 20-page research paper on the genocide that happened in Cambodia, and before that, like my family never talked about how they came, I just knew they were refugees, I didn't know why they were refugees. When I did this research paper about everything that my family had to go through, and the U.S. involvement, I was just so angry. I was really frustrated at being a U.S. citizen, and being born here, but then also having the privilege of being here, and I didn't know how to navigate that, so as soon as I got to college, I was lucky in that there was an Asian American organization that had a political mission.

I think that I caused a lot of trouble at my undergraduate institution. I think the fact that I was at a small private institution, a predominantly White institution, it made it inevitable that I would become an activist, because there was just so much privilege. I met other Southeast Asian Americans who were political, and because of their leadership I started not only becoming more involved in the Asian American organization, but other student of color organizations, which then eventually led me to be involved in more university sanctioned organizations, like student government, or the programming board. I learned early on that I needed to understand how the system worked, and that I needed to be in these spaces in order to bring back resources to the Asian Student Alliance, or these other student of color organizations. The most important thing I learned from it was that I had

a voice that I could use, and that it was an important voice, and it also taught me the power of collective action. When there were other folks who were also invested in social justice, racial justice, and this overall equity, and inclusion, so much could be done. Even though we were doing really difficult and challenging work, I didn't feel isolated. Now that I was confronting all these issues of injustice, I had people to struggle with me.

I think I got lucky in that no one ever wanted to run for student government at our campus, so I always had a seat there to understand what was going on. I also remember my first year when I decided to run for a senator position, I was living on campus in a living and learning community, I came to my room one day, and the door was open, and someone had squeezed lotion all over my bed, and had spilled a bunch of candy on the floor. The two other students of color in my hallway received notes under their doors, and I knew that it had to be someone from that hall, or that community, because they knew, they had to have known when we keep our doors open.

I just remember being so frustrated and working with other student organizations to organize impromptu meetups at student government meetings, and I was on student government, so other folks would think there was nothing on the agenda, and then ten minutes later there would be 100 students of color in the room. I think when you get into college you think you made it, and you're going to be okay, because the journey up to that has just been getting here, but I don't think, at least I didn't have any idea about the racism, and the sexism, and the ableism, and et cetera that would happen once I was there.

I feel like I had a really unusual way of coming into my Asian American identity, because I found it by going to the Midwest. When I talk to a lot of my friends who have come into their Asian American identity they talk about being inspired by actions in California, or actions on the east coast. My second year of undergrad, I got to go to a Vietnamese American student conference that was being held in my city. From that organization, I met people who were involved in the Midwest Asian American Student Union, so I went to my first MAASU, met student activists from the Midwest, became really good friends with them, and started having conversations with them about what it meant to be Asian American. I think that if it weren't for MAASU I would have not come into my Asian American identity for a much longer time. I think that was the first time where I got to have conversations with folks who came into their identity in predominantly White spaces. Conversations about, like, "What does being a person of color mean when you're the only person of color? How do you advocate for yourself as an Asian American when people don't even understand Asian American as a person of color identity?" I think, again, I have to really credit MAASU for making me embrace my Asian American identity as a political identity, not just a racial identity.

Jenny's story emphasized the impact of high school and college academics and co-curricular engagement on her activist identity development. She had exposure to many different racialized



experiences as a child and was inspired by her own family's history to engage in activism in college. But even with these diverse experiences, Jenny did not come to adopt an Asian American racial identity until she was in college. Jenny is now a doctoral student in an education program, who would like to pursue research and activism through scholarship on race and racism in higher education.

### **Narrative Three: Journey to Action**

The third and final narrative is from Hope, a Korean American adoptee whose story demonstrated a strong critical analysis of systemic racism in the U.S. Her story connected her identity development very succinctly to her current and continued understanding of power and oppression. Hope's narrative begins with her reflection on the day after Donald Trump was elected president:

There was just such a cloudy weight for everybody. Some people were demoralized. Some people were shocked and surprised. Other people were not at all shocked but just totally furious. I remember walking across the street to get food. It was the first time in a long time that I had felt physical fear, because I was like, "Shit. Someone's going to think that they can run me over while I cross the street because of who our president is now." Then, realizing, "Wow, the privilege I have, even as a body of color, that this moment is the first time I'm feeling fear rather than anything in the past, how ever many months, years, around Black Lives Matter. So, kind of wrestling with, like, "I have privilege. Yes, I'm a person of color, and I have light-skin privilege." And because of the perverse ways in which the model minority myth has been manipulated in the dominant culture of society I have, grossly, but I have benefited from perceptions of Asian Americans as being different from other communities of color.

I think for me there's lots of, not caveats, but kind of prerequisites before getting into racial equity to understand what is race as a construct, how has it been socially constructed, how is race one of many identities that have been used to oppress some and privilege and unfairly advantage others, and how all of those different systems are interconnected. Racial equity, I think for me, it's different than equality. It's not about looking at what is the exact same for everybody. To me, it's not just looking at what's directly in front of us that has historical context and legacy. Like, how are we at the current racial predicament that we are in, not as a photograph of right now, but as a full feature-length film of the history of race in America.

I grew up in a predominately White community with White parents. It was never a surprise or a secret that I was adopted, but we didn't actually talk very much about race. My parents kind of parented with a colorblind ideology. To minimize any feeling of dissonance or difference for transracially adopted children, they were encouraged to just kind of focus on love and that we're all a family. So, we didn't talk openly about race, although I encountered racist experiences and then had to kind of try to figure out how to process that. Because I didn't have racially-conscious parents and because I wasn't raised in a community of color, I didn't really develop the language to be able to talk about, acknowledge, or actively resist some of those systemic elements of white supremacy until I did some of my own racial discovery in college and graduate school.

When I moved to university, I lived on campus because I wanted that experience, and that was the first time that I was physically not in the same proximity as my White, adoptive mother. All of a sudden, I was on a college campus and I looked like any other Asian college student. Right? So, people were responding to me differently than they ever had earlier in my life. That's when I realized, "Whoa, it doesn't matter that I was raised by White people. People see me as Asian, and that means that this is something I have to wrestle with, whether or not I identify with it." I remember having a conversation with a mentor who's Asian American. I was talking about the difference between internal and external definitions of identity. She's like, "That's cute. That's cute that you think that that is different. But the reality is that you are being read as racially Asian. So, whether or not you personally identify, it doesn't matter. You're going to have to figure out how to deal with that." And I was like, "That's mean. Why don't you let me self-identify how I want?" But, I mean, I think she was just trying to have a very critical, honest conversation with me. I mean, that was over a decade ago and I still remember it very vividly. I was wrestling with the dissonance of being raced as Asian; something that I hadn't had in quite that same intensity before being kind of sheltered or attached or associated with my White adoptive mother. So rather than embracing that, there was very much resistance to it.

I ended up rushing and going Greek, and there was the invitation to join the one multicultural sorority on campus. And I was like, "No way. Why would I do that?" So, I joined a historically, traditionally White chapter. I was racially conscious enough that I remember going through recruitment as a first-year student and counting the number of people who I perceived to be women of color, and I did end up in the chapter that had the most people that I read as people of color. Now, that wasn't necessarily the deciding factor, but it was certainly a contributing factor. But by the time I was a senior, I was the last woman of color in my chapter. I remember that final senior year recruitment, being told by one of the advisors that I had to replace myself. They didn't mean as a student leader. They meant as a person of color, because they needed a token; and being really upset by that and finding it really problematic.

I think in undergrad I was developing, broadly, a racial consciousness, and I think I was developing, in general, like when we think of critical in the context of critical thinking

skills, like, I was questioning things. When I finished undergrad, I went right away to a master's program. Actually, my application to my master's program was titled "I'm a Twinkie," and it was a 500-word personal statement about how you might see me as Asian, but don't get it twisted, I'm actually White, and there's nothing wrong with that. I can only imagine what the faculty were thinking. So, I went from that to then being immersed with development theory classes and being introduced to some of the foundational stuff from my field, so in a span of a semester going from, "I'm actually White. Don't be mistaken by the package," to, "Women of color empowerment." And my cohort mates were like, "What the hell? What are you? What's happening?"

We did a lot of relationship building and a lot of story sharing. I think reading, and honestly, like, finally having access through my classes to things like the concept of hegemony, or just systemic, anything. I read it, and it made sense. I read it, and all of a sudden had language to describe things that I had wondered, or worried, or felt, but that had been minimized by my contacts and surroundings, out of idealism, out of colorblindness, out of well-intentions. So much of my curriculum at that program was also self-reflective. Like, you would read about a theory, or read about something in class, and then you would write kind of a personal essay about how you see this having played out in your life. So, I had the opportunity to do a lot of reflection. So, writing about, like, "Oh, that was actually called internalized racism. Oh, that's a microaggression. Oh, this is the model minority stereotype." And then just kind of having all of these words to describe what I had experienced, but just hadn't known how to articulate.

I also had Asian American mentors and teachers for the first time. I had my very first Asian American professor in my master's program. And even though she taught research methods and assessment, seeing her in the classroom made a huge difference. Then, I also had my first Asian American mentor, who was the director of the multicultural affairs office at the institution. He would ask questions about how my racial identity was impacting my experience, and I was like, "I don't know. It's probably not." He's like, "Really? How do you talk about that? Are you sure?" And he really just kind of pushed me in lots of ways that I'm so grateful for.

As I became more informed about the ways in which Asian Americans in particular have been situated in racial politics, and viewed so intentionally through racial triangulation as a wedge between communities of color and White-identified folks, I think it's kind of fueled my desire to want to actively resist the ways in which my community has been used to oppress others by working in solidarity with those who have been oppressed. But also, the reality I think of Asians in America is that our history has been erased in so many ways, has been neglected in so many ways in a very strategic and political way to serve a very specific point. I think that hurts not only us, because we're not aware of our own oppressions, so then we're not agitated, we're not activated, then I think it also hurts other communities, because other communities of color write the narrative of what's happened to native and indigenous communities in the U.S. That's pretty well

understood. The narrative of slavery, that's pretty well understood. The rhetoric around anti-immigration and building the wall, that's pretty widely, popularly understood.

I think more recently as I'm starting to work on something in my own research, I've also been thinking about not just racial hierarchy as in what is the impact of what supremacy on different communities of color, but also the dynamics of modern racism and the ways in which race, as it's currently and socially constructed, is so static and so rigid, that I think it doesn't account for, it's limiting to, and I would argue it's oppressive to future generations. I really believe in the worldview that there are no hierarchies of oppression. In remaining silent or passive in light of whether it's homophobia, transphobia, anti-indigenous rhetoric, that is then also being complicit in a future oppression against my community. Also, I think I expect and hope that other people will care about my community without having to be a part of it. So how can I hope or expect that without doing the same?

At the time of her interview, Hope was a full time doctoral student in an education program. Her narrative demonstrates the impact that the election of Donald Trump had on her, and how she was forced to negotiate her privilege as an Asian American person of color. She eloquently tied her early experiences as a Korean American adoptee to her racialized experiences in college and beyond, and explained how they tied to her current conception of racism in the U.S. Hope had a very critical analysis of structural racism and emphasized the need for Asian American voices for social justice.

### **Critical Incidents – Identity Development**

In order to understand the connections that participants made between their identity development journeys and their subsequent involvement in racial justice work, special attention was paid to the critical incidents that participants described as having a large impact on their understandings of power, privilege, and oppression. In many cases, these incidents occurred in academic environments in high school or college, but co-curricular activities, such as involvement in student organizations or leadership retreats, often had a large impact on participants, as well. Not all participants experienced their critical incidents while in college,

though. For them, their graduate programs and professional careers led them to the development of a critical consciousness and inspired them to engage in racial justice work. This section of findings is broken down into how curricular, co-curricular, and some non-academic experiences influenced the identity development of participants.

### **Curricular Experiences in High School, College, and Graduate School**

Critical incidents in high school were often centered around particularly positive or negative classroom experiences. For example, Jenny's narrative, above, described the family history project she engaged in in high school that piqued her curiosity in her family's history and her identity. Jessica told a story about an incident in her U.S. History class that sparked thinking about structural inequality, although she did not have the words to articulate what she was thinking at the time:

I do remember in our U.S. History class, we talked about Affirmative Action ... I really felt triggered in that class. Like I remember feeling like my face was really hot. I remember feeling like I really wanted to say some stuff because some folks were just saying some really problematic things and at that point I still didn't really know what Affirmative Action was.

I remembered feeling like the one Black student who was in the room felt like she had to just defend it, defend it, defend it. So, I think some of my discomfort had to do with it felt like everybody was angry at her. I felt like a lot of animosity was directed towards her and she was just trying to share her life experience. She was taking public transit from the opposite side of the city. Like that is not an easy commute. That's not a cheap commute. I just remember thinking, "Something is just not right about how all this is set up," but didn't have the language to express what I was trying to share or what I was feeling in terms of like, people shouldn't have to go that far away from home to go to school.

I don't know exactly if I knew why I felt that way, but I just remembered feeling that there was just this immense sense of like, "That's not fair. That doesn't make any sense. This person's my classmate," and I really wanted to connect with her afterwards, but I also felt like I didn't know how to because I didn't know what her experience was like.

Jessica's classroom experience served as a critical incident in her own identity development because as one of the only other people of color in her class, she felt the need to connect with her Black classmate around the issue of affirmative action. However, she also recognized the difference between being Black and being Asian American and was confronted with how to be in solidarity with her classmate while also recognizing that her identity and experiences were different.

In college, academic courses also often served as critical incidents in participants' racial identity development journeys. Timmy recalled how his first Asian American Studies course influenced his racial identity development:

So I think for the most part, I was always very strong within my ethnic identity as a Filipino American, I didn't really come into this identity of Asian American I would say, until probably my second year in college, where I was fortunate enough to take a course called Filipino American Experience. So, I think once I took that course and understood our place as Filipino Americans within the larger narrative of Asian America, that's where I really started to claim that identity as Asian American.

Courses in Asian American studies, sociology, and intergroup dialogue served as conduits for the development of an Asian American identity as well as a critical consciousness. While Timmy's experience in his Filipino American Experience course solidified his identity as Asian American, Emily's negative experience in her sociology course strengthened her Asian American identity as well as compelled her to engage more in conversations about racial identity in general. She told a story about the first sociology class she took:

I found myself in a race and ethnicity class that was ... taught by an adjunct White fellow who asked me to stand up with the other Asian American person in the classroom and tell [the class], "What's your racial story? What are things that frustrate you?" And we're like, "We aren't the same person, but people can't tell us apart and we don't understand." He's like, "Great, will you stand up and tell us how to tell Asian people apart from each other?" and I was like, "Uhhh."

So me and this other woman, who I was actually good friends with, stood up and we're like, we look different. She's five inches shorter than me. I don't know how to help you. We dress differently. It was a 100-level class, so we also didn't have the tools to talk about, well why do you think all Asian people look alike. Where does this racial prejudice come from? You don't think all white people look alike. This is a conversation that I would have now. So, we just stood there and tried to desperately express to our White peers how you tell Asian people apart, but that was better than nothing for me. Like all of a sudden somebody was asking me the question, opposed to just assuming I was the same person as she was. Or we got to talk about the fact that Asian people have a different experience. Black people have a different experience than White America. And it was fascinating. Horrendous, but fascinating.

Although in hindsight the experience was extremely problematic, Emily still looked back on it as a learning moment in which she realized that she did have things to say and stories to tell about her identity. Following this course, she sought out other courses and co-curricular experiences that gave her the space to learn and share about her racial identity.

### **Co-curricular Experiences in College**

Many participants' co-curricular college experiences, such as involvement in student organizations, also greatly inspired their activism and helped them form a strong activist identity. Co-curricular experiences refer to those structured activities that occurred while in college but outside of the classroom. Common examples of co-curricular activities include involvement in student organizations and clubs, study abroad, or intramural sports. Co-curricular experiences can and often do have academic components, but they are considered supplemental to the academic, classroom experiences in college.

College proved to be a very influential factor in most of the participants' development of a critical consciousness, although a few of them came to their critical consciousness after their undergraduate careers. Chris explained that his participation in the Midwest Asian American Student Union, a regional conference for Asian American student organizations, had a great

influence on his commitment to racial justice. Chris recalled a specific moment at the conference when he was in college:

I specifically remember one moment where we all sat in a room, at a big dinner just at wherever we were staying, crashing. And we were talking about how, "Chris, you're the president of your Asian Student Union at your college, and Ken," or whoever, "You're president of this at yours." We were all leaders in our different respective campuses, but all coming together. And we're just like, "Wow, damn, this is really cool that we're all together in one room, really wanting to move our campuses forward but also just build community within our communities and campuses, but also in the Midwest." So, I think that was a huge solidarity moment for me. I was like, okay, I'm not the only one. I don't feel like I'm the only one. That was a really great moment.

While Chris' student leadership experience in his Asian American student organization led to the critical incident he described, John had a slightly different experience because of his multiracial identity. When he arrived on campus, he realized that there was no student organization for multiracial students, so, he started his own.

In that first year, there was this Chinese Student Association thing, and I was like, "Okay, I don't really feel comfortable with that." I started, with my friend, a group for mixed students. That really got me more connected to the [multicultural] office. I became a leader for their retreat and did this other mentoring program that we had in the office. Then, started working as a student intern in the office with some of the programs. One of my mentors there, one day, was like, "Have you thought about [student affairs] as a career?" That's why I ended up doing it, and just doing a lot of more diversity, multicultural, social justice work, through that.

John drew a direct connection between his initiative to start a student organization for multiracial students and his subsequent career path in student affairs. His student affairs career has been guided by social justice and multicultural work as a result of the co-curricular experiences he was involved with in college.

However, it was not only student organizations that served as conduits of racial identity development for participants. Structured co-curricular experiences, such as trainings and



retreats, also had a strong impact on several participants' identity development. John attended a retreat during college that had a very strong influence on him; he described:

That was the first time, really, that we did a stereotypes activity, where we got into groups based on our race and shared out stereotypes with other groups about how we are perceived, and how we don't want to be perceived. That was the first time I found affinity with multiracial people, because that was one of the groups, and [I] just got to hear about other experiences, and recognize those differences in experience of others.

Like John, Emily attended a retreat as part of her training to be a resident assistant. Until becoming an RA, she had been somewhat disinterested in exploring her identity during college. She described this training as a wake-up call, and one of the first times she was able to reflect on her experiences and identity. She explained:

My junior year, I was an RA, and it was one of the first spaces I'd found where they weren't asking questions about, like, "Who are you?" Why does it matter? Like, does race matter? Does gender matter? Do these things matter?

And all of a sudden, I found myself in training, really challenging ideas about who I am, what I wanted. I got offered the job of RA [my sophomore year]. The next night I was drinking in the residence hall I was going to be the RA in. And so, a lot of people ... there were a couple of people asking for me to be fired by the time I got to training. Already. Because other peers knew this. But training changed my complete behavior, and I think it's all of a sudden people were asking me questions about things that mattered, that, like, no one had ever asked me, or that no one had ever talked to me about that mattered in my life when I was really, really young. And then I was, like, "Yes. I know this matters," but had no ability to talk about what that meant.

Even though some students resented her hiring as an RA due to her previous rule violations, Emily grew tremendously as a result of getting the job. Her trainings opened her up to opportunities to discuss issues like privilege and oppression, which she had thought a lot about previously but had not had the language to talk about.

Most participants who experienced critical identity development incidents in college attributed the impact of these experiences to a combination of curricular and co-curricular

activities. Although this project explored the impact of higher education identity development, two participants in particular did not experience critical incidents that were directly related to their curricular or co-curricular college experiences. For Wei-yi, it was witnessing labor activists at his university in Canada while he was in graduate school studying music that initially sparked his interest in community activism. Wei-yi explained:

I started an ensemble up there that basically teamed up with political activists to support different movements, different agendas, basically. That's when I started, I think, to really connect my musical self with my politically engaged self. Like I said, this had nothing to do with race, though. It didn't explicitly have anything to do with race. Then when I moved back to the States, that's when I started to really get involved in racial justice, re-realizing how messed up this country is in terms of racism, and re-realizing all of these things I forgot from being away.

Wei-yi's return to the U.S. after getting involved in activism in Canada was immediately followed by the critical incident of learning that he had a Chinese name that was given at birth, but that he had never known about.

A huge part of it for my identity was rediscovering my Chinese name. I was given a name at birth, all from my father's [Irish-American] side. At the same time, my grandfather and grandmother on my mom's side gave me a Chinese name. This name is only registered with Chinese, what do you call it, ancestry stuff? It's not on my birth certificate or anything. Something sparked it, that it is there, that it exists. It sparked this memory of it, of, "Oh, my God. What's this name? Really? I have a Chinese name?" My grandmother said it, just passively. I was like, "What? What are you talking about? Really?" I'm 28 years old. I never heard about this thing.

Wei-yi went on to go exclusively by his Chinese name. Although his academic and co-curricular experiences in college and graduate school did not provide him with the sparks of identity development or critical consciousness that others experienced, it was his awareness of the events happening at his university and later in his community in the U.S. that jumpstarted his involvement in activism. Wei-yi eventually went on to work full-time for a nonprofit

community organization that supports political engagement and racial justice work across the country.

### **Critical Incidents – Unlearning Anti-Blackness**

Some participants often came to their advocacy for racial justice following a series of critical incidents that sparked their realization that they had been conditioned to think and act in ways that perpetuated racism. Takuya's story in his narrative about recognizing his gut reaction to avoid a Black man at a bus stop is one such instance, in which he suddenly realized his own anti-blackness. This incident caused him to reflect further on his upbringing and the myriad ways in which he had been conditioned to adopt anti-blackness. Rohan had a similar experience when he attended a conference with his colleagues during graduate school, some of whom identified as Black. He explained:

I still remember going to the Burger King, and standing in line to get my burger, and it was probably the first time in my life at that point that I was in a community where the majority of the folks around me were not Indian or not White. I still remember thinking, honestly, I forget if it was my dad or my uncle or who I spoke to that I told them, "Hey, I'm going to New Orleans," and the first thing they said was, "Be careful. Be careful." They didn't say anything about people, but they said, "Be careful." Talked about, "Make sure that you are careful with your wallet. Don't lose your money." So, when I was standing in line, I still remember taking my wallet from my back pocket and putting it in my front pocket. A couple of my friends and I, we got our sandwiches, and we stepped out, and I still remember holding my two friends, in their hands, like with all of the stuff in our hands, I was still holding them and I said, "We've got to be careful here."

And my two friends were like, "What are you talking about?" And I was going to say something, and it was probably the most shameful ... The shame just overcame [me], right? I was overcome with shame, because the two people I was holding onto were Black folks, and I was telling them to be careful of the Black folks on the street, and so it was that moment of, "What am I doing here?"

Importantly, Rohan's experience did not end there. He continued,

It was this very profound moment of shame and guilt, of saying, "Oh, actually I've internalized some of these things that people have told me about Black folks," and so

how much of my work has been racist or prejudicial in the ways that I've operated, even with my students at that time. So that was a clear moment of saying, "Okay. How do I dismantle this in my head, and what do I do?"

For me, it was that conference. That was the conference that I was like, "Oh my God, I have no idea what I'm doing. I need to learn. I need to understand." So, I probably went to every session. In all of my career right now, that is the only conference that I've gone to every damn session. I filled my day from eight o'clock in the morning to whenever it ended, to every conversation possible in the evening. I didn't sleep. There was this urge to know what I felt like I'd missed out the prior 20 years of my life. It was all in front of me, but I didn't know, and so there was this ... It was also the moment when I came into my own racial consciousness as a person of color.

Both Rohan and Takuya explained that the result of these incidents was a need to “dismantle” the anti-Blackness they had been conditioned to adopt. Critically, though, because they experienced these incidents in the context of the development of their racial identity consciousness, these experiences compelled them to learn more about themselves and others and inspired them to engage more thoughtfully in racial justice work. As they embraced their identities as people of color, they were also confronted with how to negotiate the privileges they had as Asian Americans in comparison to Black Americans and learn how to wield that privilege in a responsible way.

### **Critical Power Analysis**

Some participants demonstrated a critical power analysis through their understanding of systemic oppression in the U.S. In the presented findings, participants who incorporated a critical power analysis demonstrated an understanding of the sociohistorical context of race in the U.S. today. They referenced historical examples of oppression and how those events shape racism today and situated their experiences in the histories of oppression of marginalized groups. Critical power analysis was the lens through which they understood their identity and identity development, and the framework through which they justified their engagement in racial justice

work. Participants who articulated a critical power analysis often also discussed the unique positionality of Asian Americans in the U.S. as racialized and minoritized people who were also privileged in some ways, especially in a way that oppressed Black and LatinX Americans. This was something they grappled with; Wei-yi stated:

In terms of racial justice, Asian Americans have a unique privilege where we can navigate interactions with those who hold anti-Black sentiments. We have this special access to something that's absolutely hostile and shut off to darker skilled people.

Wei-yi's statement reifies the idea that Asian Americans, although they are people of color who face discrimination, also have privilege that they can leverage to advocate alongside people of color for racial justice. Hope's sentiment from her narrative echoed Wei-yi; she stated:

I have privilege. Yes, I'm a person of color, and I have light-skin privilege. And because of the perverse ways in which the model minority myth has been manipulated in the dominant culture of society I have, grossly, but I have benefited from the perceptions of Asian Americans as being different from other communities of color.

Hope's critical analysis of the model minority myth demonstrated her negotiation of the privilege she has as an Asian American person with light skin, which stood in constant tension with her understanding of herself as a person of color. Her statement connected her individual experience to the systemic impact of whiteness on Asian American bodies.

Emily also demonstrated a critical power analysis of race, and used the L.A. riots to explain Asian Americans' positionality vis-à-vis other people of color:

I think equally Asian American folks are fed the lie about themselves as much as America has been fed a lie about what Asia-America is and should be. In that the narrative of the hard-working model minority is not real and it's a way to put Asian America into a gap so that we get blamed for other things, like the race riots in L.A. The riots affected Korean Americans more because we were a buffer. And so, if we don't want to be a buffer, which means we take the brunt of both White America and people of color, then we have to move forward in a larger racially just way and social just way.

Like Hope, Emily understood that the model minority myth perpetuated whiteness by pitting communities of color against each other, resulting, in this example, in a division between Black and Korean American communities during the L.A. riots. Rohan echoed this sentiment:

And so even today, there's a video that came out that said, I forget if it was Alabama or Arkansas, where the cop was telling the White woman that he stopped, "Oh, remember, we only kill Black people, not people like you," and so to me, it's like ... In the hierarchy of racial structures, I'm not Black, so yeah, I get followed on the street. That's happened a few times for me. Cops follow me, but I also know that if they run my plates, they'll know that I work at [the university]. They know who I am, and so I'm not saying that's going to stop me from ... If I'm running at them, I'm going to get killed, right? But the chances of that happening are much less than when I compare myself to a Black person.

Rohan continued this critical power analysis by exploring the ways in which systematic oppression often continues to oppress people of color even when they are acting for racial and social justice. Rohan was interviewed shortly after the Charlottesville riots, which ignited national conversation and debate about statues commemorating Confederate soldiers.

There's so much to be said about, yeah, we're taking down all these statues, right? A very symbolic gesture. I understand symbolism, but part of me also wants to understand, are we really affecting change? Yeah, we're getting rid of these statues, but are people's attitudes and values and belief systems going to change because we took down a statue? The KKK is still walking around doing all that they do, and the Black woman who stood up and put the noose around the statue the other day, she's the one who's going to go to jail. Yeah, we're fighting a cause, but at what cost? We're still going to put a Black woman in jail. That's still going to happen.

Through their critical power analyses, these participants acknowledged the way Asian American identity has been socially constructed in the U.S. in an effort to repress darker skinned people of color, thereby serving as a rationale for their involvement in racial justice work for all people of color, and not only Asian Americans.

### **Connecting Identity Development to Racial Justice Work**

Participants were asked if they saw any connections between their life narratives and where they ended up today, specifically in terms of their engagement in racial justice. In response, they widely described their current engagement in racial justice work as part of an ongoing journey that is continuing to evolve as they gain different and more nuanced understandings of their identities in an ever-changing social landscape. Hope recalled the importance of Asian American mentors and peers in her life who had pushed her to where she is today as a core driver for her passion for social justice:

I think, you know, really core to my own development in terms of my own racial consciousness, but then also my identity around activism and racial justice has been about being in a community with other Asian American activists, so whether through mentors, through peers. And that continues to be so important. At my institution, I mentioned I'm the only Asian American doctoral student. In the master's cohort there are a number of Asian American students and I've kind of taken them under my wing to say, like, "Hey, if you want to talk through things when you see tensions rise in the classroom between White and Black and Brown colleagues in your classes and you want to talk about where does that mean you fit, here, let me help you talk about that." Because we don't have an Asian American faculty member, and honestly, even our faculty members of other racial identities that could invite that conversation are not a lot of times.

So I think that part around community to have other people to say, "You can talk about this." Or even some of the ways that we have in the period of this conversation of like, "Oh, that resonates," to help normalize and validate some of the dissonance and questions about where the Asian Americans fit in this broader conversation about racial identity and racial justice. I think that's so, so, so important.

Hope tied her critical experiences of being in community with other Asian Americans to part of how she engages in racial justice work now. She is the only Asian American woman in her doctoral program, and still navigates racialized dynamics of her cohort and other students. She also has dedicated her life to social justice training for businesses and organizations, so she engages with the topics of privilege and oppression very regularly in her everyday work.

Similarly, Takuya's narrative explained that because he *did not* have the mentors he needed growing up and throughout college, he was motivated to become a mentor to other Asian American students at his current job as an academic advisor.

Chris tied his engagement in racial justice and commitment to social justice less to the critical incidents he experienced in college, and more to his upbringing in the Midwest. His regional identity of being from the Midwest played a large role in how he understood his current situation. He explained:

I feel even though I'm like, "Ugh, [the Midwest], I grew up in [the Midwest]," I think I really appreciate being in a place like the Midwest, and then finding spaces of solidarity and safeness, because I think that really gave me a lot of grit and a lot of understanding of what it's like to be the only person of color in a space that is very patriarchal, White, heteronormative, all the things. And I think that gave me a lot of personal reflection training on how to move through space. So how do I pass as a straight and narrow? How do I pass as the good Asian American? I think that it's taught me code-switching, which is a huge thing, it's taught me how to code-switch in ways that I need to survive, whether it be in a hard space like [an Ivy League university], or to be in just rural Ohio if I'm driving and getting gas and things like that. Or being [around] Asians. And so, I think my upbringing has really formed, in a sense, grit and a sense of, I don't want to say armor, but I feel like it's helped me really think about how to be myself, but in ways where, depending on the space and where I am, how much of myself I want to give.

Chris' upbringing in the Midwest laid the foundation for his commitment to social justice because he learned early on how to survive in an environment that did not reflect his own identities. Feeling like an outsider and learning to navigate that context led to his desire to eventually leave the Midwest to see what other parts of the country had to offer.

Similar to Chris, Jenny explained that her early upbringing had a major influence on her commitment to social justice. More specifically, it was her family's resiliency despite not having a lot of resources that inspired her:

I think a lot of it has to do with the resiliency I've seen from my family, and my community, and while what they have done to get to where they are may not fit into a



neat definition of social justice, I think because the way they have survived it was inevitable for me to become an activist. I see the same thing with a lot of my family members where they were just resilient, and for me, I think a lot of the social justice work that I do is to honor their resiliency that they had and continue to have, because if my family, and my community has worked to give me access to what I have now it would be, I think it would be an injustice to not use what I have access to in order to make some type of change, or difference however small that may be. Yeah. I think if I maintain the status quo it's dishonoring the things that they have done. I would say, yeah, by far their resiliency and their history, and their stories have been the most influential in the social justice work that I do.

She viewed her commitment to racial justice as borne out of her family's persistence as refugees.

Their own stories of sacrifice and determination to provide her with a good life inspired her to continue to work for others, and hopefully contribute to social progress in her own future work as a scholar-activist, or someone who engages in academic research as a means of furthering social justice and contributing to social progress.

Emily clearly articulated the way that her early experiences affected her commitment to racial justice work. She stated:

I think [my early experiences] influence everything about what I do. If I hadn't had the experiences of being an adoptee or race that I did around or gender that I did... why pursue this? But because it mattered so much, because it was so defining on my life, I can't not move forward attempting to make those changes. To recognize that when I talk about adoption, people are like, but your parents loved you. My parents do love me, but love doesn't trump racism, it doesn't trump sexism, it doesn't make these things go away, it doesn't stop families from being inappropriate, so if I want that narrative to be true that my mom could just love me and her racism would go away, then I have to do racial justice work. And so I think that's the foundation. If I want the family that I grew up in to function the way that I wish it had, for myself, for my child, for future generations, then you have to do racial justice work.

And I think equally, I think people are like, well you have some terrible experiences and I'm like, yeah, but it makes me less ignorant when I think about my childhood. [So my child will be the] first grandchild on both sides, and may look White. Absolutely, my partner is White, but I feel like a person of color. They probably will, too, in some fashion, but I assume they will be more able to handle the current climate of the world than either set of grandparents and it will make them like being a person of color. Being a person who experiences the things that we experience, not always, but for me, has made

me knowledgeable about how do you deal with these things, how do we talk about things, how do we move forward in a way that is equitable for people. That's what I wouldn't wish my childhood differently.

Like other participants, she connected the difficult experiences and struggles she had early in life with her identity to her current passion for social justice. As an adoptee and an expectant mother, Emily expressed hope that because of her own past experiences navigating her identity, her child will be better equipped to deal with those struggles in the future.

### **Critical Hope**

The interviews for this study occurred between August and October 2017, during the first year of Donald Trump's presidency and within weeks of the Charlottesville Riot, during which White Nationalists marched for white supremacy and murdered one antiracist activist. Despite current events thrusting racism into the national spotlight with an intensity that has reminded the nation of its ugly and oppressive racist history and the persistence of white supremacy, participants in this study demonstrated critical hope through their commitment to continue fighting for racial justice. Critical hope was demonstrated by the participants in this study in many different ways and was a key factor in propelling their racial justice work forward. Their commitments to racial justice and persistence in their work are examples of critical hope at a time where the feeling of hopelessness is pervasive. Chris, who has an undergraduate degree in architecture and intends to pursue his Ph.D. in higher education, articulated:

When Charlottesville happened, I was like "This is the epiphany moment of what I could do my personal statement on." Talk about statues, as physical forms of oppression. So how can I, as a person that understands architecture and higher ed, and space and campus administration, and education spaces, how do I be a voice in terms of helping a campus understand, literally, how racist their campus is, in terms of physical structure. We talk about safe space, brave space, but there's actually physical structures that make a person feel unsafe on their campus. It inspired me to think about what that looks like for me in terms of the future and my career, but also thinking in terms of [racial justice] work.

Like Chris, Emily was focused on the impact she could have on future generations. As an expectant mother, she expressed cautious optimism about her child's future given the current racial environment:

I've been thinking about being a mom a lot and as things happen, especially when it comes to racial justice for the next generation, what does it look like? What are we building for? ... How do I build a space of consciousness for my child to be able to delve into those things young, because I think we pretend that children don't know [about racism] young. My experience is that we know them very early, like grossly early. So what does that mean, what does that look like as we do this racial justice work? And I don't have the answer, but it's something that I think about a lot lately.

Emily emphasized the importance of understanding yourself and your identity as a prerequisite to knowing how to engage in racial justice work. Becoming a new mother was an important aspect of her identity that triggered her discussion of critical hope and the future.

Jessica used a cooking analogy to explain how she maintains energy for engaging in racial justice despite the fact that the work can be overwhelming, and there are times when she feels very discouraged. She stated:

I think now I kind of try to section off what's on the ground right now and is more impactful and what are things I'm building for the long term. And making some long-term changes because some of these systems have been here for way longer and will stay here way longer than I'm alive, but how am I moving that needle while also making a difference for people's lived experiences now. It's like when you are like stir-frying something and it's quick, it's fast, or if you're slow-cooking. You know, you're slow-roasting something. Having multiple things on the stove at once. So, you're going to have something that's quick the stir fry, amazing and delicious right now, and then you'll have something that you'll spend a long-time marinating, simmering, or whatever so that four, to five, six hours, two days later ... So, I have multiple things like that, at the same time, because those essentially address the different levels from like the individual, going to the bigger level.

Jessica's cooking analogy served as a reminder to her that not everything must be accomplished at once, and that seeing the fruits of one's efforts can take a very long time in the context of

social change. But, to sustain herself, she keeps on engaging in smaller, more micro-levels of interaction that inspire change on incremental levels.

Although he initially felt discouraged by the election of Donald Trump, Timmy was able to turn it into a feeling of empowerment and inspiration. He said,

There's no time to wait for some of this stuff, right? The time to act is now, and I think there's been more urgency regarding that in my own work and trying to figure out what I can do for my communities here, because I think time is a luxury at this point, knowing that yes they said six months [before DACA recipients will be deported], but who knows what that actually looks like, or who knows that they even keep to that? As we know, this administration has had issues keeping to its own word, so I think just knowing that we don't have the luxury of time to necessarily wait out some of this stuff but also recognizing that you do want to be thoughtful and meaningful in the ways that we do engage with our communities, has provided us with interesting balance of how do we ensure that we're showing up in the right ways? But then also on a personal note, just because a lot of this has bled into all aspects of life, sometimes I'm just so tired that I don't want to engage with my students around it, but then knowing that they need it, right?

So, knowing that on November ninth, where everyone woke up and was like, "What is going on?" Where I didn't want to go to work because I was just tired because I stayed up watching the election and students emailing me and messaging me saying, "I need to sit in your office and just be there." And even just in silence just knowing that that's what they needed, there are ways that I still need to show up for them but make sure that when I'm showing up I'm there too. So, I think part of it has made me more aware of the ways I need to take care of myself and engage in ways that are productive.

Timmy's recollection of the day after the 2016 presidential election emphasized the need for self-care when the sociopolitical environment became unsafe. Taking care of himself was the best way for him to continue being present at work for his students, who were also struggling to process the election.

All participants recognized the challenges in the work they do, and the personal sacrifices they made in their pursuit of social justice. Takuya's family members and family friends – especially those who were Japanese – often did not understand why he felt compelled to be

outspoken about issues of racial injustice. John and Rohan, both of whom are educators, received push-back from students who did not always understand their insistence on incorporating social justice into their curriculum. Several participants lived in conservative parts of the country where they did not always feel safe, but nevertheless, were committed to making an impact.

### **Conclusion**

The participants in this study, through their interviews, responded to the question: how do some Asian American college graduates connect their identity development journeys to their engagement in racial justice work? The many stories that were elicited through the interviews demonstrated the ways in which they connected critical incidents in their lives to their engagement in racial justice work. For these participants, racial justice work occurred through their scholarly research, formal and informal education, student affairs work, mentorship, and community organizing and activism. Although the participants presented a number of stories about challenges and experiences that had a negative emotional impact on them, they largely viewed them in retrospect as learning experiences that inspired their commitment to social justice. The injustices that many of them experienced as children and young adults served as catalysts for critical thinking about society and systemic oppression.

Beyond simply explaining their lives, the participants in this study are examples of critical hope during a time of global political unrest and social tension in the U.S. People of color and those with other marginalized identities could be easily overwhelmed by the onslaught of racist, sexist, homophobic, and otherwise immoral and unjust rhetoric coming from U.S. elected officials. The participants demonstrated resilience and strength in the face of these

obstacles, which in some cases even renewed their commitments to social change. Their stories serve as inspirations for understanding racial justice, the importance of formal and informal education in developing a critical consciousness, and the work that still needs to be done to combat social injustice in the U.S.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

The participants in this study shared life histories and narratives that explained how their racial identity development journeys influenced their involvement in racial justice work. This study builds off existing literature that explores Asian American racial identity development and the development of a critical consciousness (Osajima, 2007), and lends insight into the evolving racial order in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; O'Brien, 2008). The stories and experiences of participants presented in Chapter Four serve as counternarratives, presenting the experiences and highlighting the voices of Asian Americans. The narrative presentation of findings essentially centered the experiences of people of color while they were themselves centering the importance of racial justice. This critical narrative approach allowed the researcher to reinforce the tenants of Critical Race Theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and connect the participant experiences back to literature on identity development (Accapadi, 2012; Kim, 2002; Ibrahim et al., 1997), critical consciousness (Freire, 1973; Osajima, 2007; Watts & Hipolitd-Delgado, 2015), and racial justice work.

For the participants in this study, racial identity development occurred in a variety of ways. Because of the diversity of their ethnic identity, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, generational status, and geographic region, their experiences reflected a number of differences in the Asian American experience. Those participants who were adopted into White families or who identified as multiracial had experiences that were specific to those unique identities, further

demonstrating the diversity of Asian Americans. Participants developed their critical consciousness through a culmination of critical incidents (Osajima, 2007), often occurring in childhood but frequently occurring in college through curricular and co-curricular activities. These critical incidents forced them to reflect on their past experiences and challenged them to dismantle the anti-blackness they had sometimes internalized. Finally, their subsequent engagement in sociopolitical action for racial justice (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015) reflected their continued development of a critical consciousness and engagement in meaningful racial justice work.

In this chapter, I discuss the implications of this study's findings and their contributions to existing literature. By highlighting the voices of Asian Americans and centering their experiences using their words, this study adds a narrative perspective to Asian American identity development and engagement in racial justice work. Their stories serve as both counternarratives to dominant, White experience but also add complexity to our understanding of how Asian Americans' racialized experiences have influenced their decisions to engage in racial justice work.

### **Identity Development**

The experiences shared by the participants in this study frequently reflected components of existing linear Asian American racial identity development models (Kim, 2002; Ibrahim et al., 1997), with several exceptions depending upon the individual's identities. Hope and Emily, who were both Korean American adoptees with White families, experienced Kim's (2002) *White Identification* stage, wherein they were racially othered by their White peers, with whom they had initially identified. Because they had White family members who did not engage them in



early conversations about race, they experienced dissonance between their understanding of themselves and how their peers viewed them. They did not experience *ethnic* awareness first, since their first experience of cultural identity was with their White families. For example, Hope's story about coming home from school in tears because of her schoolmates' racial bullying, and Emily being sent to her principal's office in elementary school after being mocked by her classmates for the shape of her eyes, demonstrated early, negative enforcement that they were not White, and that not being White was a bad thing. Exacerbating these experiences, their parents, who were encouraged to adopt color-evasive ideologies, were not equipped to talk about race in a way that positively reinforced their children's racial identity. The *White Identification* stage was also experienced by some of the other participants, like Takuya, who explicitly reflected on wanting to be White, and rejecting those parts of his identity that represented his Japanese identity. However, other participants, did not necessarily fall into this stage of development at all.

Jenny and Timmy both grew up with strong ethnic attachment to their Cambodian and Filipino identities, respectively, and grew up in environments that were racially diverse, such that they did not immediately or consistently view being White (or like White people) as a goal or aspiration (Kim, 2002). Because Rohan spent his childhood and high school years in India, he was exposed to colorism in a colonial context, which distinguished his experience from the other participants. He reflected upon his memories of India as placing value on lighter skin and British English, a direct result of the colonial rule of Great Britain. While he was socialized to believe lighter skin was superior to darker skin, the postcolonial context of his upbringing differentiated his experiences from the U.S. experience of *White Identification*. Ibrahim et al.'s (1997) identity

development model of South Asian Americans was more applicable to Rohan's experiences, given his emphasis on coming from a colonized country and mindset. His early socialization differed from the other participants because he did not immigrate to the U.S. until after high school. He had internalized anti-blackness in his upbringing through the stories he heard from his teachers and parents in India, where colorism also played a role in shaping his association of light skin as positive and dark skin as negative. Rohan's critical incidents of unlearning anti-blackness through his conference attendance experience was evidence of Ibrahim et al.'s *resistance and immersion* phase, wherein he was attempting to build fragile alliances with his peers of color.

This study did not seek to validate existing identity development models but was guided by their stated paths and trajectories. The participants' experiences were reflected somewhat within the models, often in a nonlinear way, and with exceptions where unique identities and incidents created new pathways. Their journeys were guided by a culmination of experiences, leading them towards a critical consciousness, explored in the following section.

### **Critical Consciousness**

Critical consciousness refers to a level of consciousness that situates the existence of current phenomena within the context of "causal and circumstantial correlations" (Freire, 1974, p. 41). It requires one to interrogate their identity and situate their actions and experiences in the context of the social realities of racism and other forms of oppression (Omi & Winant, 2015). Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) conducted a thorough literature review of critical consciousness and concluded that sociopolitical action was a core component of critical consciousness. Sociopolitical action was defined as "the promotion of change in social and

institutional policies or practices that maintain an inferior status for members of marginalized groups” (p. 850). They posited that the development of a critical consciousness consisted of three main components: awareness of sociopolitical circumstances, encouraging critical questions, and fostering collective identity. These components can be found in the participants’ stories and built upon one another to result in their commitment to racial justice work.

### **Culminating Experiences**

The participants’ critical consciousnesses were borne out of a culmination of critical incidents (Osajima, 2007). The three featured narratives of Takuya, Jenny, and Hope demonstrated the many cumulative racialized experiences the participants had growing up, which led to their eventual development of a critical consciousness and subsequent engagement in racial justice work. Takuya grew up with strong ethnic attachment and explained that his familial influence also caused him to internalize some anti-blackness that he confronted later in graduate school when he was introduced to identity development literature, and a growing awareness of the sociopolitical context. It was the culmination of these factors that eventually led him to develop a critical consciousness and activist identity. He was then inspired to commit himself fully in his career and personal life to issues of social justice affecting not only Asian Americans, but also other marginalized populations.

Jenny’s inspiration came in the form of her family’s sacrifice. Her parents were Cambodian refugees, and as she grew older she began to understand the resilience and persistence they had modeled for her to eventually develop into a scholar activist. Her early experiences in grade school, such as taking ethnic studies courses, sparked her critical consciousness. It grew in college, where she found community among Asian American student

leaders and passion for social justice issues through her involvement in student organizations. All of these culminating experiences combined to inspire her critical consciousness, and her engagement in racial justice work.

Hope's narrative also demonstrated a culmination of experiences that eventually led her to commit her personal and professional lives to social justice. When she was in college, she realized through her mentors and Greek organization involvement that even though she had been raised by a White family, her peers perceived her as Asian, so she had to navigate what that meant for her own racial identity. As she moved through graduate school, she acquired the language to articulate her past experiences, had Asian American faculty members for the first time, and grew in her understanding of the history of Asians in the U.S.. Her growing critical consciousness and awareness of the sociopolitical context eventually brought her to the place she is now, solidly committed to racial justice with a very strong power analysis of race in the U.S.

### **The Impact of Curricular Experiences**

Osajima (2007) demonstrated the impact that ethnic studies and Asian American studies courses can have on Asian American students' development of a critical consciousness. This finding is consistent with Watts and Hipolito-Delgado's (2015) assertion that an awareness of sociopolitical circumstances, encouraging critical questions, and fostering collective identity are components of critical consciousness. The participant experiences in these courses lend support to this claim. Jenny explained that in her high school ethnic studies courses, she completed a family history project that "woke [her] up into understanding how much is missing, or purposely excluded from this narrative in the United States." John's participation as a facilitator for an intergroup dialogue course challenged him to navigate power dynamics playing out in the

classroom and opened his eyes to the power structures that influenced how identity and experience played out for different people (Gurin et al., 2013). Timmy also discussed the impact that his undergraduate Filipino American Experience course had on his development, which educated him on the history of Asians in the U.S. and social issues relevant to his experience. All of these experiences lend support to the finding that curricular experiences can have a profound influence on identity development and the development of a critical consciousness; however, it is also important to note that at least two of the participants did not experience curricular critical incidents while in college. For some, these experiences happened almost exclusively outside of the classroom (Poon, 2013).

### **The Impact of Co-curricular Experiences**

As the findings demonstrated, curricular critical incidents were frequently complemented by co-curricular experiences for the participants (Osajima, 2007). Co-curricular experiences that fostered critical incidents often centered around structured experiences, such as trainings, retreats, or student organizations, but also occurred completely outside of the structured college experience. Chris and Jenny were both involved in the Midwest Asian American Student Union (MAASU), a regional student organization for Asian American student leaders, that cultivated their Asian American and activist identities. Their involvement with MAASU and the impact the organization had on their identity and critical consciousness development was consistent with Kodama et al.'s (2017) findings that MAASU could have a potentially greater impact on Asian American leadership and identity development due to the smaller population of Asian Americans in the Midwest. Meanwhile, Emily had a profound experience in her resident assistant training

program that encouraged her to question structural power dynamics and further explore her identity.

Unlike the structured experiences that most participants engaged in, Wei-yi experienced a critical incident when he became aware of the labor movement on his university campus and was compelled to become involved in the movement not because of any structured or intentional experience, but because the protests drew his attention to issues that had previously not been highlighted in his experience. In this way, he acted as a student activist, engaging outside of formally organized student clubs or leadership roles (Manzano, Poon, & Na, 2017).

### **The Affective Component of Critical Consciousness**

Engagement in curricular and cocurricular activities was crucial in the development of a critical consciousness; however, reflection on those experiences helped participants draw meaning from them and turn them into action. Consistent with Osajima's (2007) finding that there was an affective component to the development of a critical consciousness, most of the participants described how their critical incidents made them *feel*. Jessica recalled feeling very angry in her high school affirmative action discussion, while John expressed discomfort in his attempt to join the Chinese Student Association in his first year of college. Rohan felt "shame and guilt" when he realized that he was inadvertently cautioning his Black friends to be wary of other Black people. Chris was forced to reflect on his identity further when he first experienced what it felt like to be in solidarity with other Asian American student leaders, versus what it had felt like growing up in the Midwest being one of the only Asian Americans in his community. These affective components of their experiences served as important motivations for reflection and learning (Osajima, 2007).

### **Sociopolitical Action**

In addition to the affective aspect of participant experiences, they also demonstrated their commitment to racial justice through engagement in sociopolitical action. As a requirement for participation, the participants had to be engaged in racial justice work in some way. Racial justice work was intentionally defined loosely, encompassing grassroots activism, community organizing, promoting change for social justice locally or at one's place of work or institution, or as part of one's actual career or job. This engagement in racial justice work could be considered the sociopolitical engagement component of critical consciousness (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015), and it looked different for all of the participants. Because there were a disproportionately high number of education doctoral students among the sample, several participants sought to engage in racial justice work as scholar-activists.

Wei-yi was formally engaged in sociopolitical action through his job at a nonprofit community organizing organization in the Midwest. He was involved in this organization as a result of his development of a critical consciousness in graduate school, and participated in things like voter registration, political action, and protests, through his work and also in his personal life. The development of his critical consciousness prior to this position served as a catalyst for his engagement in sociopolitical action and drew him towards a career in community organizing. The connection of his identity to his understanding of social inequity was consistent with Watts and Hipolito-Delgado's (2015) assertion that collective identity is associated with sociopolitical action.

Several participants were doctoral students in education programs. Hope, John, Jenny, and Jessica were doctoral students engaged in scholar-activism through their research and

teaching. They were drawn to their studies to gain more skills, networks, and knowledge to dismantle oppressive systems and rebuild more equitable institutions. Their awareness of oppression within the academy and the irony of working within an oppressive system in order to challenge it was not lost on them. They spoke about challenging experiences within their doctoral programs, especially regarding navigating classroom and cohort dynamics. Their engagement in racial justice work often manifested in their research and teaching, and their doctoral programs served as conduits for eventually arriving at their career goals and enabling them to engage more effectively in sociopolitical action.

Rohan, Chris, Timmy, and Emily all worked as college educators, either as faculty or student affairs professionals. They engaged in racial justice work through critical pedagogical strategies in the classroom, where they encouraged critical reflection (Freire, 1974). Those who worked in multicultural affairs facilitated workshops and dialogues that engaged students in conversation about systemic forms of oppression. Their engagement in racial justice work encompassed all three of the components of sociopolitical action outlined by Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015): awareness of sociopolitical circumstances, encouraging critical questions, and fostering collective identity. The work being done by the participants in this study can be contextualized by understanding the impact of the Black-White binary and other theories about power and the U.S. racial landscape, as discussed in the following section.

### **Persisting Black-White Binary?**

Anti-blackness as a theoretical lens for understanding present-day racism is rooted in colonial goals of establishing Black people as property and perpetuating an understanding of Black people's existence in opposition to Whiteness (Dancy II, Edwards, & Davis, 2018).



Dancy II, Edwards, and Davis theorized that anti-blackness remains a central component of the U.S. settler colonial state, that is, the perpetuation of institutionalized racism through the forcible theft of land (i.e., property) and dehumanization of Black people. This framework for understanding racism offers insight into some participants' early experiences. As they explained, they often internalized anti-Black sentiments that manifested as a result of institutionalized dehumanization of Black bodies. Even though Asian Americans are people of color, and the participants in this study all identified as such, they were nonetheless subject to the internalization of messages produced by their communities, families, schools, and other institutions that perpetuated anti-blackness.

The participants in this study all identified as Asian American, although many of them also described their identities in terms of culture or ethnicity. For example, Rohan also identified as Desi American, and Hope and Emily both identified as adopted Korean Americans. Both John and Wei-yi identified as multiracial and Asian American. Their identities played a large role in their perceptions of anti-blackness and the Black-White binary. While some of them explicitly named the Black-White binary as a factor in their identity development, it remained a persistent theme in all narratives (Kim, 2002).

O'Brien (2008) posited that the "racial middle" was an emerging referent group for Asian Americans and Latinx Americans, who have increasingly identified with experiences that were dissimilar to those of both White and Black Americans. While O'Brien's thesis held true in this study, the narratives showed how the participants deepened and complicated their relationships to whiteness and blackness through discussion of their identity development experiences. The experiences within their families, communities, and schools all had varying levels of impact on

their conception of what it means to be Asian American. The participants in this study, perhaps because they were specifically participating due to their involvement in and passion for racial justice work, fit much more squarely in O'Brien's "browning" category, because they all identified as people of color and largely demonstrated a very critical power analysis that offered critiques of whiteness and white supremacy.

While O'Brien (2008) argued that Asian and Latinx Americans were carving out their own identity as a racial middle, Bonilla-Silva (2014) contended that, in fact, that there was a new racial order emerging in the U.S., largely due to demographic changes. The lean towards more color-evasive, covert racism in national rhetoric, according to Bonilla-Silva, was likening the U.S. to Latin American countries in which whiteness is protected by a buffering class of "honorary Whites," and there is a large, emerging group of "collective Blacks." The group of collective Blacks not only encompasses Black Americans, but also those of Latinx and Native American descent, and some Southeast Asian ethnic groups. The category of honorary Whites consists of East and South Asian Americans, as well as some light-skinned Latinx Americans. This group would serve as a buffer to the Whites, who ultimately maintain power in the U.S. Bonilla-Silva's Latin Americanization thesis offers a unique lens to view the study participants' experiences. While most of them fit into what Bonilla-Silva called the honorary White category, a few of them would be categorized as the collective Blacks. Those of East and South Asian descent were less likely to grow up in diverse neighborhoods or attend schools with diverse populations, and those of Southeast Asian descent, who would then be considered in the "collective Black" category, were more likely to have attended school with Black and Latinx peers. Undoubtedly, there are socioeconomic explanations for school segregation that explain at

least part of this phenomenon. Nonetheless, this pattern persisted among the participants in this study. Additionally, many participants in this study who would fall into the honorary Whites category did in fact identify strongly with whiteness, especially prior to attending college. For example, Hope wrote her graduate school application essay about being a “twinkie,” or White on the inside but yellow on the outside. Takuya expressed his desire to be more like his White friends in grade school and felt shame around his Japanese identity when he was around White friends. When Rohan was a child, his teacher told him he could scrub his skin to be lighter, resulting in him rubbing his skin so roughly with a brick that he still has scars from it to this day. These stories exemplify a desire to identify with White Americans and the value of whiteness that Hope, Takuya, and Rohan once felt, however subconscious. Their stories demonstrated how they grew into their critical consciousness despite once placing such a high value on whiteness. Specifically, the critical incidents they experienced that encouraged them to reflect on their identities and privileges facilitated their growth away from the honorary White identity.

Despite some consistency with Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) thesis, the participants all eventually found themselves identifying strongly as people of color who had a responsibility and commitment to racial justice for other people of color (and for individuals with other marginalized identities). They actively challenged the Latin Americanization thesis through their goals of deconstructing white supremacy, regardless of whether or not they fell into the honorary Whites category. The Asian Americans in this study recognized this honorary White category as a buffer for white supremacy, and a power play instituted by White America to maintain structural power over people of color. Their attempts to dismantle this structure contradict Bonilla-Silva’s proposed new racial order, but, as described in Chapter One, there are still many

Asian Americans who subscribe to the notion that they can someday attain Whiteness through either passive acceptance of or active engagement in the oppression of other people of color.

While those participants who would be considered “honorary Whites” by Bonilla Silva’s (2014) schema worked actively to dismantle white supremacy and reject the honorary White category, those who would be categorized as “collective Black” still acknowledged the differences in their experiences from Black Americans and other people of color. They strongly identified as Asian American, but were careful to point out that discrimination existed even among Asian Americans through colorism. Despite identifying as Asian American, the ethnic diversity among the participants was not only reflective of different cultures but also different family histories, ethnic histories, and histories of privilege and oppression in the U.S. Therefore, participants who identified as Southeast Asian or Pacific Islanders acknowledged the differences in their experiences from their East and South Asian peers, but still identified as Asian American and therefore having some privilege and access that was denied to Black and Latinx Americans.

Kim (2008) suggested that the Black-White binary persists despite changes in U.S. demographics. O’Brien (2008) and Bonilla-Silva (2014) did not directly contradict Kim’s (2008) claim, but rather complicated it by explaining the experiential and power relationships of non-White and non-Black Americans to the Black-White binary. The participants in this study expressed awareness of the Black-White binary of race in the U.S. and acknowledged their unique position in relation to it. Wei-yi and Hope both discussed the privilege they had been accorded because of their ability to benefit from whiteness. For Wei-yi, this was a result of his multiracial identity and having one White parent, and for Hope, this was a result of being adopted by a White family. It was important for them to leverage their privilege to resist the

oppression of not just themselves, but for other marginalized populations as well. Their identity development journeys, and the critical incidents that inspired them to seek justice for other people of color, lend nuance to the often-oversimplified presentation of the Black-White binary.

Sexton (2010) stated that racialized experiences within the U.S., particularly those that are not White and not Black, must be understood in relation to blackness, because blackness represents "...the (repressed) truth of the political and economic system" (p. 48). Participant experiences in this study supported this claim insofar as they often understood the development of their critical consciousness in relation to learning anti-blackness and understanding not only their own identity, but also the systematic oppression of Black people. They situated their perspectives in "the genocidal policies and practices directed towards indigenous peoples ... and toward African peoples in the organization of slavery, combined to form ... a master frame that has perniciously shaped the treatment and experiences of other subordinated groups" (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 107). Even though they frequently embraced the notion that there are no hierarchies of oppression, this claim seemed to serve the function of tying their own oppression to the oppression of Black and Brown people (i.e., with the saying that "my liberation is tied up in yours"), rather than erasing their experiences or glossing over the reality of institutionalized dehumanization of Black people. While I agree with the premise of Sexton's claim, it is also true that racism as a global system is also the foundation for the attempted genocide of Native American people whose oppression tends to be marginalized if not ignored in scholarly discourse on identity, privilege, power, and oppression in the U.S. (Waterman & Lindley, 2013; Willmott, Sands, Raucci, & Waterman, 2015).

The participants' narratives reinforced this trend insofar as they rarely if ever mentioned the experiences of Native Americans. Furthermore, they almost explicitly talked about race in a Black and White frame, and discussed the experiences across race largely in reference to Black people. It is possible that due to their socialization and understanding of race in the U.S., that they automatically associated "race" with Black people, rather than Latinx or Native American people. It is also possible that they had more interactions with Black people than Latinx or Native American people, and were therefore more likely to remember those experiences as they happened more often throughout their lives.

This study did not seek to confirm or validate theories about the racial order in the U.S. However, it does contribute to our understanding of the U.S. racial landscape, and the ways in which some Asian Americans are expressing agency in their participation in it (Koshy, 2001; Poon & Segoshi, in press). It also offers a complex understanding of how power is infused within this racial order and influences identity development and engagement in racial justice work. Whether or not the participants' and others' efforts to incrementally disrupt the racial power hierarchy remains to be seen, and will undoubtedly take a long time, despite the fast-paced feeling of today's political turmoil.

This study, in many ways, lends support to the idea that Asian American persists as a political identity, rather than a purely racial identity (Lopez & Espiritu, 1990). Most of the participants in this study felt connected to both their Asian American identity as well as other ethnic or cultural identities. It served as a common denominator in their experiences with racism and discrimination (Museus & Park, 2015). Their Asian American identity served to unify their diverse experiences and facilitated their mobilization for racial justice, especially their solidarity

with other racial groups. The collective, political panethnic identity of being Asian American allowed them to leverage their diverse experiences for political progress (Espiritu, 1994). Furthermore, it enabled them to fight against efforts such as anti-disaggregation and anti-affirmative action movements within and among Asian American and White communities (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

### **Connecting Racial Identity Development, Critical Consciousness, and Engagement in Racial Justice Work**

This study's major contribution to existing literature is the connection it draws between racial identity development and the development of a critical consciousness, and then connecting the development of a critical consciousness to engagement in racial justice work. Although previous researchers have explored the elements and stages of identity development (Accapadi, 2012; Ibrahim et al., 1997; Kim, 2004; Kodama et al., 2002), and how they are connected to the development of a critical consciousness (Osajima, 2007), the connection of these two components to engagement in racial justice work had not been explicitly explored. Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) emphasized sociopolitical action as a final but critical component of critical consciousness. The narratives elicited from the participants in this study demonstrate the multiple cumulative experiences that led to the connections between these three components. The narrative method complemented these connections by tracing participants' life experiences from early childhood through graduate school and into their careers.

Participants in this study connected their childhood, grade school, college, and postgraduate experiences to their engagement in racial justice work. Many of them described that were it not for their early critical incidents, which triggered the development of their critical

consciousness, they would not be so concerned and engaged with racial justice or the political environment. Their commitment, in large part, was borne of struggle and challenging events that forced them to reflect more critically on their identity and the experiences of Asian Americans. Critical hope served as an integral component of their experiences. Undoubtedly, they would not have felt purpose in their work without the vision of a more just future. The role that critical hope played, and continues to play, in their experiences is explored next.

### **Critical Hope**

Donald Trump's presidential campaign and subsequent election in 2016 were filled with highly divisive, racist, sexist, and otherwise oppressive rhetoric that thrust a number of social issues into a brighter public spotlight than before. Although issues of social justice have always been on the radar of activists and socially conscious Americans, the Trump administration has given rise to new concerns over the futures of certain marginalized populations in the U.S. But the rising threat of discrimination has also given way for tremendous visible acts of resistance. The Women's March, which occurred the day after Trump's inauguration, was the largest national protest in U.S. history (Wallace & Parlapiano, 2017). A record number of women, people of color, and LGBTQ people are running for public office across the country (Alter, 2018). Progressive grassroots activism has been ignited given the urgency of the Trump administration's unpredictable and flagrant disregard for human rights and dignity (Carmon, 2016; Edelman, 2017).

Critical hope (Duncan Andrade, 2009) is hope that is borne of struggle and persists despite struggle. Duncan Andrade explained that critical hope encompasses "the courage to pursue the painful path" of growth, "the solidarity to share in others' suffering" (p. 186), and



self-sacrifice for others to thrive so that an entire system can eventually become one free of oppression. The participants in this study demonstrated critical hope (Duncan Andrade, 2009) through their continued commitment to racial justice despite the rise of White nationalism in our sociopolitical environment. Although the objective of this study was to learn about how Asian American college graduates connected their early developmental experiences to their current engagement in racial justice, Critical Race Theory necessitates the analysis of current power structures and systemic oppression in this analysis (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Because of the timing of this study, special attention to today's particularly volatile political climate is warranted.

The participants' expressions of critical hope and intentionality in strategizing for social action offer inspiration for the continued fight for racial justice and resistance to harmful and oppressive policies. At the time of this writing, there remain a number of highly public and political circumstances that will require more and more individuals in the U.S. to be involved in racial justice work. As mentioned in the introduction, systematic killings of unarmed Black Americans at the hands of police continue to draw national attention as White police officers are repeatedly acquitted. There are also around 800,000 young Americans known as DREAMers who are waiting on congress to act on legislation that would determine whether or not they will be deported to an unfamiliar country, separating them from their families and communities in the U.S. Increased policing of immigrant communities (of those who are documented and undocumented), and mounting support for racist, anti-immigrant policies on the federal level all serve as urgent reasons behind the fight for racial justice. Because these threats will affect

people of color of all races and ethnicities, this movement necessitates their mobilization alongside one another, not against each other (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

### **Implications**

Although this study was interdisciplinary in nature, it focuses its implications on higher education and student affairs. The protocol for this study did not explicitly aim to understand the impact of higher education (or education more broadly) on the propensity to engage in racial justice work, but it is clear from the participants' experiences that elements of their college experiences had profound impacts on their desire to pursue careers related to social justice. For example, the importance of seeing and learning from Asian American professors and student affairs professionals, taking courses in sociology or ethnic studies, and engagement in student organizations, inspired participants to think more critically about power and race in the U.S. while learning about their own identities. This study also serves as a reminder, though, that higher education is not the only vehicle to engagement in racial justice and was not a deciding factor for all participants to pursue social justice.

Higher education institutions should consider the identity development trajectories of its students, especially those with marginalized identities, when constructing the student experience both academically and in cocurricular experiences. The process by which students gain understanding of their own identities, develop critical consciousnesses, and engage in activism and social progress should serve as a foundation for constructing their college experiences. Curricular experiences especially, such as general education curriculum, should be revised to reflect the mission of the institution and prepare students to engage in a complicated social power structure outside of the university.

A number of the critical incidents that participants experienced in this study were connected to negative experiences. In some situations they were left feeling alone and discriminated against, or simply at a loss for how to engage in difficult conversations about race and power. These negative experiences bear implications for educators, who were frequent perpetrators of discrimination in the classroom. Although, thankfully, the participants were able to grow from these, this cannot and should not be expected from every person experiencing discrimination. Institutions of higher education need to do more to prepare instructors at all levels for engaging in tough conversations about identity, privilege, oppression, and power in their classrooms. Educators should be facilitators of learning, not vehicles of oppression, for those most marginalized students in their classes.

All of the participants of this study connected their identity development journeys, along with their experiences with race and racism, to their engagement in racial justice work. However, despite the connections they made between these phenomena, they also frequently struggled to pinpoint exactly *why* they were so passionate about social justice. For the most part, they all knew other Asian Americans who grew up in similar communities and had similar experiences but were not as passionate about or engaged in social justice. When Grace Lee Boggs was asked what it was about her or her experience that led her to her work, she simply responded that she was not sure, but that it probably had something to do with the fact that she was a woman and that she was Chinese (Lee, 2013). This lends support for Osajima's (2007) claim that it is in fact a culmination of experiences that leads one to develop a critical consciousness. Further research should explore in more detail the specific types of experiences,

and the settings in which they occur, that lead Asian Americans to the development of a critical consciousness and engagement in racial justice work.

Most importantly, this study also carries implications for the need for people of color to continue forming alliances in the face of the Trump presidency and ongoing oppressive systematic racism. All participants noted that they were affected both personally, and often professionally, by the sense of urgency brought on by the current, hostile political climate. Although they all recognized that racism and other forms of oppression were nothing new, many of them felt that today's political climate further ignited their passion for social justice and presented them with new challenges in navigating how they engaged in racial justice work. Given the heightened tension they and many people of color and other marginalized people feel now, it is critically important for us to seek to understand each other's experiences and how we are all impacted by federal, state, and local policy. Mobilization against the Trump presidency (commonly referred to as "the resistance") should pay careful attention to the ways racism feeds federal policy that is being created under the guise of equality and protecting "Americans." These movement should seek to be inclusive of all voices and highlight the stories and experiences of people of color, centering their experiences in protests, marches, community organizing, and political action.

In order to enact a decolonized vision of higher education and student affairs, professionals in these fields should confront the racist foundation of their institutions and how the legacy of those practices informs their current structures and processes (Poon, 2018). To do so, a critical examination of their policies is warranted, along with a strategic plan for re-envisioning how they can be made more equitable (Poon, 2018). Policies and practices that

affect admissions and enrollment management, student services, financial aid, curriculum development, and other aspects of the lived student experience should be examined.

Furthermore, professional organizations within the field and adjacent to the field, such as the NCAA, should be held accountable for practices that view students as laborers or consumers and perpetuate inequitable systems (King, 2018). Doing so could lead to more intentionality behind the development of the critical consciousness of students, as they were encouraged to engage in more critical examination of their experiences.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited in several ways. First, the participants were almost all from the field of higher education, and all but one held at least a master's degree in higher education or student affairs. Future research on this subject should seek to diversify the careers and jobs of their participants to gather more diverse perspectives. Because professionals in the field of higher education were often (but not always) inspired to join the field through the impact that their college experiences had on them, this study may have overstated the influence of higher education on one's propensity to engage in racial justice work. Because the researcher specifically recruited participants with at least bachelor's degrees, there was an implicit assumption that higher education would in fact be a critical factor in each participant's journey. This turned out, however, to not be the case. Including participants from more diverse careers and academic fields of study may highlight alternative routes to engagement in racial justice.

A second limitation of this study is in the number of participants. Although this study did not seek to make generalizations about Asian Americans, including more participants of diverse Asian American backgrounds would offer a deeper dive into the experiences of specific groups.

For example, this study could be replicated with only participants who identify as multiracial, South Asian, or adopted Asian Americans. Doing so would also offer more content to confirm or validate existing Asian American identity development theories, many of which remain understudied – especially for those of South and Southeast Asian descent. Future studies should interview larger numbers of participants to gather more narratives, and therefore, content for analysis.

Third and finally, qualitative studies, by nature, are not designed to be generalizable. Therefore, quantitative methods that explore the types of experiences that motivate people to engage in racial justice work would complement this study nicely. Quantitative studies could more precisely identify the types of critical incidents and the extent to which they predict engagement in racial justice work, as well as narrow down how different critical incidents affect different groups of Asian Americans.

Future research should consider these limitations and broaden the research questions being pursued. Given the Trump presidency's embracing of policies that neglect the needs of marginalized populations, understanding how and why some people decide to work towards a more equitable society is critical. Researchers should also continue investigating questions about Asian American identity and political engagement, given their growing population in the U.S. and increasing (but still small) representation in U.S. politics and social action. Furthermore, this study can serve as a framework for understanding other identities, such as Latinx Americans, and explore how and why their identities are complicating the U.S. racial landscape and how non-Black people of color are positioned to contribute to or hinder social progress.

## Conclusion

This study explored why and how some Asian American college graduates' identity development journeys influenced their eventual engagement in racial justice work. This study carried timely significance given today's tense political climate, which had served as further motivation and inspiration for many of the participants. Their experiences with and across race and racism in their families, communities, schools, in higher education, and their careers, culminated to lead them towards a critical consciousness and subsequent engagement in racial justice work.

Guided by Critical Race Theory, this study centered the voices and experiences of Asian Americans, a marginalized population within the U.S. It focused on their racialized experiencing, eliciting counterstories to the dominant, White narrative that is so pervasive in academic studies. The use of narrative inquiry as a method allowed the researcher to elicit stories of identity development that participants felt were relevant to their engagement in racial justice work. It also served the research question by giving participants the opportunity to name the connections between their early identity development experiences and their current passion for social justice (Caine et al., 2013). It was not only the participants who were under study themselves, but rather the stories they told and constructed through their interviews (Caine et al., 2015; Josselson et al., 2011a). The use of narrative inquiry also separated this study from existing literature on Asian Americans in higher education and other fields by drawing on Critical Race Theory to center their narratives and examine their journeys as data in and of themselves.

The ten participants in this study shared their early childhood experiences, experiences across race and with racism, and many other factors in their lives that would eventually culminate in their engagement in racial justice work. Through semi-structured interviews, they explored their passion for social justice and the people who inspired them. They delved deeply into their identity development journeys, naming the critical incidents that made them more self-aware and critical of their own socialization.

This study is timely and important for understanding engagement in racial justice work. It inspired me, the researcher, to be more intentional and thoughtful in my engagement in racial justice work and offered critical hope in an overwhelming political environment. The participants in this study demonstrated critical hope, thoughtfulness, and empathy in their work; their passion modeled persistence in the face of great challenges.

### **Epilogue**

This study encouraged me to more critically reflect on my own experiences with owning my Asian American identity and developing a critical consciousness. These two things necessarily happened at similar times, for me, because once my Asian American identity was validated by my peers, especially within my field, I was encouraged to further explore where I was positioned in the midst of systems of power that at once privileged and oppressed me. I have reflected on the critical incidents in my own life that have led me to where I am today, and I look forward to the journey ahead, as more opportunities arise for me to pursue my passion for social justice.

As I reflect on my own life narrative, there are a few incidents that strike me as particularly relevant to my own story and development. They were undoubtedly shaped by my



early experiences in childhood attending an international school in Japan, being part of a multiracial and multicultural family, and moving to a White suburb of Massachusetts at a young age. All of these things can be viewed as foundational; they set the stage for the growth of my passion for social justice and interest in race and racial identity. It wasn't until I got to college and participated in a living-learning community for students of color that I really started to adopt an Asian American identity, largely because it was being institutionally recognized by the university and recognized on an individual level by my peers. I also made close friends with Asian Americans for the first time since I was a small child. Getting to know them and learn from them was key in validating my own experiences and feeling like I finally had something in common with my peers. A number of my first friends in college were Korean adoptees into White families; we had a number of conversations about our identities and how they were similar and different, given that I also have a White mother.

This community also exposed me to a number of courses that focused on racial inequality in the U.S., inspiring me to major in sociology. Some of my college level coursework was also critical in affirming my identity as Asian American. I took several courses in Asian American studies. Sociology of the Asian American experience and Sociology of Immigration were two courses that particularly validated my experience while centering the experiences of Asian Americans and immigrants, respectively, two identities that affected my own identity and experiences.

In Chapter Three I referred to an incident in my professional career in which I advised student organizations who were competing for resources on campus. All of these organizations were identity based, for example, the Black Student Union, Hispanic Student Association, and

Asian American Student Association. The regional context and history of the institution had led to a situation in which the Black student organizations had access to a much larger pool of funding and a huge number of vocal, prominent advocates on campus among the faculty and staff. The Latinx and Asian American student orgs, however, did not have long histories at the institution and therefore were less resources and had fewer individuals advocating for them as they were dramatically underrepresented in terms of faculty and staff. I was one of two Asian American staff members in the entire division of student affairs, including housing. There were only three Latinx staff members. This context encouraged me to consider the various forces at work and power dynamics that had led to this situation. It was complicated and difficult for me to navigate conversations about equity, history, oppression, and discrimination in this specific context in which Black students had more resources than other students of color, even though outside of the institution that was certainly not necessarily the case. My own identity as Asian American became particularly salient in this instance, because I found myself wanting to advocate very hard for the Latinx and Asian American students, who I perceived at the time to need someone on faculty or staff who would side with them in their fight for more resources.

This experience, in a lot of ways, can be equated to what we see happening in affirmative action debates today. There are people, many of them people of color, fighting it out for a limited number of positions at elite universities. Asian Americans fighting against affirmative action are essentially trying to take spots away from Black students, instead of working with Black students to take more spots away from White students. In my position, it would have been more effective for us all to advocate together for more resources for all of us, rather than trying to take anything away from each other. After all, even though the dynamics of privilege and

power were complicated within this group of students of color, they were a lot more black and white when you contextualized the issue within the broader scope of the predominantly White institution.

Following this incident, I decided to pursue my Ph.D. at Loyola University Chicago. I was drawn to Loyola for the sole purpose of working with Dr. OiYan Poon, my advisor and dissertation chair. I had sought out Ph.D. programs in which I could be exposed to critical Asian American scholarship, and I knew I needed an Asian American mentor. I had never felt so validated in my identities as I did when I began my program, which consisted of people with very diverse identities. This was the first time that I felt that I had something original to contribute, and that that contribution would be valued.

I arrived at this study a very different person than the person who had entered this program four years ago. I had a renewed sense of self-confidence, an unapologetic drive to study things that were important to me because they *were* me, and had done a lot of reflection on the values that drive me. The process of data collection was therapeutic in a sense, as the participants shared their diverse experiences that at times challenged my own perceptions and ideas about identity development, but also frequently served to validate my own experiences.

As I move forward in my journey, I anticipate continuing to grow in my own critical consciousness through continuous reflection. My commitment to social and racial justice has been renewed through this study, and will persist for the rest of my life. As I pursue new professional and personal opportunities, I look forward to what lies ahead.

APPENDIX A

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW

Dear [NAME OF PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT]:

My name is Megan Segoshi and I am currently conducting a study for my doctoral dissertation tentatively titled Asian American Critical Consciousness and Racial Solidarity, under the supervision of Dr. OiYan Poon (Assistant Professor of Higher Education). I am contacting you because you have been identified by [INSERT PRIMARY CONTACT] as a potential participant in my study. The purpose of this research is to understand how some Asian Americans' experiences have led to their solidarity with other people of color in racial justice movements. This study's findings will contribute to a growing body of research about Asian American racial identity and critical consciousness.

I would like to invite you to participate in an interview for this study. I am specifically seeking to interview Asian Americans who graduated from a two- or four-year university within the last fifteen years, and who engage either personally or professionally in antiracist work. If you have questions about these parameters or whether or not you meet them, I would be happy to discuss them further. This interview will attempt to understand how your life experiences and racial identity have contributed to your involvement in anti-racist work. Potential questions include:

- What were your perceptions of racial inequality growing up? (How did they develop? What influenced them?)
- Was there a particular event, experience, or relationship you had that sparked your engagement in racial justice work?
- Why is it important to you to act in solidarity with other marginalized groups?
- What is your perception of the racial positionality of Asian Americans in relation to people of other races?

This private interview will likely last between 60 and 90 minutes, and can be conducted face-to-face or via Google Hangouts. In either setting, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service. Your name and participation in the study will be kept confidential, and will not be used in any final products resulting from this study, including my dissertation. A pseudonym will be used in place of your real name in all documents.

Please let me know if you are able to voluntarily participate in an interview for this project by May 31, 2017. Once I hear from you, we can schedule a time to meet or conduct the interview via Google Hangouts and I will send you a consent form for participation. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at [msegoshi@luc.edu](mailto:msegoshi@luc.edu) or call me at 774.364.4162. Dr. Poon can be contacted at [opoon@luc.edu](mailto:opoon@luc.edu). Thank you.

Sincerely,

Megan Segoshi  
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education  
Loyola University Chicago

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### **Part 1: Personal History**

Where did you grow up?

Where did you go to school? What were your schools like (i.e. racially diverse?)

How did you first become aware of your race?

What were your experiences like interacting across race growing up?

What were your perceptions of racial inequality growing up? (How did they develop? What influenced them?)

-If participant hasn't moved to talking about their experiences in higher education, prompt them

Do you feel that your experiences in higher education had an impact on your racial identity consciousness? (What were those experiences?)

If participant is not clear about what "racial identity consciousness" means, clarify that racial identity consciousness refers to your awareness of your racial identity.

How has that awareness evolved over time?

Potential follow-up: Has your racial consciousness been influenced by other factors?

### **Part 2: Engagement in Racial Justice Work**

One of the criteria for participating in this study was that you are engaged in racial justice work as part of your personal or professional life. That could be on an informal level, like engaging people in conversations about racism that affects other people of color and not just Asians, or it could be more formal, like community or political organizing. The key component here is *action*. How would you describe your involvement in racial justice work?

Was there a particular event, experience, or relationship you had that sparked your solidarity with other people of color?

Why is it important for you to be in solidarity with other marginalized groups?

Why do you think it is important for Asian Americans to be engaged in racial justice work?

What is your perception of Asian Americans racial positionality in relation to people of other races?

How has the current political climate and heightened awareness of racism in the U.S. affected your work or the way you see yourself as an Asian American person in relation to your work?

How have your upbringing or experiences growing up (from part 1) influenced your eventual solidarity with other people of color or engagement in antiracist work?

APPENDIX C  
CONSENT FORM



Loyola University Chicago  
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Project Title:** Asian American Critical Consciousness and Racial Solidarity

**Principal Investigator:** Megan Segoshi

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Megan Segoshi, a doctoral candidate at Loyola University Chicago. You have been invited to participate in this study, because you are an Asian American individual who engages in antiracist work in either a personal or professional capacity, and have graduated from a two or four year university in the last fifteen years.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this research is to understand how some Asian Americans' experiences have led to their solidarity with other people of color in racial justice movements. This study's findings will contribute to a growing body of research about Asian American racial identity and critical consciousness.

**Procedures**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to voluntarily answer a set of questions regarding your personal experiences and identities.

**Risks/Benefits**

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

There are no direct benefits to you from participation. However, the results of the research will contribute toward the scholarly knowledge on Asian American identity development, critical consciousness, and antiracist work among Asian Americans.

**Confidentiality**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. In all reports of your responses, your confidentiality will be strictly maintained. In order to maintain your confidentiality:

- Recordings of the interview will be destroyed after they are transcribed, coded, and analyzed.
- Your real name will never be used in the reporting of data and analysis.
- The principal investigator, Megan Segoshi, is the only person who will have access to the recorded interviews, which will be kept on a password protected computer.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

**Contacts and Questions**

If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Megan Segoshi at [msegoshi@luc.edu](mailto:msegoshi@luc.edu) or 774.364.4162. You may also contact Dr. OiYan Poon, dissertation chair, at [opoon@luc.edu](mailto:opoon@luc.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

**Statement of Consent**

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Name of Participant (Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## VITA

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