

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Racialization in the Context of the Urban: Asian American Students & the Asian-Black Binary

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6qc6f5wc>

Author

Ching, Yenhoa

Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Racialization in the Context of the Urban:
Asian American Students & the Asian-Black Binary

By

Yenhoa Ching

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Daniel H. Perlstein, Chair

Professor Zeus Leonardo

Professor Michael Omi

Fall 2015

Abstract

Racialization in the Context of the Urban: Asian American Students & the Asian-Black Binary

by

Yenhua Ching

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Daniel H. Perlstein, Chair

Asian American students attend increasingly diverse schools, yet scholarship on their experiences typically considers them in isolation, leading to a group-level emphasis rather than a focus on the relational processes that give ‘Asian’ meaning as a social and educational construction and social location. Building on theories of racialization, I study an urban context where multi-group ethnic and racial relations are negotiated. My dissertation examines how Asian American and Black students, as well as staff, engaged in discourses and practices that reproduced patterns of inequality among groups of students of color in a high-poverty school that was 99% non-White, but where Asian Americans comprised almost half the student body. This research clarifies how positive but conditional notions of Asian-ness were created through and against negative ideas of Blackness, in particular. Staff generally contrasted engaged Asian American students with oppositional Black youth, despite the diversity of students’ aspirations and performance. While some contested these constructions, many students acted in ways that reinforced them. These biased perceptions ultimately led to greater support for Asian American students, who expressed a stronger sense of belonging to and ownership of the school than non-Asians. My work examines formal and informal stratification among racial minority youth and elucidates the ideologies and mechanisms that normalized it. Despite their academic heterogeneity, urban Asian American students were privileged through a re-inscription of the model minority myth that imputes a cultural basis for Asian American educational success, while Black students were interpreted through negative stereotypes and expectations. This dissertation highlights the costs of Asian American students’ privilege in this context and draws attention to the continued marginalization of racial minority students. It argues that the model minority trope and the trope of the oppositional and deficient Black subject were bound together in the schooling of Asian American and Black students. It reveals the power of the myth to shape how all students are positioned in a racial hierarchy, thus giving insight into racialization itself.

for my parents

Table of Contents

List of Tables	iv
Preface.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Curriculum Vitae	vii
Chapter 1, Introduction	1
Theoretical Framework & Literature Review.....	4
Schooling and Social Reproduction.....	5
Racial Identity-Formation.....	6
Asian American Racial Positioning.....	8
Methodology and Site Description	12
Process of Analysis & Reflections on My Researcher Role.....	14
Contributions of the Research.....	16
Organization of the Dissertation.....	17
Field Note.....	19
Chapter 2, The Role of Administrators, Teachers, & Staff in a Race-Making Institution	26
Racialization and Color-Blindness in Schooling.....	27
Race-Blindness and Teacher and Staff Perceptions of Race, Racism, and Racial Minority Students.....	28
Tracking Non-Asians: Spaces of Marginalization.....	35
Spaces of Ownership: Academic Tracking and Extra-Curricular Activities.....	39
Discourses of Culture and Student-Centered Choice.....	42
Race-Making in a Struggling School: The Difficult Position of Teachers and Staff	46
Conclusion	48
Chapter 3, The Racialization of Asian American Students	50
Asian Americans and Education: The Myth of the Model Minority	51
The Asian-Black Binary	52
Asian-ness and Blackness in Mr. Roth’s History Class.....	53
The Meaning and Materiality of Asian-ness at Central High School.....	57
Children of Refugees and Immigrants	59
Poverty and Violence in Central City and at Central High School.....	61
Self-Segregation in Classroom Settings.....	65
Asian American Students’ Non-Participation and Superficial Learning.....	70
Being ‘Asian’: Non-Political Ways of Identifying.....	74
High-Achieving Asian Americans: Defining Sites of Engagement	76
High Achieving Asian Americans: Ways of Categorizing.....	80
High-Achieving Asian Americans: Racializing Involvement	83
High-Achieving Asian Americans: Views of the Racial Structure	84
Asian Americans in the “Regular” Track	87
Asian Americans Falling Through the Cracks: Perspectives on Schooling and Education	90
Average and Struggling Asian American Students: Perspectives on the Social Structure.....	95
Average and Struggling Asian American Students and Racial Privilege.....	97
Racial Boundary Crossing	98

Anti-Racist Youth Organizations: Asian American Students as People of Color	104
Asian Immigrant Newcomers: Entering a New Field of Racial Positions.....	107
Conclusion	109
Chapter 4, The Racialization of Black Students	111
The Fluidity and Durability of Race: Blackness at Central High School	112
The Fluidity and Durability of Race: Multiracial Black-Asian Students	121
Environmental Constraints to Black Students' Agency.....	126
Black Students and the Production of Race: Meaning-Making, Racialization and Stereotyping	135
Black Students' Survival Strategies for Navigating Racialization	141
Marginalization, Racialized Places, and Alternative Spaces of Belonging	144
Conclusion	150
Chapter 5, Conclusion.....	152
Notes	156
Bibliography	171

List of Tables

Table 1 <i>Percentage of Central High School students scoring at proficient or advanced (meeting or exceeding the state standards) on the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program, 2010-2011.</i>	47
Table 2 <i>Central High School and district advanced placement (AP) course completion rates and exam passing rates.</i>	73
Table 3 <i>Central High School Science Academy by race.</i>	78
Table 4 <i>Central High School student class officers by race.</i>	79
Table 5 <i>Central High School Leadership class/club by race.</i>	79
Table 6 <i>Link Crew club by race.</i>	79

Preface

One morning during my ethnographic field research, I awoke at 5:30 and could not fall back asleep. I found myself thinking about snippets of conversations from the previous day at my school site. I thought about things people said that I forgot to record in my field notes, and worried that I would forget them before I had a chance to write them down. I thought about individual students I wish I had gotten to know better the previous semester, before they graduated. And I found myself worrying about something the principal said. She reiterated to me that my research should not include the name of the high school anywhere, nor the names of the teachers and students. I reassured her that this had been my plan all along. But the greater issue was anonymity, confidentiality, and the possible identification of those who had been involved in my study, because “there might be something bad to say.”

My outsider role at the school enabled me to have access to insights that were more elusive to the adult and student stakeholders who were involved in the thick of personal, social, and professional investments in the school’s collective life. Yet my subjectivity and “situated knowledge” was undeniable to me. Throughout the field work and the writing of this research, I have asked the following of myself: How can I tell a story (one possible among many) out of all the stories that I collect at this site, and what stories are *not* possible here? How can I make storytelling a point of departure to learn about and then say something about the broader social order? Can someone so concerned with the patterns of the social order draw a picture of local social life that is not a caricature, an unintentional distortion of an exceedingly complex set of observable givens? After all, how can social scientific writing – or any research that purports to tell a story (and all research does) compensate for its acts of elision and omission?

My desire in this dissertation is to honor the trust that has been shown to me by the teenagers and adults who have shared parts of their stories with me. I seek to do this by drawing as faithful an account of reality as possible, sketched out in a way that is informed by theory and that illuminates theory, to describe the reality of the world and to suggest that other worlds are possible.

Acknowledgements

During my first week of graduate study, my advisor, Daniel Perlstein, invited me to go for a walk. We strolled off campus and into downtown Berkeley. As we passed by Berkeley High School, a large, comprehensive public high school, my advisor stopped to ask me a deceptively simple question. “Berkeley High,” he said. “Reform it, or burn it down?”

That question, which was meant to get me to think about the nature of the problems confronting education in American society and to conceptualize their remedies—liberal, incremental reform or radical, fundamental change—was the first of countless puzzles we talked over in the course of almost a decade of mentorship, that Dan used to push me intellectually. I am fortunate to have been advised by him and welcomed into the academic community through office hour meetings that ran late into the afternoon, research groups held at his home, and writing getaways at his beautiful retreat in Big Sur, California. I am indebted to Dan for his support, generosity, and warmth. I am also appreciative of Michael Omi and Zeus Leonardo, dissertation committee members who helped me deepen my thinking and sharpen my sense of politics, through the years.

I am grateful to the Center for the Study of Social Change, especially to Christine Trost, Deborah Lustig, and David Minkus, who read multiple drafts of parts of this dissertation and gave valuable feedback, encouraged me, and cultivated a true sense of community among social change scholars in Berkeley. I am also thankful for colleagues in my department, namely Kenzo Sung, for his critical insights and guidance. I am lucky to count these brilliant scholars as my friends.

With heartfelt thanks, I acknowledge my most steadfast companion and source of love and support on this journey, my husband, Yaacov. I also thank our little daughter, Winter, for the joy she gives. She is my perfect poem. My efforts are a product of the good life I share with them. Finally, my deepest gratitude is to the students and staff whom I encountered during my fieldwork, who brought me into their lives and shared their world with me.

Curriculum Vitae

Education

M.A. Education, University of California, Berkeley, 2009.

B.A. History, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Summa Cum Laude, 2006.

Employment

2012 – 2015 Graduate Student Instructor, “Effective Personal Ethics for the 21st Century.”
Department of Liberal Arts & Sciences. University of California, Berkeley.

2011 Graduate Student Researcher, “Beyond Whiteness: Asian Americans and Latinos
in the U.S. Imagination.” University of California Center for New Racial Studies.
Principal Investigators: Lisa Garcia Bedolla and Claire Jean Kim.

2011 Graduate Student Instructor, “Chicano/a History.” Summer Bridge Program.
University of California, Berkeley.

2008 – 2010 Graduate Student Instructor, “Educational Equity and Urban Schooling.”
Department of Education. University of California, Berkeley.

2009 Graduate Student Instructor, “Contemporary Issues in the Southeast Asian
Refugee Community.” Department of Asian American Studies. University of
California, Berkeley.

2007 – 2008 Chief of Staff to the Campus Affairs Vice President of the Graduate Assembly.
University of California, Berkeley.

Fellowships and Awards

2013 – 2015 Graduate Training Fellowship, Center for Research on Social Change, University
of California, Berkeley.

2014 Honorable Mention, Ford Foundation Fellowship.

2009 Mentored Research Award, University of California, Berkeley.

2006 – 2011 Chancellor’s Fellowship, University of California, Berkeley.

2006 William V. Power Award, University of California, Berkeley.

2006 James Scholar, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

2006 Phi Beta Kappa, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

- 2006 Phi Beta Kappa Scholarship Essay Award, First Place, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- 2006 Clark Cunningham Undergraduate Essay Award, First Place, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- 2006 Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship, Alternate Status, Southeast Asian Summer Studies Institute, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- 2005 Summer Research Opportunities Program Outstanding Scholar Award, Committee on Institutional Cooperation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- 2003 Asian American Heritage Month Essay Award, First Place, Northern Illinois University.
- 2003 General Assembly Scholarship, Illinois Office of the State Representative.

Activities

- 2013 – 2015 Graduate Fellows Training Program, Center for Research on Social Change, Institute for the Study of Societal Issues, University of California, Berkeley.
- 2010 – 2011 Tutor, Refugee Transitions, Oakland, CA.
- 2007 – 2008 Tutor, East Bay Asian Youth Center, Oakland, CA.
- 2008 Committee Chair, New Graduate Student Orientation, University of California, Berkeley.
- 2008 Student Judge, Haas Global Social Venture Competition, Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley.
- 2007 – 2008 Committee for Campus Affairs, Graduate Assembly, University of California, Berkeley.
- 2007 – 2008 Chair, Committee for Institutional Change, Graduate School of Education Graduate Student Association, University of California, Berkeley.
- 2007 Graduate Student Representative, Search Committee for the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, University of California, Berkeley.
- 2006 – 2010 Democracy & Education Research Group, University of California, Berkeley. Research Director: Daniel Perlstein.

Chapter 1, Introduction

Whenever human beings move geographically and become intimately intertwined with other human beings, they inevitably enter into a dialogue that produces a particular pattern of institutionalized differences: soon people must act in terms of the identifications their interlocutors have made of them. 'Diversity' is never a simple end product of substances living together in some geographical space. (Varenne, 1998, p. 27)

I'm very aware of my race when I'm at the school, and I feel like I'm hyper-aware of other people's races. – An Asian American teacher

Seated at a long row of blue cafeteria tables arranged especially for the occasion, I was struck by the conjunction of cultural forms in front of me. It was Central High School's Lunar New Year celebration, and I arrived an hour into the scheduled program on a very rainy Friday night. Instantly, some students who recognized me smiled at me, and I was greeted by Mrs. Conner, a middle-aged White teacher who wore a characteristically tense expression. The principal sat at a table, enjoying the show. Mr. Lee, the Cantonese Club faculty sponsor who was leading the event, directed some students in the food line. They were worried about running out of Chow Mein noodles and soft drinks.

I took a seat and watched a boy sing a slow, romantic song in Vietnamese. The crowd cheered him enthusiastically. Perhaps 30 adults and about 120 students were present. Among the adults, most were White and Black. Many were teachers. All the students who I saw were Asian American. Certainly all the student performers were Asian American. Behind the emptied cafeteria floor that served as the central stage area, there were two tables holding Chinese New Year accouterments, like a large wheel featuring all the signs of the Chinese zodiac and corresponding stuffed animals. Above these tables was a large banner painted with the profiles of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and other Black historical luminaries, along with the words "Black History Month." Along the walls hung colorful flags representing nations from around the world. On the back wall hung a painted banner heralding the Lunar New Year.

Four boys danced to the next song, a contemporary R&B song. When they finished, the students urged a White male teacher, who was obviously familiar with the students, to go to the center of the floor to dance. Evidently bashful and nervous but very good natured, the teacher joined the students in a dance that made the entire crowd laugh. As I settled in my seat, I noticed the presence of a few students who were not Asian American: a Black male student whom I recognized from Mr. Medina's AP U.S. history class and Ms. Meier's Leadership class mixed in with the crowd, and two Black girls and a Black boy, who sat together at a table on their own. There was also another Black girl posing in a group photo with several Asian American girls.

One of the next songs was in Spanish. One of the Spanish teachers, Mr. Garcia, belted out the Spanish lyrics. When he finished, Mr. Lee took the microphone, saying "Muchas Gracias." Students urged more teachers from the audience to take center stage and dance to the hip hop songs that followed, including Mr. Medina, the AP U.S. history teacher. When he finished dancing, students told him he had "moves." The MC returned to the center of the floor and asked the crowd if anyone watched Asian dramas. The crowd cheered. Referring to a popular Korean

romantic comedy, he asked, “Does anyone know *My Sassy Girl*?” Some hands went up. The Asian American boy seated next to me turned to me and said, “What’s that? Maybe I’m not Asian enough!”

What does it mean to be “Asian enough,” and in contrast to whom? In the United States, racial structures were historically codified in slave laws and in Jim Crow laws, the effect of which was the construction of a Black-White binary and comparatively little crossing across relatively fixed racial lines.¹ Following the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, the unprecedented and accelerated immigration of people from Asia and Latin America unsettled and complicated the historical Black-White understanding of American race relations.² Asian Americans occupy a liminal position in the racial order at the thresholds of both Blackness and Whiteness. Indeed, scholars of Asian American identity and history have long observed that the incorporation of Asians into the civic and democratic life of the American mainstream is not simply a narrative of assimilation, but also of exploitation, legal and structural restrictions, political contestation and grass-roots organization (Espiritu, 1992; Chang, 2001; Lowe, 1996; Palumbo-Liu, 1999).

Today, Asian Americans are one of the most heterogeneous racial groups in the U.S., comprised of a staggering multiplicity of ethnic groups related to almost fifty distinct national origins, and within the U.S., are spread across the class spectrum. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Asian immigration met the American demand for cheap labor, and after World War II, Asian immigration was shaped by occupational preferences for professionals and other highly trained individuals in fields valuable to the U.S. economy and government. Thus both historically, and in the wake of global restructuring that has given rise to newly powerful Asian economies, the selective immigration of Asians with high levels of economic and social capital has influenced their economic standing in the U.S. (Louie, 2004; Ong, Bonacich, & Cheng, 1994). Their widely touted economic and educational achievements have contributed to their recent image as model minorities situated on the White side of the Black-White racial binary. On the other hand, popular normative conceptions of Southeast Asian Americans have led scholars to label Southeast Asian American ethnic groups as “ideologically blackened” and to include them in the “collective black strata” (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Ong, 2003).³ This range of origins, migration experiences, socio-economic profiles, ascriptions and classifications reflect the special degree to which Asian Americans reside in a space of racial indeterminacy.

In the introduction to the third edition of *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi & Winant (2015) write, “Race and racism in the United States have been shaped by a centuries-long conflict between white domination and resistance by people of color. Theories of race and racism have necessarily been molded by the same relationships” (p. 3). Indeed, the directional flow of action in the story of racial formation in the U.S. has flowed up and down, between the system of white domination and resisting actors named as people of color, i.e., actors who became raced subjects through processes of racialization and self-formation arising in response to that racialization. *People of color*, then, refers to a politicized identification based on the experience of inhabiting contiguous, perhaps shared, social positions within a racial hierarchy. Given that racial power and privilege are experienced unevenly by differently subordinated, racialized and racializing groups, what is the relationship of these positions in relation to one another? More specific to this project, what is the social location of Asian American students in light of minority groups’ differentiated experiences of racialization?

To capture how Asian Americans understand and negotiate these racial ambiguities and relations, and to illuminate the landscape of racial positions that can take shape at an ‘urban’ high school, this dissertation analyzes the racialization of Asian American students in a multiracial urban context. I found that implicit beliefs about Blackness were contained in constructions of Asian-ness, and implicit beliefs about Asian Americans were contained in constructions of Blackness. Asian American students were also defined (and defined themselves) against Latino students. However, as I will demonstrate, this particular school was organized around an Asian-Black binary that reinforced the invisibility of Latinos. I draw on the experiences and perspectives of Asian American students as well as those of the group which they were most frequently juxtaposed: Black students.⁴ My dissertation examines the racial subject-formation processes and constellations of relationships that formed a part of the racialized sense of self/others that these students constructed, and which influenced how they, as parts of racialized groups, shared racial meanings and values. While paying particular attention to Asian American racial positioning, I reveal how two groups of young people dealt with race in a diverse and heterogeneous school setting, and I interrogate what implications their efforts fruitfully and particularly reveal for schools and society.

The chapters that follow demonstrate how race, as an idea and as a social category, was mutually worked on, built up, and in short co-constituted and experienced by individuals who used racially informed concepts and beliefs to conceptualize who they were, to order their social and academic lives, to interpret their schooling experiences, and to make sense of how they and their peers fit into the larger social order. The following pages also attend to the material dimension of race-making by looking at the concrete forms this process took on, including in the relatively segregated arrangement of classes, programs, and school spaces, as well as in racially bifurcated and unequal academic performance outcomes. This study uncovers racial patterns but also highlights slippages in how race-making operated, which allowed students to respond to racialization with more and less subtle exercises of agency, showing that agency was variably bounded in certain contexts and for racially differentiated groups. I show that within ‘zones of contest,’ students resisted racialization in innovative, sometimes oppositional ways (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Over the past 50 years, scholarly debate about urban communities and schools has been shaped in large part by disagreement over the intersection of poverty and race, and especially by arguments about the ‘culture of poverty.’ Still potent today, these arguments treat poverty as an autonomous, self-perpetuating way of life rather than an effect of deepening economic inequality. Scholars have shown that urban areas are repeatedly marked through the racial signification of poverty and the ‘inner city’ as non-White (Leonardo & Hunter, 2007; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Soss *et al.*, 2001; Valentine, 1968). Following the cue of scholars who examine interracial tensions and group position in urban centers (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996), my dissertation highlights the ethnic heterogeneity and dynamic racial interplay in such settings, and shows how race works as a vehicle of subjectivization for Asian American students attending school in a racially and economically segregated, post-industrial environment impacted by concentrated poverty.

The relationship of Asian Americans to other racial minorities in the urban school context particularly warrants deeper examination, because assertions of Asian American educational and socio-economic ascendance are currently salient. I found that the apparent success of Asian American students (as a group) in a low-performing school was often used to justify teaching and discipline practices that tended to reinforce wide disparities between Asian American and

other students of color, and among Asian American students themselves. Focusing on individual and group-level competence and competition can mask the failure of schools to foster academic success and to inculcate deep learning.

Why study the formation of racial subjects in the context of the ‘schooling’ of racial minority students? Schools are ideal places to inquire into relations of power and cultural production not only because they are sites where power is brokered, normative conditions are set, and identities and subjectivities are imposed, tested, refused, and redefined but precisely because these things are not readily recognized as happening. Like other social systems, schools are surprisingly effective at creating mechanisms of stratification, of demarcating ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ and delimiting the social boundaries between the two. Thus, young people learn and perform identities in institutions that teach hierarchy as much as anything else. Deschenes, Cuban & Tyack (2001) offer a historical perspective on the penchant of educators to frame educational misfits in terms of blame; research on curricular tracking (Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Oakes, 1985) strongly implicates schools in the work of social division; and analyses of classroom-level interactions capture ‘failure’ in its collective construction and deployment against individual children (Eckert, 1989; McDermott & Varenne, 1998). Much is at stake in *not* inquiring into the naturalized routines of one’s socialization into inequality.

By adopting a conceptual frame that conceives of schooling in terms that are attentive to cultural production and the weaving of power into daily experience, I am able to analyze the unique ways in which urban Asian American and Black students were racially and otherwise configured as ‘other,’ as well as how they expressed a political agency by adopting, improvising, and contesting personal and collective meanings about themselves and others. The context of these configurations is a history and landscape of interconnected power arrangements that is older and more immense than the space lived in by any particular individuals. I reveal this arrangement of social power as it was activated and concretized at the levels of racialization and schooling.

Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

To conceptualize how the experiences of Asian American youth present a case for analyzing racial and social power, my dissertation research draws from modes of critical inquiry that have developed in sociology, cultural studies, race and ethnic studies, and education. My theoretical framework interrelates three bodies of literature.

First, I draw upon findings from studies of schooling and social reproduction that demonstrate that schools are social systems whose contradictory promises, purposes, and effects mean that they play a significant role in shaping youth subjectivity and have a crucial, unfulfilled equity function. Second, I define racial identity formation as a discursive process drawn from material-cultural resources and embedded in social-structural formations within scholarly literatures that take the subjectivity of human agents as their central problematic. Third, I outline current thinking in theories of Asian American racial positioning, and contend that the complex social location of urban, Asian American youth can serve as a window into the deep structure of the larger social order, where it is possible to both recognize some of the tensions and tendencies of domination and to extend a critique of powerful racial dynamics. In this section, I delineate the contours of these three bodies of thought, connecting them and giving prominence to representative works in each that are seminal and which influence the theoretical framework of my dissertation.

Schooling and Social Reproduction

Educational analysts broadly agree that much is at stake in the schooling of America's young people, particularly those who are most socially, economically, and racially disadvantaged (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 1991; MacLeod, 1987). There is less agreement about the extents to which schools enhance equity or aid in reproducing unequal social relationships, educational disparities, and uneven opportunity structures. Some theorists and policy-makers have seen in schools the potential to affirm America's basic democratic ideals of fairness and equal opportunity (Gutmann, 1987). Schools hold the promise of upward mobility and the American Dream of success forged through individual effort (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003). Even schools labeled as 'inner-city,' 'ghetto,' and 'failing' are viewed as "indispensable institutions": for all they do wrong, public schools are nonetheless a source of social support and hope in the communities they serve (Noguera, 2003). Yet, scholars have powerfully argued that these same institutions are often the places where exclusion and failure are first painfully concretized for the oppressed (Ferguson, 2001; Fine, 1991).

Educational systems and the theories that describe them extend from and are shaped by the social theories and transformations of their age (Durkheim, 1969). In the United States, schools have been implicitly and explicitly charged with a range of political, social, and economic purposes: to educate future citizens, exercise social control, improve conditions in social life, increase national wealth, and socialize future workers, for example (Spring, 1978). My dissertation research draws from and adds to a wide body of literature that challenges the notion that schools are neutral spaces where curricular content is an innocent expression of what students learn (Giroux, 1993; Karabel & Halsey, 1977). I seek to analyze schools as institutions that are inextricably value-laden, and I interpret schooling as a process that is charged and animated by broad political, economic, socio-historical, and ideological forces (Perlstein, 2004).

Schools are not stand-alone institutions and cannot be divorced from the class-stratified societies in which they are ensconced. This starting point is informed by works in neo-Marxist and educational theory that focus on the role of schooling in a capitalist society. Authors writing from a radical, functionalist, social reproductive perspective advance an analysis of a society concerned to reproduce the social forms and relations that sustain capitalist modes of production (Althusser, 1971; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Conceptually anchored in the context of historical materialism, they argue that schools play a critical role in reproducing the conditions of class domination, particularly as they function as an agency of the "ideological state apparatus" of the self-regulating state (Althusser, 1971) or as exponents of a "hidden curriculum" that corresponds the social relations of the classroom with the hierarchical values, norms, and skills that characterize social relations in the workplace (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Both approaches conceive of the educational system as a reflex of economic imperatives.

In contrast, Bourdieu (1977) contends that schools do not simply reflect the designs of the economic system, but instead are systems that subtly and covertly perform the function of culturally reproducing the power relations and symbolic relations that uphold dominant class interests.⁵ Cultural capital—the dispositions, habits and "linguistic and cultural competence" that are valued by the dominant society and are used to pass along privilege and status from one generation to another or within a community, is unevenly distributed across classes and class fractions and exists in embodied, objectified, and institutionalized states (p. 81). It represents the "best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital" (Bourdieu, 1986). This concept enables an analysis of the exertions of the ruling class in the field of culture linked to supposedly meritocratic organizations like schools, because although it is acquired in the class-specific

setting of family life, its value is especially legitimized and normalized in schools and universities. According to Lareau & Weininger's (2003) interpretation of Bourdieu, the cultural capital concept emphasizes the "capacity of a social class to 'impose' advantageous standards of evaluation on the educational institution" (p. 567).

Whereas the above theorists examine schooling as a heavily structured process of social and cultural reproduction that results in the domination of individual subjects, others point towards contestation and resistance. Willis (1981) combines neo-Marxist social theory with ethnography to uncover oppositional youth cultures and their counter-hegemonic meanings. The working class lads, as Willis calls them, create and share a rich counter-school culture that is a kernel of political self-formation, and therefore, emancipatory possibility. However, the lads' rebelliousness inevitably helps secure their subordinated place within the class structure, and they are prepared (and prepare themselves) to assume working class jobs and identities.

Another profound critique of counter-posed treatments of structure and agency can be found in the work of Giroux (1983), who contends with schools as sites of both dominance and resistance. He elucidates a theory of resistance and radical pedagogy in which history and political expression are not "made behind the backs" of social actors, but dialectically through them (p. 120). In this formulation, schools are not simply factories of domination, but "alternative public spheres" that have a deep capacity to foster self and social transformation and to "provide room for emancipatory teaching, knowledge, and social practices" (pp. 239, 115). Above all, they are political sites where hope is not lost.

This canon of neo-Marxist educational theory is a compelling conceptual platform for analyzing structural and cultural (re)production in schools. However, it fails to interrogate conceptual territory beyond the analytics supplied by capital. My research extends in the direction of the resistance theories posited by Willis (1977), Giroux (1983), and others (Eckert, 1989; Hall & Jefferson, 1993; Thompson, 1964) in its presupposition that subjectivization is not a one-way process. Schools provide space and ideological resources for developing individuals to forge identities that are simultaneously or alternately accommodating, creative, and oppositional. My study makes room for contradictions not only amongst students (and the institutions and authority figures exerting control over them), but also in the very logics of domination and resistance, both of which are never informed by a unitary oppressor. Finally, and crucially, this literature on the social reproductive function of schools lacks a racial analysis. My dissertation foregrounds a racial analysis to examine how Asian American students came to understand themselves and to be understood as racial beings.

Racial Identity-Formation

The continued significance of race is evident in all facets of American life, including young people's experiences of schooling. Unequal educational attainment among Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and Asian Americans, for example, reveals patterns of persistent racial stratification across social domains that influence students' opportunities for education and future employment (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003; Jenks & Phillips, 1998; Massey & Denton, 1993; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Willie & Willie, 2005). At the same time, racial categories are socially and politically constructed concepts, a consequence of our individual and collective negotiations and contestations concerning racial meanings and how they ought to matter (Omi & Winant, 1986/2015).

At once politically consequential and more fluid than essential or fixed, race also proves to be a potent and captivating resource in people's identity-formation. In this project, I treat

‘Asian’ and ‘Black’ not simply as descriptive labels, but as dynamic social relations that connect individuals to one another and to the social structures they live in and help (re)create. I investigate how Asian American and Black students see themselves and others as a means of unraveling and ‘defamiliarizing’ how these terms are conferred (Marcus & Fischer, 1986). I draw from the conceptual re-imagining of racial identity as a phenomenon enabled through social relations and anchored in a concrete, material reality, both a being and a becoming in an unequal society, in order to illuminate the inter-subjective experiences that partially but powerfully constitute people as racialized subjects (Holland, 1998; Hall 1992; Butler 1993).

In analyzing students’ racial understandings of self and others, my study takes the notion of complex social subjects who 1) are socio-historically situated and 2) exhibit a profound human capacity for agency, as a theoretical premise. It is influenced by and expands upon the works of cultural theorists whose insights into identity and subject-formation aid a more critical analysis of schooling that mediates the dialectic between structure and agency. Specifically, my understanding of racial identity-formation borrows from Holland’s (1998) practice theory of self and identity and Foucault’s insights on the subject’s relation to social and institutionalized mechanisms of power.

Holland (1998) provides a theory of identity linked to cultural production and meaning-making. Inspired by the works of Bahktin and Vygotsky, they define *identities* as self-understandings continuously formed in social practice, which provide the basis for framing new understandings and actions:

Identity is a concept that figuratively combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations. We are interested in identities, the imaginings of self in worlds of action, as social products, indeed, we begin with the premise that identities are lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualized as they develop in social practice. But we are also interested in identities as psycho-historical formations that develop over a person’s lifetime, populating intimate terrain and motivating social life (p. 5).

This dialogic and developmental conception of identity directs focus to the inner life and activity of subjects, but is not individualistic or aesthetic; it connects subjects to the cultural forms of their environment, which they actively interpret, improvise upon, and (re)produce. Within this frame, the self is made and remade through a shared process of instantiation in which individuals draw from cultural repertoires, values, and discourses to identify and manage themselves and others. Individuals create shared logics with other individuals; for instance, students might co-construct a code that corresponds to and plays with the discourses of the moral world of their school space. Furthermore, it confronts the structural features through which power differentiates intersubjective existence. Identity and opportunities for agency are specific to structurally marked “worlds”—historically, socially, and culturally contextualized fields or social frames that individuals participate in constructing and recognizing.

I conjugate the vision of self and society elaborated by Holland with certain aspects of Foucault’s treatment of the subject’s relation to social and institutional power to understand the discursive, relational dimension of racial identity formation. I see it as a process drawn from cultural resources and manifested in social discourses. Crucially, however, the material conditions of peoples’ lives inform how and why they form specific racial identities. Racial categories also become visibly embedded in normalized institutional structures and in the social

patterns that are associated with them. I am interested in Foucault's (1977, 1978, 1980) contextual and historical analytics of power, in which power is conceived of as diffuse rather than top-down and relational rather than objective; individuals do not merely possess and dispossess power, they also participate in it and are socially constituted through power relations. Foucault's belief in the productive capacity of power allows us to analyze the discursive constitution of racial subjects. In this project, power is inextricable from the constitution of the Asian American model minority as the intimate foil of the oppositional Black subject. Power has a positive as well as negative aspect, that is, it generates new discourses and enables the potential for resistance.

My reading of Foucault emphasizes his study of the subject's possibility for resistance against severely asymmetrical power relations. I contend that human subjects are constituted and disciplined through social norms and discourses, but not totally or permanently; even under profoundly constraining conditions, the subject is constantly involved in the active constitution of personal and collective subjectivities. The social, political, and economic context of schools and the urban city ground my investigation of students' racial self-making (and their making of others as racial subjects) within the structures and conditions that make struggle and resistance eminently relevant.

Asian American Racial Positioning

The third body of literature which my dissertation research is informed by and contributes to examines the racial positioning of Asian Americans within the contemporary racial order of the United States. It represents an analytical and theoretical conversation that developed in sociology, Asian American studies, history, cultural studies, critical race theories, and education centered on the relationship of Asian Americans to the concepts of race and racism. Race is a historically specific ideological construction of difference that is the result of a process of signification that attaches certain somatic characteristics, usually skin color and hair texture, with meanings and cultural values that are then ascribed to whole groups of people who supposedly share those attributes; although race is at heart a socially constructed concept, its effects are materially consequential.⁶

I root my research in the sociological frame of 'racialization' propounded by Omi & Winant (2015). As they draw the point, race is both ideological *and* material, linking the ways bodies are seen to socio-historically driven systems of cultural representation as well as institutionalized macro-structures and relations. Racial identities, categories, and the relationships connecting these are the symbolic terrain of contestation upon which meanings about embodied individuals and groups compete to stabilize as "common sense." Racialization is the process through which that happens:

While acknowledging the inherent instability and socially constructed characteristics of race, we argue that there is a crucial corporeal dimension to the race-concept. Race is ocular in an irreducible way. Human bodies are visually read, understood, and narrated by means of symbolic meanings and associations. Phenotypic differences are not necessarily seen or understood in the same consistent manner across time and place, but they are nevertheless operating in specific social settings. Not because of any biologically based or essential difference among human beings across such phonemic variables as "color" or "hair texture," but because such sociohistorical practices as conquest and enslavement classified human bodies for purposes of

domination—and because these same distinctions therefore became important for resistance to domination as well—racial phenotypes such as black and white have been constructed and encoded through the language of race. We define this process as racialization—the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group (p. 13).

Omi & Winant posit a theory of racial formation (defined as “the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed”) that argues that race cannot be theoretically managed as an epiphenomenal relation of supposedly more fundamental fields of social conflict— such as ethnic incorporation, class relations, or various nationalisms—because (in the U.S., anyway) racial politics provide the outline for hegemony (pp. 55-56). According to this theory, racial rule was instrumental in the nation’s historical formation and development, and today it continues to consolidate racial formations within explicitly political arenas and at the micro-level of everyday experience. My work is located in the intellectual current that the theory of racial formation set off, which emphasizes the socio-historically influenced power of race in organizing contemporary social relations. More specifically, this dissertation is concerned with the school and its institutional capacity to racially position Asian American students in relation to Black students by representing them as normatively unequal types of racial subjects, and with the discourses and practices through which students also engage in the work of unequal positioning and representation.

The conceptual relationship of Asians to race depended for a considerable time upon the essentializing construction of Asian “Oriental” identity. As Said argues in *Orientalism* (1979) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), centuries-long Western military dominance and colonization in the Near East (beginning as early as the period of classical antiquity) accompanied and was underpinned by European efforts to represent the Orient as the Occident’s dialectical “Other,” a “constitutive outside” category of people and territory that was meant to be subdued (Hall & Gay, 1996, p. 3). Later, the Orient moved Eastward in tandem with increased European and American colonization, trade, and exchange on the Asian continent, shaping Western understandings of Asians as exotic and inferior. In a work that acknowledges Said’s critics, who charge that *Orientalism* is overly “totalizing,” Ma (2000) highlights the powerful impact of Orientalism, both as Said saw it (as the “geopolitical distribution of awareness... and ‘interests’... it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, and in some cases to control”) [emphasis in original] (Said, 1993, p. 12, as cited in Ma, 2000), and as a cultural critique of that intention, upon an emerging Asian American community. Ma writes that “Orientalism and Asian American identity are thus ultimately symbiotic” (p. xii). Yu (2001) argues that Orientalist articulations were sustained in American institutes of knowledge-production, especially academic sociology, and in the American national popular imagination. They colored perceptions of Asian immigrants and their children, and influenced the cultural context of their reception in the United States.

Asian American racialization has been and continues to be shaped by the immigrant nature of the Asian American population. The relationship of Asians to race has been considered by immigration scholars, including those of two major assimilation theories: straight-line assimilation and segmented assimilation. Contemporary scholars have reworked classical straight-line assimilation theories, associated with the Chicago School of Sociology’s study of turn of the century European immigrant incorporation (Park, *et al.*, 1925), to consider the assimilation and acculturation of post-1965 immigrants into a remade, dynamic and heterogeneous mainstream American society and culture (Alba & Nee, 2003). For them, the

boundaries differentiating Asian immigrants and other groups from the mainstream will blur over time. This work was partly a response to the claims of segmented assimilation theorists (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), who emphasize the positive adaptation consequences of ethnic cultural preservation for second generation immigrants. They explicate three vastly different outcomes for them: upward assimilation, downward assimilation, and upwardly mobile selective acculturation. These varied paths of incorporation are contingent upon the traits of individual immigrants, especially the level of human capital they possess; the character of the receiving society; and the composition of immigrant families and extended ethnic networks.

Zhou and Bankston (1998) use segmented assimilation theory to explain the adaptation experiences and outcomes of the children of Vietnamese refugees, ultimately asserting the importance of the ethnic community as a locus of support and control. They are influenced by Coleman's (1990) concept of social capital, which "exists in a set of social relations such as is found in the Vietnamese community, in which participants are tightly integrated into a group with definite shared goals" (as cited in Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 237). The authors understand the ethnic group to be a "true social group, a source of identity and distinctive pattern of social relationships" (p. 231). It forms the "basis of cooperation and survival" and represents a "multiplex social system of family or kinship ties, religious ties, organizational ties, and work ties." These, in turn, are conducive to successful adaptation. Thus, the community acts as a "buffer between the individual, family and larger society" (p. 222).

In this study, Vietnamese immigrant youth entered a context of reception like Central City; they lived in urban, low-income neighborhoods and went to underprivileged schools. The authors contend that this setting placed a central tension on Vietnamese youth: they were pressured by their parents to seek upward mobility through educational channels, but pulled by the oppositional youth culture found in their neighborhoods toward negative assimilation. They contend that immigrant youth in low-income communities follow two potential routes: they either cleave to the ethnic community, which aids in positive adaptation and encourages mobility goals, or Americanize at a dissonant rate with their parents and acculturate into the immediate local social environment of the most alienated segment of American society. Accordingly, ethnic social relations play a social monitoring function that prevents the latter from happening:

The point is that it is not the values per se that cause the favorable outcomes but rather the patterns of social relations among individuals, in which nonconforming is severely condemned, that cause these values to have positive effects on outcomes (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 149).

As has been noted by immigration scholars, empirical studies demonstrate that immigrants assimilate into a segmented, rather than undifferentiated American society (Waters, Tran, Kasinitz, & Mollenkopf, 2010). Zhou & Bankston's study provides some key insights into immigrant adaptation in the second generation by focusing on the interplay of the individual with the community, and the community with the wider society. However, a core assumption is that a network of community relationships, cemented by a shared ethnic culture, provides the way up from and out of an unjust social order and its problems of academic failure, delinquency, and socioeconomic immobility. While I agree on the significance of social relations, I am afraid that this reasoning suggests that groups that participate in what is considered the urban underclass do so because they lack a strong ethnic community. Yet, as Zhou and Bankston (1998) duly note, the effects of ethnicity are constrained by socioeconomic contexts, and the ethnic community is

not immune to the wider society's injustices and inequalities, including discrimination in a racially stratified economy.

Moreover, as Mollenkopf (2012) points out, there are other problems with the assumptions of segmented assimilation theorists. He remarks, "for those who look like or live near poor African Americans," the theory hypothesizes that "assimilation brings downward mobility." Yet, he notes, most Blacks are not trapped in concentrated poverty; classification as a racial minority may confer institutional benefits; most immigrants, including Black immigrants, are able to separate from areas of concentrated poverty; and the "central tendency of the second generation groups is to far surpass their parents" (p. 6). Finally, Mollenkopf argues that groups "achieve upward mobility by *exiting* parental enclaves and assimilating into mainstream institutions" [emphasis in original] (p. 8).

Whether assimilating or not, and irrespective of the background determinants that may influence segmented routes of incorporation, Asian immigrants enter a racializing context in which they become racial subjects, or normative types of racial beings. They are racially positioned in the receiving American society through the ideological brackets of Whiteness and Blackness. Seeking to counter the Black-White binary model of theorizing American race relations, Kim (1999) contends that historically, Asian Americans have been cultural valorized relative to Blacks and civically ostracized in relation to Whites upon a power-stratified, triangulated "field of racial positions." I borrow from Kim's theory of racial triangulation, particularly her concept of racial power, which "refers to the racial status quo's systemic tendency toward self-reproduction" (2000, p. 2). Crucially, this tendency involves the reproduction of racial categories and meanings in a "racial order," that is, a distinct structure that differentially racializes Blacks and Asian Americans, implicates all racial groups in a racial hierarchy, and shapes uneven relationships among them (Kim, 1999, 2000). I found that urban Asian American students were valorized in relation to Black and Latino students. In terms of their academic status and meaningful integration into school life, they appeared to be insiders. Yet, I argue that this role was contingent upon their relationship to a contested racial order.

A growing sociology of race posits that Asian Americans (and Latinos) are in the process of racially assimilating into Whiteness or Blackness. A representative of this field can be found in Yancey (2003), whose book, *Who is White?* conceptualizes race relations in the contemporary and future U.S. society as governed not by a White/non-White dynamic but a Black/non-Black paradigm whose concomitants are Black alienation and the racial assimilation, or whitening, of non-Black minorities. Ultimately, Yancey's Black/Non-Black schematic depends upon his Black alienation thesis: that Blacks experience alienation based on their race in a qualitatively different and more powerful way than any other racial group, and furthermore, that this trend will continue to intensify rather than be mitigated in the future, as non-Black minorities achieve racial gains. Yancey makes the crucial point that it is impossible to truly understand the social position of Blacks without understanding those of non-Black minorities. Whereas analysis centered on a White/non-White division potentially compresses these racisms by lumping non-Whites together, analysis of a Black/non-Black paradigm beyond the Black-White duality could draw attention to how racial power unevenly shapes multifarious relationships in ways that deepen Black alienation.⁷

Bonilla-Silva (2004) refigures racial categories in his thesis of the Latin Americanization of racial stratification in the U.S., concluding that a "tri-racial system" is emerging that configures Whites at the top, honorary Whites as an expanding intermediary buffer, and a broad collective Black strata at the bottom. The cultural citizenship of Asian immigrants may be

subject to a normalizing process that ties imputed cultural competence to dominant racial identities, as Ong (2003) attests is the case for “ideologically blackened,” impoverished Cambodian refugees in California.

Are the rapidly growing and diverse members of the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1982) of Asian Americans honorary or conditional Whites, and will they racially assimilate into the dominant racial group? The Black-White binary serves as a useful reference point for interpreting racial experience, because it crystallizes the polarizing tendencies of White racial supremacy and one of its most powerful constructs, Blackness, that find expression in an American history of racial formation (Omi & Winant, 2015). It is useful in underlining the specificity of the Black-White tension. Crucially, however, the Black-White duality fails in the end to account for the unique specificity of non-White and non-Black modes of racialization, including the stunningly diverse, often contradictory racial experiences of Asian Americans; more to the point of this project, it cannot tell the full story of how Asian American students are racialized in increasingly diverse American schools. I am interested in racialized social locations within, between, and among the ‘dominator’ and the ‘dominated,’ and this dissertation is concerned to show that minority groups experience different racisms. I will demonstrate that Asian American students are positioned to both benefit from and be harmed by processes of racialization that harm other non-Asian minority students and show that Asian American and Black students understand themselves and others as racial subjects who are not simply Black/White (though their understandings are indeed framed by and help solidify Black alienation and White dominance); they construct themselves and others as complex racial subjects for whom meanings of Asian-ness and Blackness are contested and intertwined.

Methodology and Site Description

I chose to approach the study of Asian American racial formation in the school setting as an ethnographer. This methodological decision was rooted in my desire to witness the textured interplay between social structures and the daily practices of individuals and groups. The method of ethnography enables researchers to draw lines of sight at the local and particular level in order to reveal multiplex processes and patterns in the socio-historical and macro levels of the social order. Ethnography goes beyond portraits of measurable outcomes to explore and explicate the mechanisms that generate and sustain the conditions within which such outcomes materialize and to express, as thoroughly as possible, the rich fullness of everyday life in a given cultural reality.

Critical ethnography, which combines theoretical rigor with self-consciously reflexive writing, is not only concerned with the politics that such a project invokes, but with its ethics, specifically “the complex relationship of the observer to the observed” (Marcus, 1998, p. 75). My dissertation research is motivated to narrow the traditional distance between a subjective author and her ‘object of analysis’ by undermining ethnography’s pretensions to transparency and immediacy (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) and by highlighting the historically contingent and partially situated nature of all research and knowledge production (Haraway, 1988). As Geertz (1973) unambiguously put the point, “cultural analysis”—including analysis undertaken through careful and caring “thick description”—is “intrinsically incomplete” (p. 29). I do not aim to represent the totality of Asian American or Black youth, but to study one dimension of their lives in the vein of critical qualitative research that recognizes its own positioning.

This dissertation draws on data collected at a comprehensive urban high school and its surrounding communities between February 2011 and May 2012. I employed standard ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing. These include interviews with

50 students (30 Asian/Asian American students, 10 Black students, 6 Latino/a students, 1 White student, 1 self-described “Middle Eastern” student, and 2 multiracial Black-Asian students); three informal focus groups, each with approximately 15 students; interviews with 30 staff (15 teachers and other instructional staff, 3 administrators, 2 counselors, 2 security personnel, and 8 employees of an on-campus community-based agency); and documentary analysis of school publications and student-produced media. I coded this data to see how students, teachers and staff racially categorized Asian American and other minority youth, to explore the structural relations among social categories; to understand how informants interpreted the racial, academic, and social dynamics at the school; and to get a sense of the learning and working conditions specific to the school.

My study is situated in a medium-sized city in California that I call Central City. I selected this city and one of its major public schools for several reasons. The first relates to my interest in schooling as it interfaces with locally and historically significant racial dynamics and developments in the political-economy. The racial make-up of the city is approximately a quarter non-Hispanic White, a fifth Latino/Hispanic, a sixth Asian, and just over a third Black (2010 U.S. Census). Central City is a highly diverse, dynamic city with a strong history of community organizing around labor, political, and racial issues. Much of the current grassroots energy that animates its political culture is supplied by young people, many of whom believe in the city’s tremendous potential for social change. Nonetheless, the challenges they face are formidable.

Central has been and continues to be subject to a host of profound inequalities, chief among them suburban over-development and urban underdevelopment combined with racial isolation. These spatial and racial inequalities developed with full force in conjunction during the postwar years. The racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) and spatial development of contemporary Central City reflects these divisions. White residents who have not migrated to affluent nearby suburbs are largely clustered near the city’s lake and in the hills, away from the city’s large, non-White population. This racially and ethnically heterogeneous group is clustered in the downtown area of Chinatown and spread across the ‘flatlands.’ There, an array of Chinese and Southeast Asian immigrants, Latinos from Mexico and Central America, Blacks, and other minorities and immigrants live in close social and spatial proximity to one another and come together in the predominantly non-White public schools.

This point leads to a second reason for designating Central City and one of its public schools for study, which is the school’s racial, socio-economic and academic profile. The Central Unified School District (CUSD) is comprised of various charter schools and comprehensive public schools broken down into smaller academies. The district serves a predominantly non-White native and immigrant student population (greater than 90%), more than two-thirds of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch. The record of achievement in its schools tells a story of struggle for educational equity.⁸ My school site, “Central High School,” is a large, comprehensive high school that mirrors these statistics. For this reason, it is an ideal site for analyzing the dynamic contexts and processes that mediate the interplay between social structures and individual/collective agency. At the time of my research, students were predominantly Asian or Asian American, Black, and Latino. Almost half of the student population was Asian or Asian American. Approximately one third of the student body was Black, one fifth was Latino, and Whites, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans each comprised 1% or less. Three quarters of students were described in district documents as Socioeconomically Disadvantaged and approximately 40% were English Language Learner (ELL) students.

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

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

Process of Analysis & Reflections on My Researcher Role

Many mornings, getting out of my car was difficult. Some days, I did not feel like talking with anyone, including students who recognized me and waved hello. I just watched, unsure what to watch for. There were a few go-to places I could count on finding an open door, a classroom where a teacher welcomed my unannounced presence. I would start there; at other times, a block of unformulated questions and conversations stopped me. Parked along the busy main street that bordered one side of the CHS campus, I would sit in the driver's seat, reading Allaine Cerwonka's emails to her adviser, Liisa H. Malkki, until I felt confident enough to walk into the high school.

These emails were included in *Improvising Theory*, in which Cerwonka (2007) details her "uneven tempo of analytic understanding" in the ethnographic field. She shares exchanges between herself (she was then a graduate student) and her academic advisor in order to show "how the hermeneutic circle unfolds in real time" (pp. 4-5). Cerwonka writes that "the interpretation of empirical details in fieldwork is always a way of reading and dwelling in the world through theory" (p. 4). The local forms, local differences, and local worlds of my site did not map onto a ready-made theory, and as such, I employed an iterative method of analysis. When I began fieldwork at Central High School, I was guided by a point of view and an intuition about what to look for, but I did not know what story I would find or the theorization it would generate. In fact, my research questions and my primary object of analysis transformed in the field, as a result of what I saw and heard. Initially interested in the identity-formation of Southeast Asian American youth, I shifted my attention to the category 'Asian' when I saw that

the boundaries between Southeast Asian American and other Asian American students, in terms of both identity and experience, were to a significant degree porous.

My field site was a place where only a handful of ‘races’ were seen to exist. Among them, ‘Asian’ identity stood out, but on smaller scales, racialized ethnic identities were also asserted. Thus, social groups both corresponded to and transcended ethnic and national origin groups. Looking at Chinese American college students (Louie, 2004) and Korean American high school dropouts (Lew, 2004), scholars have demonstrated that class distinctions in co-ethnic communities matter for Asian American students’ educational attainment. The Asian American students in my study shared the same class location, and moreover, they described class backgrounds that were similar to that of their non-Asian schoolmates. The major differences among them related not to class, but to whether or not they were American-born, to their relationship to the racially stratified organization of school life, and to their perceived school performance and academic orientations to school.

I also realized that in order to understand the racialization of Asian American students, I needed to understand racialization and the processes of race work (King-O’Riain, 2006) in the racial field as a whole. Consequently, I expanded my interviews to include non-Asian students. A theme that arose in my discussions with students, teachers, and staff, especially Latino students, was the invisibility of Latinos at CHS. I am conscious of the danger of reifying this erasure through my exclusion of Latino voices in this dissertation. However, the focus of this project is limited to how Asian American students became racialized through the tensions of the binary racial structure that was salient in this specific context. Thus, while this dissertation focuses primarily on Asian American racialization, my line of inquiry landed upon the two groups, Asian American students and Black students, that represented the most defining features of the racial field of Central High: the dichotomous relationship between Asian-ness, captured in the model minority subject, and Blackness, captured in the oppositional subject.

“Are you grown?” a tall Black senior asked me in Mr. Oparah’s Chemistry class. He could tell that I was not a student, but he could not put his finger on what part I played as I sat in the back of his classroom, taking notes. At the time I conducted this research, I was wearing braces. Staff members occasionally mistook me for a student, and I was asked to show my hall pass now and then. However, students could tell that I was not one of them. Rhonda, an Asian American girl with glasses and braces, told me that she could tell I definitely was not a student because of the way I dressed. I did not wear the button up shirts and nice pants that teachers wore, but I also did not dress like the students. Nor did I talk like them.

As a (self-described) anti-racist scholar engaging in critical ethnography, it is important for me to foreground my positionality within the project and vis-à-vis my relationship to participants. To a certain extent, this qualitative inquiry is about my line of sight as well as it is about the lines of sight of urban Asian American adolescents, how we each look out at a shared world and peer into our internal worlds to create subject positions for ourselves. My own experiences as the daughter of working class immigrants from Laos and my migrations first from a refugee camp in Thailand to a declining post-industrial city in the Midwest, and second to the San Francisco Bay Area for graduate school, inevitably influences my own ‘standpoint,’ my political and epistemological stances and the knowledge claims I posit (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986; Smith, 1976). Coupled with this background, my age, appearance, and researcher role also influenced my reception from the youth and our dual engagement with the research questions. Rather than try to ignore these influences, I use them to reflect inward, back on the project itself.

More than is usual, CHS students were used to being observed and studied. This was a result of the sociocultural context of their setting. For instance, although I did not encounter them, I was told that a film crew visited campus in the time period that I was studying CHS, taking footage for a glossy special about high school violence. Students were unsurprised by outsiders, relating to them not with apprehension but with either curiosity or disinterest. This included researchers like myself. “What are you?,” a Black freshman named Isaac asked me. “I’m a woman, I replied.” “No, I mean, you’re not a teacher, so what are you?” I explained who I was and what I was doing. I mentioned that I would like to share what I learn with other researchers and write a book. Isaac got excited. “My teacher in middle school wrote a whole book about the school and everything! I had a chapter in it.” A Latina, Cassandra teased him, “You think you’re special.” “It is pretty amazing,” I agreed, nodding. “I’m special,” Isaac replied as a matter of fact. “She wrote about me because I was like, her favorite student. But I was also really like one of her worst students.”

The distance (between researcher and informant, between reality and its representation, or between the goals of a project and its effects, for example) that is indexed in the authorship of social analysis and cultural critique involving living humans (as opposed to historical ones) is instructive. My dissertation is not concerned to deal primarily with subjects of consciousness, but with embodied and living subjects who have feelings, understandings, and questions. As such, I examine racialization based on the resources available within given social locations, with the understanding that this examination is only valuable when it does not undermine the living reality of subjectivity. Ultimately, I seek to learn from my informants, to tease out meanings from their encounters with personally resonant but socio-historically rooted phenomena in the minutiae of everyday living, which I self-consciously capture as a partial and particular ‘fiction’ of ethnographic production (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

Contributions of the Research

My research addresses several lacunas in the education and race and ethnicity scholarship. Education researchers have documented how race not only shapes academic outcomes, but textures the socio-cultural worlds of schools (Ferguson, 2001; Foley, 1990; Fordham, 1997; Leander, 2002; Lewis, 2003; Perry 2001; Valenzuela, 1999), yet few focus directly on Asian American students or recognize important distinctions among East and Southeast Asian American youth (exceptions include Chhuon & Hudley, 2010; Lee, 2005, 2009; Lei, 2003; and Lew, 2004)

Ethnographers of race and education argue that members of different racial groups have different schooling experiences, for example, in her ethnography *Race in the Schoolyard*, Lewis (2003) writes that race “lead[s] many children of color to have fundamentally different schooling experiences” (p. 154). I also research this phenomenon, but look at deeper stratification as well, pointing out different and hierarchical locations *within* racial categories that influence schooling experiences. I show that there are also common experiences and efforts *across* racial categories, based on individuals’ social locations within their racial group and within the academic hierarchy (for example, at CHS, educationally marginalized Asian Americans and educationally marginalized Blacks shared the experience of being labeled ghetto, though they were racialized in different ways).

Second, while there is interesting and rich theorization of the place of Asian Americans in a complex, perhaps shifting American racial paradigm, educational and ethnic studies scholarship on the racialization of Asian Americans often considers them in relationship to the

ideology and structure of Whiteness. Indeed, Asian American racial positioning must be examined in light of the structure of racial power that secures the dominance of Whiteness in relationship with other racial constructions. However, current theorization of the racialization of Asian Americans often overlooks their practical and symbolic/discursive relationships to those racial groups with whom they share a limited history of racial oppression, but whom they, as a broad group, have outpaced some significant ways, e.g. educational attainment and household earnings (the important work of Kim (1999, 2000) excepted). The historical civic ostracism of and racial discrimination against Asian immigrants and Asian Americans contextualizes my understanding of the racial positioning of Asian American students. At the same time, I am very interested in the access to racial power and privilege that is afforded to Asian Americans, especially when it comes at the expense of other racial minority groups. The innovation of this dissertation is that it illuminates how a struggling urban school that purported to value diversity ended up functioning as a race-making institution (Wacquant, 2002) that racialized minority youth *relative* to one another.

A principle aim of this dissertation is to highlight the racialization of urban Asian American students *in relationship* to Black students, groups whose racial representations served as foils for one another, and through that specific illumination, to cast a general light on how power animates the lived meanings of race. I have argued here that the racialization Asian American youth provides a compelling case for examining the conduct of power in social practice and for studying connections among schooling, race, and equity. Theory building around these relationships will cast light on the role of race in the broad social order of contemporary American life. My goal is to use this case to surface the durability and contradictions of such an order, and to imagine alternative—potentially more emancipatory—modes of teaching and guiding youth in urban communities of color. I examine the deep and complex nature of racial inequality with the aim of diminishing it. In my mind, this project has a practical no less than theoretical importance and urgency.

Finally, this dissertation provides a strong empirical, fine-grained ethnographic grounding for understanding Asian American racialization and racial positioning by connecting the day-to-day accretion of racial categories and hierarchies to more ideological claims regarding inequality and its reproduction. Drawing from extensive and sensitive participant observation in a high school and its surrounding community and from in-depth interviews with students and staff, my work builds a staircase between the ground level of discourses, practices, expectations, and identities and macro-level theorizations of schooling and racial power.

Organization of the Dissertation

Between Chapters 1 and 2, I begin with a field note about a single day at Central High School. The purpose of this vignette is to set up the tone of the socio-cultural world of the school and to introduce a few individual staff members and students outside of the set of priorities, questions, and analyses that follows in the main body of the dissertation, in order to expose the reader more intimately to the forms and conditions of their education and lives.

In Chapter 2, I take a close look at the institutional context of the dual construction of the Asian American model minority as a deserving and engaged subject and of the stigmatizing tropes of Black/Brown educational deficiency, resistance, and failure. I demonstrate that administrators, teachers, and staff drew from a color-blind discourse to understand Asian Americans through the model minority myth as cultural rather than racial subjects, and consequently privileged Asian American over Black and Latino students. Drawing on the voices

of adult actors, I shed light on the model minority myth's durability in a multiracial urban context (where the myth plainly does not provide a faithful account of Asian American students' reality), a durability that is indexical of the tensions and tendencies of urban inequality in a liberal society. I argue that understanding how institutions such as schools aid its reproduction makes it possible to extend a critique of powerful racial dynamics that shape schooling in urban communities and elsewhere.

In Chapter 3, I analyze the racialization of Asian American students, especially how they experienced and responded to the attachment of meaning to the categories of Asian-ness and Blackness, as well as to the relationship between them (forming an Asian-Black binary). I reveal Asian American students claiming identities and roles for themselves within hierarchies of difference that related to race, ethnicity, achievement-orientation, and immigration status. I draw on the perspectives of "high-achieving" Asian American students to demonstrate how they defined and categorized themselves and others, as well as to illustrate the power of school policies to designate certain racially stratified school domains as important and valuable. I highlight the views of Asian American students who were on the "regular track," including those who were falling through the cracks, to show that there were many examples in which Asian American students were not aligned with the learning practices championed by the school or by the model minority image. I show that among both sets of students, racial boundaries were adhered to and rejected. In this chapter, I also discuss the development of Asian American (and Asian) students' racial views in light of their participation in anti-racist community youth organizations. I argue that Asian American students' behavior, which was characterized by racial segregation and atomization, was framed by competing discourses of colorblind multiculturalism (coming from the school) and people-of-color solidarity (coming from anti-racist organizations). Finally, I highlight the experiences and perspectives of first generation, Chinese immigrant students.

In Chapter 4, I examine the racialization of Black and multiracial Black students. This chapter focuses on the "social fact of Blackness" as it developed in conjunction with and in relief against, the model minority myth of culture-based Asian American achievement. Focusing on the perspectives of these students, I demonstrate the Asian-Black binary's structuration of race relations at CHS and clarify how the racialization of Asian American students shaped Black students' experiences. I discuss the fluidity and durability of racial categories for Black students as well as for multiracial Black-Asian students, address Black students' agency in the co-creation of categories and their resistance to them, delineate the survival strategies Black students used to navigate racialized school life, and describe the marginal school spaces where they dwelled.

In Chapter 5, I conclude by summarizing the purpose of my project and touch on my key findings. I also reflect on the idea of a good school and consider the racialization of racial minority students in light of that idea.

Field Note

It is Friday evening; these notes are about a day full of ordinary events that are nonetheless (in some ways) indecipherable to me.

Driving home, my head felt like it would burst from the developments of the day, so I turned off the radio in an attempt to sort out and hold onto my thoughts. I spent the morning shadowing Calvin, a Black boy I met in the Fashion Club. [I am omitting a description of my observations from Calvin's class here because of its length.] Next, I followed him from his 3rd period Special Ed class next door to Mr. Davis's English class. Calvin didn't wait for me, but sat outside the classroom door. He was perched on a ledge in front of the glass panel next to the door, watching passersby as if from a chair on his own front porch. Mr. Davis and Ms. Morrison, another Special Ed teacher, stood nearby. The three talked casually. "Why don't you go to the assembly, Calvin? You like dance," Ms. Morrison said. "Not that kind of dance," Calvin replied. "It's ethnic stuff." It turned out that one of the dance classes was putting on an African Dance themed performance during 4th period, and various classes were invited to attend.

I decided to check it out. When I arrived outside the auditorium, however, there was a massive swelling of students from different classes. I stayed away from the crowd, partly out of fear of being nudged or shoved by the pushier students and partly out of a desire not to "be a student," which in this moment meant being a body among other bodies that were funneled along an all-too-small corridor. I could step back and preserve some autonomy and individuality. I tried an alternative door to the theater without luck, since it was locked. Finally, one of the dance teachers opened the door, but she slammed it shut on me mid-sentence. James (a Mien boy I recognized from Mr. Roth's class) and his friend Winston (an out-going, popular Asian American boy with black glasses) saw this happen, and Winston said, "Dammnn!"

After waiting a while, I went back to the other side of the theater before deciding to wait outside. Cherry, one of the two main female security guards, greeted me. (All the security guards were Black.) She often greeted me as I entered the building in the mornings. She held a Walkie-talkie in one hand. She was dark-skinned, slightly chubby, did not wear make up, and wore a blue windbreaker jacket on top of her official uniform. She usually sat on a chair set up next to the front gate, but she also walked around in patrol of her small territory. I ended up spending the whole period with her as she interrogated students, gave them hugs, denied them entry until the lunch bell rang, and said hello to visiting adults.

Cherry complimented me on my engagement ring and asked me if I was married. She told me I could be 18 or 19 years old. At 41, she also looked young for her age. She had been working at CHS for 7 years as a security

officer (employed and placed by the district), and worked for several more years before that doing security at a middle school. She had a son who was in middle school at a charter school, where he was having problems. She didn't like the school. She said she was meeting with a few of the "higher ups," including the superintendent, to sort through the problems she had with her son's school. When we talked about my research, she said, "Oh yeah, like sociology. Yeah, I took a couple of sociology classes at the community college."

When I told her I was studying racial issues, Cherry said, "We take 'em all." She said this phrase several times to me, and later that afternoon when I walked back onto school grounds with Romero, a multiracial Vietnamese boy I'd been interviewing, she looked at me, nodded, and said it again: "We take 'em all." What she meant, she explained, was that she treats all her students with the same degree of respect and stern care irrespective of race: "I treat them all the same. It don't matter what the race. I got Asian kids that call me mom." (I looked at her with surprise.) "Oh yeah. I know them all." In fact, Cherry played more roles than just security guard. "Sometimes, they just need someone to talk to. You never know what they going through. Sometimes they just need a hug. Yeah, I give it to them. It can make all the difference."

She told me that she spent six months working security at another high school in the district, and that CHS had it much more together. "The leadership was more disorganized, there was more fights, the kids had more problems," she said about the other school. She told me that students at CHS "have a lot more resources. They have the Wellness Center. They can go there and get a pregnancy test, they can go if they were raped, they can go there if they have problems at home." As we spoke, students kept leaving the building, heading towards the front gate to exit, and others tried to come in through those gates. She called them out, sometimes by name, shouting "Nuh Uh! Get back in that school. Not today! It's not time." Some passed by and give her a squeeze. Boys and girls hugged her. At lunch time, a student brought her a Subway sandwich and she gave him cash on his return. "There can be so much going on," she said, "and it can make all the difference if they got that one person that pay attention."

At one point, Principal Ricci drove up and parked her little green Mini Cooper in her designated parking spot. As she got out of her car, she called out to a student who was walking through the area. "Justin! What are you doing, Justin? Why aren't you in class? Why aren't you in class?" Justin was a Black boy with long braids. "She cares about him," Cherry told me. "That's why she's asking all that." Later on, Ms. Henry, the other Black female security guard, arrived from her post, and the two women shot the breeze. Cherry half-teased one student who walked by her, saying to Ms. Henry, "She did me right in front of Ms. Ricci, telling a girl "I'm going to fuck you up." She turned to the girl and repeated "right in front of Ms. Ricci." The girl, Deshondra, laughed. She was a pretty 15 year old who wore a very tight black t-shirt, torn,

tight jeans over black leggings, and large hoop earrings. She and her friend were both Black. They had been leaving their 4th period classes before sitting down at Cherry's station, near her chair. I sat there, too, on a stool, and listened.

Deshondra's friend was ditching Mr. Newmark's choir class. She said he blew up at the class because he thought that "4th period jacked his phone. Now he won't even let us charge our phones in there. He said [something like], you better not motherfucking think you can get away with it." Cherry gave her a look as if to ask if he really used those words, and the girl said, "Yes, he did say motherfucking." Deshondra said something in passing about her ankle bracelet. I asked her if she was being truly serious, and she lifted up one leg of her jeans to reveal a serious looking grey security monitor. It was bulky and could not be removed. "Oh my gosh!" I exclaimed. "Can you shower with that on?" Cherry laughed at my question. Deshondra had been wearing the bracelet for six months and needed to continue to wear it "for as long as they tell me I gotta." I introduced myself to her, asked pardon for my intrusiveness, and asked as sensitively as possible if she could share her story.

I learned that Deshondra spent about a month in jail in two periods relating to or stemming from the same event. According to her telling, she was out one day when she noticed her cousin and a group of teenagers robbing a man. She couldn't stop the robbery, but told the man she thought it was wrong and shook his hand. She then boarded a bus that other members of the group subsequently also boarded. When members of the group were arrested, she was arrested along with them. The man couldn't remember the details of the robbery or distinguish among the faces of those involved. Deshondra said that her cousin lied and 'snitched' on her, falsely accusing her and causing her arrest. She missed a great deal of school and subsequently had to repeat her freshman year because of the time lost to jail and court dates. I asked her about how she felt when she was in jail, and she told me "It wasn't fun in jail. I was jumped all the time. Now I'm paranoid wherever I go. I don't care about school because of it. It changed things." When the lunch bell rang, she and her friend got up and left for the local convenience store. Cherry gave me a look. "You never know what they're going through," her eyes seemed to say.

I stayed seated on the stool when Cherry moved, temporarily or not I was unsure at the time, to another post. Without prompting, she took my audio recorder with her, speaking into it about whatever she thought was important for me to learn about the school. I watched a steady stream of students walk out the main gates onto the city sidewalk, destined for a city bus, to go on foot to the local convenience store, or to board friends' cars in search of fast food. Some were leaving for the day. Students of all races walked past me. I recognized several faces. One boy, a freshman I knew from brief conversations at the bleachers, smiled at me as he walked by. Kids were hanging on each other, laughing, playfully pushing. They kept to their groups or walked solo. Then I spotted Romero, who I knew not to have any afternoon classes.

I asked Romero if I could interview him and asked him to sign a consent form (he was 19 years old). This took a long time, because he didn't understand things as quickly as his peers. He was a Special Ed student with an Individualized Education Plan, so he had officially been recognized as having some kind of learning disability or disabilities. He used simple sentences and I needed to repeat myself and elaborate for him to understand my questions. But if you didn't really talk with him, you would just think he was a reserved kind of tough guy. Romero was tall, a bit racially ambiguous looking, with buzzed hair that was often covered with a black knit hat. In fact, he was a quarter White. In Vietnam, his grandmother was impregnated by an American soldier (who the family never heard from again). Their son was Romero's father, and his mother was a Vietnamese woman who abandoned Romero, his three siblings, and his father when Romero was a small child. "I don't like my father," Romero told me. "Man, my family's complicated. It's messed up."

We decided to get some food, walking along a path that went above a highway and towards a major thoroughfare. As we walked and talked, he took pains to shelter himself from the mild February sun. He held his backpack up as a shield against the sun. "I don't like to get dark," he told me. Later, I learned that he was "the darkest one" in his family. His sister "looks Mexican," while one of his brothers "looks Viet." Romero told me that he had never been to the area we walked to, even though it was a popular lakeside avenue that attracted people to its many cafes and shops, and even though it was only a mile or so from the high school. "I only go to school and home," Romero said in a way that made me believe him. He did not have a driver's license or car. In vast contrast to the majority of his peers, he did not even have a cell phone. He communicated a desperation when he talked about wanting a job. "I'm a man now, so I got to have a job," he said. "I want to save up for a phone." The problem was that he was 19 and had no job history. There was steep competition for work in the area, and I heard from many of the high school students that they fruitlessly applied for countless retail jobs. Romero mainly stayed home because he did not want to get in trouble. He was wary of trouble.

Romero and I continued our informal interview inside a trendy-casual pizza and bakery café. He thought he had been there before, or someplace like it. A different place completely. I got the sense that it was only vaguely like the place where we were sitting—the only connection seemed to be that it was not a local immigrant-run Asian joint—and it was a place that a couple of his teachers brought him to in the past. He was reluctant to eat at first, but eventually shared a couple of slices of pizza with me, thanking me politely. We talked about his family and his fears about life after high school. I sensed an emptiness in his family life, but was glad to learn that his three older siblings were, to varying degrees, watching out for him. His 20-year-old sister had dropped out of high school and had a three-month old infant with her boyfriend. "I'm not ready to be an uncle," Romero said. He lived with his dad and a couple of roommates. He spent a lot of time playing videogames and sleeping. I asked him what he ate and whether or not he cooked. He didn't

know how to cook, but liked to watch cooking shows. I mentioned that my mother recently cooked pho for me, and he remarked, “Man, I’m sick of pho. We eat Asian food. It’s a lot of noodles.”

On the one hand, he was bursting to get out of the skin of high school: the supervision, the monotony, the associations with childhood. On the other hand, he had an acute sense of fear about becoming a man and finding a place in whatever came next. “Life in America is difficult,” he told me, his words forming slowly. “What do you mean?” I asked. “You got bills. With work. With getting a car and rent. That’s why I want to go to college. I want to get my knowledge.” I winced inside, because I knew that unless something changed dramatically in Romero’s educational career and life, he would not go to a four-year university. He would probably take a couple of remedial classes at the local community college before “cooling out.” Yet, he seemed to think that “college is going to tell me what to be in my life.” I gingerly expressed doubt that community college or any college would do that for him, and he agreed. “Man, I don’t know. It’s confusing,” he said.

Romero was a little bit like a cloud. It was difficult to see what was happening inside, but I could tell that it wasn’t tranquil or simple. By the end of our conversation, I opened up a little bit about myself and my family. He told me that he hadn’t opened up about his life as much to “anyone else – I talked with some teachers like Mr. Kim (his Special Ed teacher), but not as much.” As we walked back over the highway, we kept talking. “You can’t tell from looking at people who they are, and I think some people out there are hurt or angry, but I think most people on the inside are good people. What do you think?” I said. Romero thought about this comment and seemed to really appreciate it. I was verbally enthusiastic about his future, expressing my hopes and telling him I thought he was a good person.

When we got back to the school, we were greeted by two of Romero’s friends, a girl and a boy (both Asian American – the boy was Cambodian American, I didn’t know about the girl). The boy asked Romero if I was his mother. “No, that ain’t my mom, I wish that was my mom!” Romero responded. A little part of me was struck by this comment. I knew that he very obviously was not saying that he would like me to be his mother. Yet, I also knew that he was abandoned by his mother and lacked the security of a stable family life. “You’re a pretty good person to talk to,” he said to me. I gave him my business card and told him I was willing to listen if he needed someone, anyone, to talk to. We kept talking for another ten minutes or so. I mentioned something about making pizza from scratch with my husband and he almost reminded me of a child when he said excitedly, “you like to do fun stuff, huh?” (Update: The weekend passed before I saw him again on Monday. I give Romero a little smile as we passed in the hallway, but I sensed he was more of a cloud again.)

After talking with Romero, I took an hour to drive home and eat before heading back to the high school in the afternoon. I arrived at the Wellness Center almost an hour into the scheduled Open Mic event. The lounge area

was crowded with students; I quickly counted about 60 students and adults. About 80% were Black, and the rest were Asian American, Latino, and White. I noticed that there were no teachers or administrators in attendance. Many of the AYO and Wellness Center staff were present, including the Wellness Center director. There was a DJ station where a white DJ was mixing and scratching. There was a side table set up with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, pretzels, oranges, and chips. There was a white banner with the words Life Beats printed over and over on it behind a drum set and a set of microphones. A white board listed the names of open mic volunteers, who came up to the front to share rap songs, poems, and songs. I recognized Nick, a smooth-talking Black boy with glasses from Mr. Medina's 6th period Economics class. He confidently MCed the event. Boys and girls shared songs and poems—pieces of themselves—in front of the crowd, some for the first time. Each performance was followed by a supportive round of cheers and applause. I left as the show wound down, about an hour after I had arrived.

I heard some kids talk about heading to the varsity basketball game, and as the Open Mic show drew to a close, I headed over myself. Steadily, small crowds tried to make their way into the school gym through the single entrance that was open for admission. I could hear the cheers and excitement of the basketball court and bleachers from my position outside the entrance, just outside. Some girls asked me if I wanted to buy nachos, and declining, I noticed Principal Ricci chowing down on nachos. Mr. Kibebe, the Ethiopian security guard who never failed to strike up a conversation with me if he was not otherwise engaged, smiled at me. He and Ms. Henry frisked students and passed handheld metal detectors over their bodies before allowing them to enter, one by one. There were 4-5 security guards posted at this entrance, monitoring and directing the flow of people (mostly students) in and out of the gym.

Doing a quick head count again, I noted about 75 people sitting on the CHS home side of the bleachers (there were between 40-50 people seated on the visiting side, divided by a gap in the bleachers and on the far side). Of this crowd of 75, there was one Asian American student (a girl sitting among her Black friends), two Pacific Islander students, and a few small sets of parents. Several teachers watched part or all of the varsity game. Besides the cheerleaders, who took up a big section of the same bleachers, everyone else present was a Black student. They seemed to be having a very good time bantering, gossiping, showing off, posturing, and watching the game. It was one of those intense, tight games that goes into overtime. The cheerleaders were loud, enthusiastic, and spirited in uniforms in the school colors. There were 11 of them: one East Asian American girl, one Southeast Asian American girl, two Latinas, and seven Black girls.

I stood along the side of the gym, where I could observe both the game and the crowd. The girls softball coach, a burly, friendly Black man, stood next to me. I periodically asked him questions about the game, since I know very little

about basketball or sports in general. “You must be a parent,” he told me after I asked why only one person was on the court (after a technical foul). He pointed at the one East Asian American cheerleader and asked me, “Are you her mom?” Interestingly, Cherry also came up to me some time during the game and pointed out the single East Asian American cheerleader. “She’s so cute” she commented to me. Also along the side of the gym was Ms. Kinkaid, one of the assistant principals, who was doing her usual thing of throwing hard, meaningful glances in the direction of rowdy students and giving directions into her Walkie-talkie. I got drawn into the game, but was especially on the lookout for Mark, the only basketball player I knew. He was easy to follow, because he wore bright pink sneakers. He was also the only Asian American member of the team. He had an intense look of focus on his face most of the time, even when courtside. CHS ended up losing by a few points.

Chapter 2, The Role of Administrators, Teachers, & Staff in a Race-Making Institution

This is a school where the students are always coming and going. – A White male teacher

Being Black is a job, a 24 hour job. That's why I say in here, "Pull your pants up. Let's kill the n-word and all that nonsense." – A Black male teacher to a group of Black boys

Grading papers is political. Teaching my lesson and having students turn in worksheets is political. The politics are embedded in my work everyday, because of the demographics of where we're teaching. There isn't money, because we're in an impoverished city with a low tax base. Who wants to be doing this? – A multiracial teacher

Focusing on the role of teachers and staff in shaping racial perceptions, this chapter analyzes the role of the institution of the high school in racializing students and clarifies how positive but conditional notions of Asian-ness were created through and against negative ideas of Blackness and Latino-ness. This chapter will demonstrate that administrators, teachers and staff drew from a color-blind discourse and related paradigms of meritocracy and individualism to understand Asian American students as cultural rather than racial subjects and consequently privileged Asian American over Black and Latino students both socially and academically.

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

The second notable reality of the educational setting was its environment of taken-for-granted inequality and school failure. Despite their academic heterogeneity and educational difficulties, Asian American youth were encountered and assessed through a re-inscription of the model minority myth that positioned Asian Americans as an exemplar group in what was popularly imagined as a Black/Brown urban ghetto, a site of failure (Leonardo & Hunter, 2007). Resigned acceptance of both urban inequality and low expectations shaped adult and youth's common-sense understandings of race at both the individual and organizational level. Ultimately, this exacerbated the severely compromised learning experience of *all* students. I will show that the model minority representation of Asian American success was a distortion of students' actual learning experiences that diverted attention from school-level and societal-scale problems, whose symptoms included inequality among minority groups and shallow learning and limited achievement across groups.

In what follows, I situate my study of an urban school's racialization of Asian American youth in relation to the discourse of color-blindness, before demonstrating how administrators, teachers and staff, as part of a race-making institution, engaged in mechanisms and practices that stratified Asian American and non-Asian students and constructed racial categories about them using interdependent and mutually influencing terms. These normative constructions were related, in different ways, to Whiteness.⁹ I close by arguing that they worked in conjunction to divert attention from structural limitations within and beyond the school that made both teaching and learning there a struggle.

Racialization and Color-Blindness in Schooling

Joining a long tradition in which schools have been studied as cultural sites involved in the production of meanings and identities (with political consequences beyond what is learned in the formal curriculum), I analyze schools as race-making institutions (Wacquant, 2002) where racial identity formation and the cultural production of race are salient elements of the schooling experience (Erickson, 1987; Giroux 1988; Varenne & McDermott 1998). Social reproduction in the realm of race does not only occur in school settings, but it is *through* schools that the racial inequalities of the broader society become reproduced as educational inequality. Yet, ethnographers of education have shown, those on the ground do not readily recognize that they are participating in processes of racialization (Ferguson, 2001; Lewis, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). Instead, they invoke and draw from a discourse of color-blindness, according to which ignoring race is supposedly beneficial. The color-blind perspective has become mainstream, because the concept of race has been reduced to the color of one's skin rather than something that connects individuals and groups to social processes and institutions.

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

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

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

At Central High School (CHS), some educators refused to recognize race altogether while preferring to discuss culture (e.g. "Asian culture," "Chinese culture," or "Black culture") in lieu of race. Teachers and staff tended to distance themselves from student outcomes that evinced racial inequality and instead championed the tenet of multiculturalism as an affirmation of the school's valuing of cultural diversity. However, as Leonardo and Hunter (2007) note, "the very presence of multiculturalism is evidence of a reaction to a White normativity in school

curricula, administrative structures and classroom interactions” (p. 263). In other words, a school’s effort to raise the profile of a multicultural paradigm is generated by the need to recognize what is excluded by White dominance and privilege in the first place.

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

Less often discussed are the growing tensions that exist between and among various groups that gather under the umbrella of multiculturalism—that is, the interests of groups can be competing or their perspectives can be at odds. We assert that the ever-expanding multicultural paradigm follows the traditions of liberalism—allowing a proliferation of difference. Unfortunately, the tensions between and among these differences is rarely interrogated, presuming a ‘unity of difference’—that is, that all difference is both analogous and equivalent (p. 62).

In the schooling of multiracial minority students at CHS, the ‘difference’ of Asian-ness (attributes socially constructed as Asian) translated into educational opportunities and experiences that were denied to Black and Latino students, whose racialized difference could not as readily be linked to Whiteness through the vehicle of the model minority ideal. I argue that Asian American students were “racially made” (i.e. socially constructed as Asian racial subjects) not in a vacuum, but through and against the racialization of Black and Latino youth (and vice versa). This “making” occurred through the daily practices of teachers and staff, as well as students.

Race-Blindness and Teacher and Staff Perceptions of Race, Racism, and Racial Minority Students

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

Multiculturalism was celebrated through efforts like Multicultural Week (when student groups held a food fair featuring the cuisine of their ethnic heritages and organized smaller-scale events that were unrelated to culture or multiculturalism), the Latino recognition night, and the Lunar New Year Celebration dinner and performance. Remarkably, the racially homogeneous and stratified nature of those planning and attending these “multicultural” events was taken for granted. Similarly, when teachers and staff described their school as a “diverse” place, they used the term to mean that many “racial groups and cultures [were] represented” but not necessarily integrated. The lack of integration was reportedly unintentional; as one teacher remarked, “it just happens this way.” Some teachers and staff noted that the racial dynamics at the school reflected (and some argued they were derived from) the segregation and conflicts of the broader

community and city. They occasionally referred to the school as a “sanctuary” from neighborhood divisions and from violence.

Teachers and staff pointed out that students tended to self-segregate. They explained that this was the result of peer pressure and because “those are the groups who they communicate best with; they share common experiences.” A multiracial teacher who was a native of the city suggested that “racial segregation [was] fine, because the co-existence” of the different racial groups at the school reflected “respect and appreciation” that minority youth of color from different backgrounds had for one another. He added, “the culture around race is one of the things that’s functional at the school.” Another teacher claimed that the racial climate was not “as bad as it looks.” While teachers and staff (as well as students) described the school as an “urban school,” they said it was generally a “good school.”¹⁰ They stated that the climate was “better” than at many other schools in the district, both as a place to work and as a place for students to learn.

The distinction between definitions of racism is important. The individualistic version limits racism to the purview of extremists and masks racial privilege. In contrast, institutional racism is evidenced by the widespread reality of racial inequality. Administrators, teachers and staff operationalized a limited definition of racism that distanced them from the racially differentiated academic outcomes and social worlds of their students. They described racism as a “dislike and distrust of another racial group,” “a defense mechanism,” and “a product of ignorance and negative interactions.” It was understood by most, but not all, as taking place at an interpersonal rather than structural level. Nonetheless, when staff talked about increasing diversity, they essentially meant increasing the proportion of Black and Latino students relative to Asian American students. Even though some teachers and staff made efforts to alter the racial composition of classes and activities by recruiting non-Asian students, their stated beliefs about racial stratification at the school conveyed a color-blind emphasis on individual motives and actions that downplayed institutional influences. In fact, they sometimes invoked accusations of reverse discrimination against Whites or Asian Americans.¹¹

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

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

chemistry in the following way: “So this is what I am suggesting to you, if you stay here, you become a seed... if you don’t stay and you are not brave, who is going to make that step to make it happen?”

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

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

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

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

Mr. Posey: It’s cultural... It is definitely cultural, it’s definitely from the family and nobody wants to touch that because that is a political no-no. It’s much easier to point at the teachers and leave the family out... For instance, in this school, [Chinese students] are successful but just as poor, and if you talked to them individually, they are just as pained. I mean, I know a girl in one of my classes whose father is schizophrenic and despite the horrible things that are going on in her life, she is still pulling A’s. The culture is different in the Chinese community, I know, because my wife is Chinese, and I saw immediately the difference between the American culture, which is “C’s are okay”—that is a broad generalization, but it’s true—versus the Asian, not all Asians, but Chinese in particular, it’s A’s or nothing... I have my African American kids coming here, they see an Asian American group doing the review session at lunch and they are intimidated. It kind of feels very uncomfortable. They are saying they have been squeezed out and there is probably some truth to that. It is just that the difference is they don’t like the room full of Asians in there—they clearly know the material better, so they can’t ask what they think is a dumb question.

Yenhoa: So then how can adults increase access for Black and Latino students?

Mr. Posey: The answer isn't simple... It is working slowly to try and change the culture of the people at home and the larger community.

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

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

Asian-ness was constructed in complex ways by administrators, teachers and staff who were cognizant of the variety of challenges faced by ethnic groups of different socio-economic statuses and migration contexts, especially the refugee context. As I discussed earlier, the model minority myth has been widely studied and problematized in Asian American American studies scholarship. I was surprised to witness the extent to which teachers and staff brought the model minority subject to discursive and practical life at CHS. They told me about struggling Asian American students who came from socio-economically struggling families and who lived in impoverished neighborhoods where they were often the targets of crime and violence. They then attributed the idealized students’ academic success to a combination of individual effort and a cultural focus on family values and hard work. In these idealizations, the school was not imagined as an institution where race making impacted educational equity.

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

Mr. Walters: Yeah I mean there is that kind of default association I think.

Yenhua: Yeah, so can you say more about that?

Mr. Walters: Well, I think there is a predictable amount of associated or shared cultural norms that you have, just being, I think shared values of like, respect... I think there is a baseline of sharing cultural norms. And then, I

mean on average, well like Asian students being a majority of the students and I mean yeah, mostly those are going to be like the most academically successful students I have. As far as intellectual curiosity, it's just a much larger percentage than with any other group of students I have. And so I think over time I'm just drawn to that. And so if like, I see an Asian kid that comes in to sign up for class, it's like "okay." But if it's a Black kid I'm sizing him up, I mean before I can even think better of doing it. Like it just... it happens automatically... And that is going back to what I have been saying about identifying most comfortably with Asian students, just the students that I've had the most success with.

Yenhua: Do you think an accumulation of experiences over time led to that tendency?

Mr. Walters: Yeah. And I mean I think that's the thing, like, it's even hard to say that like out loud on the record, but it is so obvious.

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

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

It is important to note the ways in which staff also challenged model minority representations. Mr. Roth, the multiracial Asian-Jewish teacher, pointed out that the image of Asian American students as model minorities was "more of an identity than an indication of achievement or skill." He said that students "owned the Asian overachiever identity," and that seeing themselves as such "went a long way" in terms of how involved and pro-school teachers saw them and in terms of who ultimately became "involved." On the other hand, Ms. Jones, the Black math teacher, claimed, "the Asian American kids are the Blackest kids." Other staff members pointed out that Asian American youth dressed like the other youth of color and "use the N-word as part of a language and a code that says they've integrated." Finally, the Asian American director of one of the youth-serving agencies on campus said that at this school more than at others, her organization was trying to show students that "there is a wide variety of ways to be Asian American."

Especially among teachers, administrators, and academic staff, Asian American students were less frequently seen as occupying a privileged role in the school than as sharing a culture that fostered attitudes and habits that enabled them to be "successful." Students' performances of

engagement and demonstration of “study skills” was stressed as a major characteristic of being a “successful student.” As was demonstrated in the excerpted interview with Mr. Walters, some teachers also used these perceived traits as a litmus test for whether or not students deserved instructional attention.

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

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

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

The hierarchal configuration of Asian Americans, Blacks, and Latinos was conditional upon their relationship to a contested racial order. A Black teacher commented, “It’s not that many White people around... Here at CHS [where Asian Americans were the dominant group], we have the Black and Latino kids fighting to be number two.” I asked her to clarify, “Number two in terms of what? Like reputation, grades, status?” She responded, “All of that, everything.” Aside from a handful of students, the only White bodies present on campus belonged to teachers, administrators, and counselors. Nonetheless, White dominance influenced racial perceptions of youth, as symbols and signifiers of model minority status (such as the “shared values” Mr. Walters and others referred to) held value as cultural capital that linked Asian American youth to

Whiteness. However, identification with Whiteness required a trade-off. As a White math teacher remarked,

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

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

When I probed about how race was discussed among adults at CHS, I found evidence of race-blindness. I learned that race was observed but not talked about. Common responses included, “People don’t want to go there” and “they don’t want to get near it.” One teacher said conversations about race “never happened adequately.” An administrator noted that it was difficult to interrupt broad racial trends that were set in daily routines which were already very demanding: “It typically happens that it ends up being, some people call it survival mode, some people call it just getting from one day to the next, just moving on, you are covering material. And so yeah, we can complain about this kid and that kid and attendance, behavior, but we just keep moving forward. We just keep moving forward.” Similarly, teachers particularly reported that they lacked the energy and resources to deal with racial issues with students, and felt ill equipped to address them with colleagues. Commenting on school-level responses to racial issues like the disparate academic performance of racial groups or their unequal sense of institutional belonging, the same White teacher who said “we are steering [Asian American students] towards the White culture” also said, “I feel like the efforts are too little, too small in scope, and there’s not enough energy or resources devoted to them.”

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

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

Tracking Non-Asians: Spaces of Marginalization

The role of classroom tracking as a mechanism of racial stratification is notable, especially since educators tend to naturalize the results of tracking (e.g., racially homogenous classrooms) within an explanatory framework that de-racializes school-level processes and student outcomes. As Oakes (1985) asserts, tracking publically identifies students’ intellectual capabilities and separates students “into a hierarchical system of groups for instruction” (p. 3). These groups are “labeled quite openly and characterized in the minds of teachers and others as being of a certain type—high ability, low achieving, slow, average, and so on. Clearly these groups are not equally valued in the school...” Subsequently, “a student in a high-achieving group is seen as a high-achieving *person*.”

At CHS, the tracking of students into Advanced Placement (AP), “regular,” and Special Education classes, into academies (which I will discuss shortly), and into school-supported leadership positions contributed to racial hierarchy, because these racially stratified tracks were differently valued. Asian American students vastly predominated in AP classes, Leadership class, and the science-oriented academy, while non-Asians were much more likely to be enrolled in “regular” classes, to be given Special Education designation, and to participate in the arts academy or in no academy at all. These school spaces had unequal statuses. Students in different tracks developed unequal levels of entitlement and institutional belonging and they demonstrated unequal academic outcomes.

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

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

excerpt from my field notes illustrates a commonplace scene in which teachers simultaneously expected and condemned poor behavior from students, whose failings were routinely highlighted. The class composition ranged by period, but was roughly 75% African American, 10% Asian American, and 15% Latino.

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

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

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

There was a great deal of commotion and noise. Two Asian girls were asked to move from the back to the middle of the room. They nervously linked their arms as they moved seats, speaking together in Chinese. Besides two Asian immigrant girls and two Asian American boys, there were 20 Black students.

A Black girl with false eyelashes worked on a craft project that looked like a small dream catcher. Mr. Oparah taught at the white board, ignoring the chatter in the back third of the room. Over twenty minutes after the class officially began, about half of the students seemed engaged, although a constant, loud buzz of conversation persisted. A dark-skinned Black boy with a diamond stud earring and charming smile stood and announced to everyone: “I keep having dreams about this class. I’m sitting right there,” he says, pointing to his chair, “and Oparah, you’re up at the front teaching. There are people joking in the back of the room. For some reason, I can’t turn around to see them in my dream. I can hear them though.” Students laughed.

Several minutes later, a Black junior who had been showing a friend something on his phone during the entire period observed Mr. Oparah tell a boisterous Black student to gather his things and leave. The boy with the phone said to his friend, “He usually don’t ever do shit in this class, then she came

[he gestured at me]. He's just trying to impress her. That's why he's kicking him out." The boy pounded rhythmically on his desk. When Mr. Oparah turned to quiet a Black girl with long orange-pink braids, who was seated near him in the front of the room, she responded with exasperation: "Damn, Oparah, we learning today! We're not talking today! We learning. We can't even learn!" Later on, I overheard two students discuss the prospect of working with another science teacher. "You don't want to do chemistry with Posey. He do binder checks and all that."

In this example, a student claimed that the teacher was only gesturing at discipline because of my presence, while another student signaled that for them, the activity of *not* learning was more commonplace than was learning ("Damn, Oparah, we learning today! We're not talking today!"). When I asked students in the back of the room what class was generally like, one used the same phrase I quoted another student using (above), "He usually don't do shit" and another said, "He usually just puts the lesson on the board, then we copy it, and he gives us credit." This assessment contrasts with the understanding students had of Mr. Posey's demands ("He do binder checks and all that"). Mr. Posey was a science teacher in one of the three major academies at the school, the Science Academy, which (as I will discuss below) was known for being comprised mostly of Asian American students. (He was the teacher who asserted that Black and Latino students could become "a seed" of change.) The students who participated in this conversation did not want to be required to do more. Instead, they aligned themselves with the minimal expectations they currently faced.

Trey's dream about his chemistry class and the fact that he was compelled to announce it to his teacher and peers was particularly illustrative of the taken-for-granted nature of academic marginalization and its impact on students. The students in the back of the room were, despite their efforts at getting attention and the high volume of their speech, invisible ("For some reason, I can't turn around to see them in my dream"). Often, the instances in which the teacher engaged these students were the same ones in which they were asked to leave the class, making their invisibility true for the rest of the period. In this and several other classes, I noticed the perpetual and consistent use of the door as a divider between those who were seen as willing to learn and those who were not. A Black math teacher explained, "If they don't want to be in the community and learn, then they need to get out, because then they see that when they're in here, they can't mess around."

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

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

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

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

Mr. Oparah was one of several teachers who spoke about administrators' tendency to place "problem students" into certain classes or with certain teachers. He told me that in one of his classes, out of 35 students, 17 had overall GPA's (not only in his class) ranging between 0 and 0.5 on a 4.0 scale. He blamed the administrators and counselors for overpopulating his class with failing students, but said they told him "the computer scheduled it that way." Unconvinced, Mr. Oparah said,

Everyone has to defend themselves. They will tell you they are not tracking students here, but there is no way a computer will put that kind of class together, because it is not possible. There is no way... They don't want to put them in other good classes, they want to put them together and pack them for one teacher to teach, which is very unfair.

Far from being exceptional, I observed many classrooms like this one. Mr. Oparah was a Black male teacher who contributed to the marginalization of mostly Black students by expecting little academically or behaviorally from them, but the school's unofficial policy of dumping amplified this problem and made it difficult for Mr. Oparah to improve pedagogically. I also observed men and women of different racial backgrounds and ages who did a disservice to the students they were meant to educate. The first time I introduced myself and my research interest in Asian American youth to Mrs. Conner, a middle-aged White English teacher, she told me that she had many disruptive students, but hastened to tell me that I would not be interested in them "because they aren't Asian, anyway." She continued to say, "They perpetuate failure. Everything stops with them. I don't try to save souls... They just shouldn't be here."

Several teachers and staff reported that administrators often "dumped" students with behavioral issues and/or academic difficulties into specific classes (as was attested by Mr. Oparah in the previous vignette). This practice was part of a greater sorting mechanism that created a situation of racial stratification in which Asian American students were more likely

than Black or Latino students to be in higher functioning academic spaces. This mechanism included tracking by academic program (“academies”), Advanced Placement (AP) classes, subject level tracking (needing to pass algebra before moving on to geometry), and restricted membership in resource-rich electives and activities that conferred exclusive social and cultural capital to students (e.g., Leadership class).

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

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

Spaces of Ownership: Academic Tracking and Extra-Curricular Activities

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

The two oldest and most prominent academies were the Science Academy (SA) and the Visual Arts Academy (VAA); these were known, respectively, as the “Asian academy” and the “diverse academy.” SA was known as the “Asian academy,” the “fieldtrip Academy” (because students participated in so many excursions with their science classes) and the “smart Academy” (where smart students go). A non-SA teacher remarked offhand that students claimed SA was 99% Asian American (while this number is not accurate, it signals how students saw the program). The overwhelming majority of students associated with Leadership, Delegates Assembly (a branch of student government), and Student Council were also part of the SA. (I

will highlight students' perspectives of these racially stratified spaces of ownership in the next chapter.)

I happened to observe in a math class when students were asked to nominate one another to the Delegates Assembly. Four of the five students nominated were Asian American and were nominated by other Asian American students. The exception was a Mexican American student who was also one of only two non-Asians in his AP U.S. History class. When I talked with the teacher, a young White male, about the nominations, he said, "the Leadership group has a lot of control. The things that parents do in other schools, they're in charge of." He added, "And most of the students in there are Asian."

At the first Delegates Meeting of the year, the White principal stood on stage with Ms. Meier, a White teacher, to commend the exiting officers, all of whom were Asian American girls. The principal gushed, "These girls that run everything, they're just, I mean, they could be CEO's." She then called on the incoming officers. Of between 35-40 positions, only one was held by a Black student and another by a multiracial Black/Asian American student. "These kids are going to mean so much to the school," the principal told the audience before she led the officers in swearing their allegiance to the school. At the Senior Awards Night I attended, the principal, Ms. Meier, and a counselor handed out tribute after tribute to Asian American students. The only ones they gave to a Black student went to a Black female softball player for her sportsmanship.

In her article introducing the term dysconscious racism, King (1991) describes it as racism related to "an uncritical habit of mind... that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (p. 135). Teachers and staff largely took as a given the fact that the rich extracurricular world of the school was highly segregated. The principal's comments are especially revealing, because while Black and Latino youth were active in extracurricular activities such as football, basketball, soccer, and Life Beats¹² (a "rap as therapy" segment of the school's comprehensive Wellness Center, run by an umbrella group of community agencies), these were not the spaces that conferred esteem in the eyes of administrators, teachers, and other staff, that then translated into academic access and privilege.

Many administrators, teachers and staff members were aware that different racial groups unevenly expressed institutional belonging. In one season of campaigning for student office, I observed 20 Asian American compared to only four non-Asian students give speeches and drum up support for their election. When I commented on this to Ms. Meier, she described Asian American students by comparing them to "the Republican voting bloc" because of their tendency to vote for those within their group. Notably, she held students, rather than administrators or teachers, responsible for the racially disproportionate character of student leadership. Similarly, a White administrator shared the following anecdote regarding student leadership when I asked him to comment on the racial dynamics that he observed in his time as a vice principal:

The other part that really struck me the other day, we were in a meeting and they were announcing all the student leadership on this campus and they listed 25 to 30 names and every single one but one were all Asian surnames... I thought wow, first of all that is not representative of the campus, the demographics in the campus, but it is representative of the kids who are involved in that. So when you go in to the Leadership group and you walk in and it's a sea of Asian faces. Where is everybody else? There's no Caucasian American, there's no African-American. Where are they?

*So, it's almost like that world is operating totally separate from everybody else. And what I was wondering was, are they even aware? As we are listening to the names? Am I the only person in the campus that thought "Whoa! What is that about?" ...I would be willing to wager that whether it's conscious or not, that **this school is viewed as an Asian school.***

*And that other kids, and that other ethnic groups, either they come here and they either are trying to figure out how they can be a part of that culture. Not necessarily Asian culture but the Asian school culture. Or just **co-existing and not being a part of it.** It's like, I don't know. I would ask, why really high performing Leadership-oriented African-American, Hispanic, Caucasian American kids don't get involved. And maybe they did, and maybe the majority of people voted and they voted Asian. Maybe they were there, I didn't see that. So I think it's an effort of them trying to fit in to how this school is typically perceived.*

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

This comment suggests that although he was a vice principal, he should not intervene in the troubling patterns he observed because that would “make an issue” of race. He did not perceive the “Asian American school culture” that predominated at the school in structural terms. The fact that non-Asians, in his description, struggled to participate or simply “co-existed” separately from the “involved” students was seen as a student issue. The racial homogeneity of school spaces, especially in very high status settings and in stigmatized environments like his own office—where students with disciplinary referrals were sent—was essentially understood as the by-product of individual, interpersonal level choices.

Teachers and other school staff exercised a considerable amount of influence not only over classroom stratification, but also over the degree to which certain types of students felt and displayed a sense of belonging to and ownership over the school and their educational experiences. Leadership class, Delegates Assembly, Student Council, and volunteer clubs like Kiwanis and Link Crew all orbited around Ms. Meier, the charismatic, blonde, veteran teacher of 30 years who had clout, status, and a direct line to the principal. She saw her classroom as an anchor for students, saying, “This room is so important for kids. It's home base.” Leadership and Psychology (which she taught) took place there. Students from the Leadership class read the daily announcements over the intercom in the main office. After school, Ms. Meier's room was a hub of activity. Practically every organized, school-wide activity related to student governance, the honor society and some volunteer organizations, school assemblies (like the Homecoming Assembly), and school dances was planned in her room. When one peered on any given day into this particular “home base,” one saw a White teacher and students who were disproportionately Asian American.

Discourses of Culture and Student-Centered Choice

Teachers and staff never asserted that Asian American students were biologically or genetically gifted in ways that made them superior students, nor did they ever suggest that Black and Latino students were biologically inferior. Nonetheless, many made comments that betrayed a belief in the cultural superiority of Asian American students vis-à-vis Black and Latino students, whose values, habits, and culture they found suspect. Critical race scholars (Barker, 1990; Bonilla-Silva, 2006) recognize this culturally-based racism to be the “new racism.” Unlike traditional, old-fashioned beliefs about biological deficiency, statements about cultural deficiency do not evoke skin color, race, or racial hierarchy. Yet, cultural racism becomes a surrogate vehicle for signaling supposedly inherent inclinations of individuals in racialized groups; these inclinations are used to explain social experiences. Bonilla-Silva (2006) defines cultural racism as a “central frame” of color-blind racism, that “relies on culturally based arguments... to explain the standing of minorities in society” (p. 28). Color-blind, cultural racism helps us understand how teachers and staff maintained normalized beliefs about the character of racial groups without overtly referring to race, and how they, like their students (as I will show), articulated notions of individual choice to explain and often defend and support, the racial status quo.

Teachers and staff upheld a color-blind ideology even when they contradicted themselves by intervening in school processes in racially affirmative ways (e.g. by recruiting non-Asians into Leadership class and into AP classes). Ms. Meier made efforts to recruit Black, Latino and other non-Asian youth into Leadership, but said she had a “harder time roping in Black and Latino kids to Leadership, mainly because of the 2.0 GPA requirement” that many struggled to meet. The participation of non-Asians in high-status spaces was a thorny issue, because teachers and staff either felt that their presence was insufficient or became defensive about any perceived criticism related to exclusivity or racial homogeneity.

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

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

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

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

In an interview, Mr. Tilman connected racial disparities in education to the "crack epidemic" that ravaged Black communities in the 1970s and 1980s. He said that while CHS was seen as an Asian school, "a lot of [Black and Latino] kids take two buses to get here... because they don't want to go to [other schools]... where there is more gang activity." He did not delineate the additional implications of this trek for the students. For instance, many students likely left their homes early in the morning and arrived home late, leaving little time (especially if students had jobs or familial obligations) for schoolwork. Others arrived throughout the day. Those who arrived after the bell sounded for the start of a period were usually locked outside the main, gated entry until the period ended.

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

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

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

A lot of African American students feel that they are not, how can I say this without being harsh, oh forget it—they feel like they are not a part of this school. So if you look in the Leadership class, oh my goodness, I think it is about maybe 50 kids, you probably see 5 Black kids in there. It is not representative of the school at all. Just a lot of aspects.

They feel like they are not welcome here, you know. I don't know. That's just how it is, a lot of their ideas are not implemented... And it is the same thing with a lot of these AP classes. You know when you're in the AP classes you see nothing but Asians and of course you know you are going to feel out of place... I was the sponsor of the Black Student Union last year and we [did not have consistent participation]. They always felt like, 'Why get involved when we are outnumbered?'

You know. 'I am out numbered, so what?', 'you know, as far as like Black History Month and stuff like that. We did the Black history facts. We had a big old painting in the commons and it was a big battle with the, what's the Asian club here called? [Yenhua: The Cantonese club.] Yeah, the Cantonese club, there was a big battle with that because Lunar New Year was at the same time as Black History Month. So it's like we were going back and forth on who is going to have the space and it's just like, we just felt that it is always a battle. It's always something. It is always like we're fighting... And so you are always like, damn, I mean, can we get a break?

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

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

The themes of exclusion, ownership, and belonging surfaced repeatedly in my interviews with students, but seldom came up in conversations with adults until I introduced it. Often, teachers

and staff seemed unaware of their power to formalize interactions and practices that could disrupt a dynamic of Asian American insiders and Black/Latino outsiders.

One academy where teachers and staff purposefully tried to bring Black students, Latino students, and struggling Asian American students in from the margins was the Visual Arts Academy (VAA). VAA was known to be racially diverse. It was described by youth and adults as the “academy for Blacks and Latinos and Asian American kids that identify with Black people,” “the easy Academy,” and “like a family.” I frequently overheard comments like the following (made by one Black student to another who wanted to join the program): “Just tell Ms. Meier there aren’t enough Asian American kids in VAA. There’s mostly Black kids in there. She’ll let you in.”

A well-liked White art teacher named Mr. Casey said the program “tries to target those students who would otherwise fall between the cracks and who are on the brink of being stronger students.” He told me that “the small academy system isn’t for everyone, but you can see the difference between the VAA kids and the regular kids.” One set comprised his 4th period class, while the other group comprised his 6th period class. In the VAA class, “you could keep track of how students are doing and kids get to know each other pretty well.” When I spoke with three Latino boys in a VAA art class, they said, “In VAA, I feel like there’s a family” and “if it weren’t for VAA, I wouldn’t feel comfortable.”

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

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

Mr. Posey: The new thing is to get into small schools and create these comfortable little enclaves where kids feel supported, so it basically took a bunch of kids, mostly African Americans with low skills, and say ‘You are part of the Health Academy’ [a new academy]. It’s not a choice—though academies have always been a choice, just like the leaders, they choose themselves—

Yenhua: So why do they target those kids?

Mr. Posey: Because there is nowhere to put them.

Yenhua: Because they just happen not to be in an academy?

Mr. Posey: Yes, they are not in an academy and they are the ones everyone is hopefully trying to help, so this is their version of helping them, they are going to dump them in there.

Mr. Oparah, who did not teach academy classes, commented, “I told Mr. Posey one day, ‘You know what? What they do is that they give you all the SA students. Then whatever is left is

what they put in my class, and that is why we are having problems here. Because when you pack students that are not doing well in the same class, you are not motivating them.” Similarly, Mr. Roth, a VAA teacher said, “There were 40 students who were having problems and they just put them in VAA, because they know that we [the teachers in VAA] can manage them.”

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

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

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

This job is really hard. It's hard to do it well. And it can be shit. You get paid nothing. You get like \$38,000 a year. You have to be organized. You have to be disciplined. You work long hours. And there are lots of reasons to get discouraged. So there's got to be something in it for me, too. What keeps me in the classroom is that I'm going to really do my job. I have my lessons, I prepare for them, I get students to learn... People come in to teaching for all these altruistic reasons. I did, too. But you can't spend all your energy on what's going on with students, in their lives. You know that students go home and there's no food. Everyone has responsibilities at home. Everyone knows someone who was shot. Everyone has a story... I have to separate out the stories from the teaching. It has to be about the teaching. Otherwise what the fuck good are you doing?

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

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

Teachers face an extremely difficult pedagogical situation... In addition to the curricular and instructional mandates and conditions... teachers confront

roomfuls of students whose home circumstances are often extremely stressful. Their desperate lives make many of them restless and confrontational (p. 28).

At CHS, Black and Latino students were involved in disproportionately more physical altercations and received disproportionately more disciplinary referrals than Asian American students. Undeniably, behavioral problems among Black and Latino youth impacted how teachers and staff constructed racial identities for these students. Similarly, Blacks and Latinos graduated at lower rates and consistently performed worse than their Asian American peers on standardized tests of proficiency across subject matters.¹³ These formal indicators of “success” strongly influenced which students adults regarded as “good students.”

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

Table 1
Percentage of Central High School students scoring at proficient or advanced (meeting or exceeding the state standards) on the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program, 2010-2011.

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

Source: Central Unified School District data.

Similarly, the principal and several teachers praised the success of the senior class president and the valedictorian, but in interviews, both reported that they felt grossly underprepared for college and were fearful of college level work. Another example is found in Asian American students’ depth of learning in Advanced Placement (AP) classes, where they predominated. When I asked a guidance counselor about exam passage rates, he explained that only a handful of students earned a score high enough to receive AP credit in any given subject. The model minority image of Asian American student success also belied their documented academic diversity. In fact, some Asian American students simply fell through the cracks. I observed students with failing and near-failing grade point averages (GPAs of 1.0) who simply faded into the background as adults focused their attention elsewhere. (These issues are further discussed from Asian American students’ perspectives in Ch. 3.)

Teacher and staff perceptions were complex and wide-ranging, but the overwhelming majority held racially differentiated views about students that informed practices which deepened academic and social divisions between Asian American and non-Asian students. Moreover, most adults did not consider that their relatively higher expectations for Asian

American students could have a self-fulfilling effect on students' efforts. Individuals often did not realize they were engaged in processes that perpetuated the formal and informal stratification of students by race, even though they were often aware of the racially stratified nature of settings within the larger institution. In fact, once mechanisms were set in place, individual staff could both actively and passively support a status quo wherein Asian American youth, especially those who were seen as high-performing and engaged, were academically and socially distanced (and distanced themselves) from the diverse nature of the larger school community.

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

Conclusion

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

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

and oppositional and unengaged Black/Brown youth, as meaning-making anchors. The creation of racial categories was mutually co-constitutive; one was defined in relation to the other and these relationships were in turn related to the ideology of color-blindness.

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

Black and Latino students consequently expressed a lower sense of belonging to and ownership of the school relative to Asian American Americans, who had better access to school resources and were disproportionately represented in leadership activities. Buoyed by perceptions of themselves as "smart" and "engaged," Asian Americans often internalized this identity and saw themselves on upward trajectories, even when in practical terms, many struggled with the content of higher level curricula. Asian Americans who defied model minority expectations sometimes faced academic and social exclusions similar to those experienced by Black and Latino students, though they were not disciplined at the same high levels. Very often, "Asian American" was understood by teachers and staff as a stand-in for White. Asian-ness and Blackness often served as racial foils, complicating the Black-White binary and the binary relationship of White supremacy/oppression of the racialized 'Other.' In this case, racial privilege was constrained. For example, the purchase on power that Asian Americans had as a privileged group at this school was conditional upon certain demands for normalized behavior and came at the extraordinary expense of educational equity.

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

Chapter 3, The Racialization of Asian American Students

The majority of students at this school are Asian. The majority of the students who do well are Asian. The majority of the ones who aren't doing well are Black males, followed by Black females, then Latino males and Latino females. If you can figure out why that is, then you can get on 60 Minutes. – A multiracial vice principal

There's the ghetto Asian kids, like the gang bangers. And then there's kids like me, probably the outspoken and spirited and like really involved in school, smart kids. – A 16 year-old Asian American girl

It's the students that make the school bad, not the school. – An 18 year-old Asian American boy

How did Asian American students *experience* and *respond* to racialization in a racially and ethnically heterogeneous urban school? Over the 12-month period in which I conducted fieldwork at Central High School, I got to know and befriend Asian American students from across the school's academic and social configurations. I conducted in-depth interviews with 30 Asian/Asian American students and had numerous informal conversations with dozens more. Finally, I observed and interacted with these students in a rich variety of contexts, inside and outside of school. This chapter uses vignettes and quotes to convey what racialization looked like from the perspective of Asian American (and Asian) students, to show how they were both affected by and contributed to the 'racial projects' of the school (Omi & Winant, 1986/2015).

I argue that their *experiences* of racialization were shaped by two dynamics that emerged: an Asian-Black racial paradigm and a model minority versus oppositional or deviant minority binary. Asian American students' varied responses to their racialization influenced how they straddled or lived within or outside the category of Asian-ness. Asian American students played a dominant role at CHS and they, like the rest of the school, were actively negotiating cultural representations of Asian-ness. In the same instance, Asian American students' narratives revealed a special preoccupation with Blackness. Asian American students constantly separated themselves from Black people, or alternately, repudiated negative stereotypes of Blackness and personally identified with Blacks. In either case, they expended considerable energy defining what Black people were like.

Thus, a traditional Black-White interpretation of race and racism cannot explain the relationships of Asian American students with their peers. Nor could it account for the stratification, hierarchy, and inequality among racial minority groups of students at CHS. The key relationship in the racialization of Asian American students at CHS was in fact the relationship of Asian-ness to Blackness. By empirically examining the social construction of Asian Americans through this prism, it is possible to shed light on the racialization process itself: 'Asian' operates not simply as a classification describing a group, but as a *social relation*. What can we learn from the material and ideological conditions through which Asian-ness arises and gains its value, when we understand them better? I found that CHS was a setting where the model minority myth of Asian American success plainly did not describe the reality, because

Asian American students who were held up as models were struggling, but it was a site where this ideal nonetheless persisted as a regulative representation (Hall, 1996). At CHS, Asian American students negotiated what it meant to be Asian by defining Asian-ness against oppositional and deviant Blackness (and, to a lesser extent, Brown-ness). They lived in the shadow of the model minority ideal as it endured not only side-by-side with, but interdependent with, a strongly anti-Black racial construction.

Asian American students' *responses* to racialization demonstrate that they benefited from, invested in, and reproduced racial categories, but some Asian American students also were troubled by racial categories and tropes and redrew or rejected racial categories and boundaries. This chapter reveals some Asian American students fortifying their advantages and others wrestling to find alternative explanations for racial stratification. The story of Asian American students portrays incredible variety in terms of how they drew on school experiences to identify and be identified as racial or ethnic subjects: it shows that there were many types of Asian students, and many ways of being Asian.

An outcome of Asian American students' racialization had implications for their life-chances and future social and economic standing. Although some students gained admission to colleges and universities, I will show that the academic privilege that Asian American students experienced due to their positioning at the top of the racial hierarchy was of limited value for most. Some Asian American students joined their Black and Latino peers in falling through the cracks of the school system. Even the "high-achieving" Asian American students had precarious academic identities and felt profoundly unprepared for postsecondary education. In short, Asian American youth gained limited access to racial privilege at the cost of not only Blacks and Latinos, but also at their own expense.

This chapter is organized to examine how components of Asian American students' personal and school-based backgrounds contextualized their experiences of racialization and their responses to it. First, I touch on a myth that students and staff drew from to understand and racially locate Asian American students, whether they knew its name or not: the model minority myth. Second, I show that an Asian-Black binary contoured the school's racial dynamics. Third, I elucidate shared features of Asian American students' racialization, both how they were racialized and how they participated in racializing one another. Next, I investigate the views and practices of two groups of Asian American students: those who were defined by teachers, administrators, and staff as "high achieving" and those on the "regular track": they were average school performers, academically struggling, or failing. Then I consider the role of the youth-focused community organizations in Asian American students' racialization. Finally, I highlight the perspectives and experiences of first generation Asian immigrants at CHS.

Asian Americans and Education: The Myth of the Model Minority

Academic literature and popular media attention to the educational experiences of Asian Americans tends to focus on the education of East Asian Americans, particularly Chinese and Japanese Americans. One model that persistently shapes popular perception is the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans as a monolithic group of overachievers with few educational needs. It has also become the "prevailing discourse in Asian American education research" (Coloma, 2006, p. 7). Several scholars (Cheng & Yang, 2000; Lee, 1994, 2005; Osajima, 1987/2000) have criticized this model for its homogenization of Asian Americans and attempt to account for the diversity of Asian American educational experiences by

disaggregating data, accounting for differences of class, ethnicity, gender and generation, and examining various identities and intersections of identities based on these realities.

Education and race scholars have deconstructed the model minority myth, which imputes a cultural basis for Asian American educational success, by tracing its historical formation and by highlighting class-based and ethnic cleavages among Asian Americans (Cheng & Yang, 1996; Lee, 1996; Louie, 2004). In comparing conceptions of the model minority in the 1960s and 1980s, Osajima (1987/2000) locates the social and political sources of the myth in the dominant culture's desire to affirm the belief that the U.S. is a free and open society wherein opportunity is equal for those who have the merit to take advantage of it. While the model minority myth was espoused against the racially critical debates of the 1960s, including those spurred by the Black Power and Chicano movements, the core message it carries continues to resonate with elements of the dominant society. Because the ideology of the model minority was founded upon culturally based explanations for success, conservatives and others could deploy messages of Asian American success to criticize, regulate, and discipline non-Asian minorities, especially Blacks and Latinos, as culturally deficient. Although the myth faced more complex criticism in the 1980s onward, the core precept of blanket Asian American success grounded on culture, family, and hard work (i.e. self-sufficiency) continues to be used to affirm the U.S. achievement ideology.

Lei (2006) argues that a (de)racialization of AAPI students takes place in their representation. She notes that scholars (Ancheta, 1998; Cho, 1993; Hune, 1995) have critiqued the dominant social and academic Black/White racial binary for excluding populations of color who are not viewed as legitimate racial minorities. In particular, the exclusion of Asian Americans reflects their precarious position on the American racial hierarchy as 'forever foreigners' or 'honorary whites' (Tuan, 1998). Asian Americans have recently come to enjoy some of the symbolic and material benefits of racial inclusion that other racial minorities do not enjoy, leading some to confer upon them the conditional status of whiteness. This status presupposes that Asian Americans are distinctly not physically white and thus ultimately will not be racialized along the same historical trajectory as White ethnic groups, who moved from the status of racial outsiders to that of insiders.¹⁴ Instead, Tuan contends that Asian Americans are perpetual foreigners, inassimilable immigrants who never become genuine Americans irrespective of how long they or their ancestors reside in the United States. Thus, honorary Whiteness and perpetual foreignness coexist and reinforce each other.

Despite the academic literature's well-established critique of the myth's static and inaccurate characterization of Asian American homogeneity, in practice, institutions such as schools continue to rely upon and reproduce the myth to racialize students. At Central High School, the model minority myth represented a form of truth. The myth was 'true' in the sense that it was a vehicle of meaning-making, a way of seeing and explaining the social world. The myth was particularly potent and resonant because it provided a story within which to locate two salient groups whose pathways seemed divergent: Asian Americans and Blacks. In the next section, I describe the racial paradigm that centered on Asian American and Black students and that formed the context of their differential experiences of racialization.

The Asian-Black Binary

The academic and social configuration of CHS was bifurcated between those students racialized as Asian Americans and those racialized as Black and Latino. It was also divided between high academic achievers and low academic achievers and those who were "involved"

and those who were marginal to the realm of academic extra-curricular activities. At the same time, the social distance (Bogardus, 1925; Simmel & Wolff, 1950) among Asian Americans, Blacks, and other students was relatively close; in other words, occasions for social interaction within and without school walls were many. The result was a sustained opportunity to develop the normative content of racial categories.

In the minds of Asian American students, the categories of Asian-ness and Blackness stood out in particular. One reason for this was because CHS youth saw Central City as a Black city.¹⁵ The following comment illustrates this racial identification: I asked Ken, a Filipino American student who transferred from a nearby city, how he came to find himself as a student at CHS. He answered, “My step-dad is Black, so we had to move to Central.” When he saw that I did not understand, he explained, “Central is a Black place, so when my mom got married, we moved to be by everyone.” As with Ken’s mother and stepfather, there were also instances of inter-racial dating and coupling among CHS students. Residential integration of Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans existed alongside segregation, especially the segregation of Whites and non-Whites, and the vibrant Asian American and Latino presence within the region also colored the landscape.

Asian American students (like all students at CHS) experienced schooling in a landscape of racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, but this social landscape was underlain with deep racial fault lines, or a site’s historically racialized patterns of group relations (Almaguer, 1994). CHS saw several demographic transformations over its long history. A perusal of yearbooks in the school’s small archive room reveals that CHS began as a virtually all-White school and transformed into a mostly White and Asian American school, then into a majority-Asian American school serving mostly non-White students, and finally, at the time of my research, into a school in which Asian Americans comprised the largest racial group in an almost 100% non-White student body.

Comments by students and staff indicate that the school was seen as an “Asian school,” but that it was in the process of “becoming less Asian.” As I will show, when White students left, Asian American students took control of student activities and affairs. They also took place at the top of the academic hierarchy. In Ch. 4, I will show that Black students took position at the bottom. Fundamentally, these two sets of students were not only demographically important; they also represented powerful, polarized racial categories that formed over time and pervaded racial understandings. In *Up Against Whiteness*, Lee (2005) portrays Hmong American youth from refugee families straining against an institutional culture of a high school in which Whiteness figured as “normal, desirable, and good” (p. 29). At CHS, Asian-ness was coded as these things. To be sure, Whiteness was preeminent, but it operated in an abstract, indirect way. The Asian-Black binary was the dominant language of local social interactions, expectations, and representations regarding race and culture, and Asian-ness figured as the regulative ideal of this paradigm.

The following vignette illustrates that Asian-ness and Blackness were central organizing elements of race-making at CHS.

Asian-ness and Blackness in Mr. Roth’s History Class

College pennants and banners encouraging decorum, discipline, and respect hung from the walls. On a cabinet was a poster of a painting of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, who stood behind a podium at a 1997 march. The poster read, “Si se puede!” A Vietnamese flag with faces and the words “Vietnam Ho Chi Minh” hung along the wall. Another poster of Tupac Shakur

and a painting by Diego Rivera covered more wall space. There was a large sheet with vocabulary words used in the current unit, including “disparity,” “criticism,” and “poverty.” Mr. Roth circulated among groups of students as he talked, sometimes munching on baby carrots that he pulled from his pants pocket.

Students sat in assigned seats. Looking around the room, I saw a good deal of mixing. In one group, a Black boy, a Cambodian-Thai American, a Samoan boy, and a Latino boy joked together. At another set of desks, a Chinese American girl, a Vietnamese American girl, a Tongan girl, and a Black girl sat together. Mr. Roth’s history class seemed to be a “safe space” at CHS, where youth had exceptionally good rapport both with their teacher and with one another. The positive cross-racial dynamics of Mr. Roth’s multiracial class were unique, and were not in small part a result of Mr. Roth’s efforts to teach racial themes in his American history classes and to go out of his way to de-center the school’s commonplace focus on Asian American students.

I had a chance to observe as students debated several questions related to the Racism, Civil Rights, and Black Nationalism unit they were studying. Their activity involved moving to one or the other side of the room depending on their agreement with problem statements. One was the following: “Racial equality is impossible without integration.” Student comments evinced an immediate grasp of the limitations of de jure integration. For example, they pointed out, “Even in places where you have legal integration, there’s still segregation” and “Even if laws changed, people would still feel what they feel in they heart” [*sic*]. Only two people in the class agreed with the idea that racial equality requires integration. One was Romero, a tall, quiet multiracial Vietnamese American boy with a learning disability, who teachers said had difficulty dealing with his emotions, especially anger. (Romero is featured in the Field Note after chapter 1). “You have to fight against racism with integration,” he slowly explained, as he stood in a near empty end of the room opposite his classmates.

Mr. Roth added, “To elaborate, you have to have interaction with different races so that people can see through some of the stereotypes.” Tamicka, a Black student, shook her head. “I disagree, because you can’t make somebody like somebody else. I could sit in the same classroom with you, but I don’t have to have a relationship with you.” Mr. Roth’s eyes scanned the group. An immigrant student, a Vietnamese girl named Ly, stood quietly behind Tamicka, attempting to evade notice. She seemed to shrink in her spot when Mr. Roth called on her. “Ly, Do you think Black people and Asian people should have to mix?,” he asked. “No,” she replied. “Why not?,” he persisted. Ly turned red and did not answer.

Mr. Roth turned to a boy named Chu, who, like Ly, immigrated to the U.S. within the past couple of years. He stood out to me, because he was the sole Chinese member of an otherwise all Black and female hip-hop club. I had seen the group dance after school in the courtyard. “What do you think?,” prompted Mr. Roth. Tamicka turned to Chu and asked him blankly, “Do you want to sit in this classroom next to Black people?” Chu covered his blushing face with his hands, laughing nervously. “He’s going to get beat up after class!” someone joked. A Black girl named Stacey, a fellow member of the hip-hop club, offered, “The teacher sometimes expects you to do so much, more than what you can handle, but because there’s Asians in that class, the teacher expects more.” Mr. Roth apologized to Chu for putting him on the spot, then addressed everyone: “What if I put all the Asians from this class in one class and all the Blacks in another?” “The Asians would probably learn more,” Stacey answered, then said, “There are some Black kids that want to learn, but there’s others who want to act up.” A Chinese boy named Edwin spoke up. “Racially speaking, everyone thinks the Asian kids are real smart.”

In teaching about the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalism, the sections of the curriculum that dealt most explicitly with race, Mr. Roth focused on White supremacy and Black subordination and resistance. For the most part, his lectures mirrored the mainstream language of a historical American Black-White paradigm, focusing content on White control and Black slavery and Jim Crow segregation. However, when students discussed integration and the limitations perhaps inherent in the goal of integration, they chose not to focus on Blacks and Whites, but directed the conversation towards Blacks and Asians. They spoke in contemporary terms, using themselves as examples.

Given that CHS was aptly described by adults and youth, by members of the school, as well as those of the surrounding community as racially and ethnically diverse, the reality that the racial groups of students at the school were neither academically nor socially integrated in a meaningful way presented a puzzle. As I argued in Ch. 2, teacher and staff biases in favor of Asian American students and institutional practices of tracking and dumping resulted in profound academic stratification along racial lines. Yet, I will show that like the teachers and staff, Asian American youth rationalized the segregation they observed around them as natural and perhaps even inevitable.

Even in racially mixed classes such as Mr. Roth's exceptionally diverse history class, racial boundaries remained (*"I could sit in the same classroom with you but I don't have to have a relationship with you."*). Following an Asian American male student, who stated, "If integration didn't come, Obama would never have been president," a Black male student said, "What do you mean by integration? Because it's integrated but not really integrated. How many White people go to Central schools? We're still with colored people. You're Asian. You still feel comfortable with Asians because of your culture. I'm just going to say it, if I was stuck on an island, I'd take Black folk with me."

Mr. Roth attempted to highlight students' commonalities, particularly the experience of attending an under-resourced urban school. In teaching about the history of the Civil Rights Movement, he showed the class a film about court-mandated school integration in 1980s Boston and the White working class community's resistance to it. Then he scrolled through images of a local high school, which had a sprawling campus and gleaming facilities. Located in an exceptionally affluent school district only three miles from CHS, it nonetheless could have been a world away.¹⁶

"Dang! I want to go there!" called out a Black male student named Darrell. "I would be an outcast," objected Jayden, another Black student. Mr. Roth posed a question: "Can you imagine if we bussed some of you there and some of those students over here?" Lisa, a Cambodian American girl, responded, "I'm Asian, but what if I were Hispanic or Black? There's not a high percentage of my kind. I would be treated differently." Mr. Roth responded, "I would probably venture to say that most of the Asian people there are—" Before he could finish his sentence, students shouted, "Whitewashed!" "I was going to say, are Chinese," Mr. Roth finished. "Chinese as opposed to Cambodian or Lao."

Mr. Roth asked who among the students would send their children to the other school rather than CHS. Dean, an Asian American boy, would not. "I wouldn't send my children there, because I want my kids to know the struggle I went through, to know how to work hard and appreciate their education. It's whitewashed. I would want my kid to go to CHS where it's diverse." In Dean's eyes, the mostly White and Asian American school was not "diverse" in the way that the mostly Asian American, Black, and Latino school was. His perception was that

CHS students work harder and had greater appreciation for their education than those with more economic privilege.

The theme of struggle resonated across racial groups among students at CHS, including Asian American students. In fact, the words “Beautiful Struggle” were painted on a student mural outside the school. In a spoken-word poem shared in the cafeteria after school, a Latino boy listed “the challenges in our lives: violence, crime, drugs, pregnancy, unemployment and poverty.” In interviews with Asian American students, I learned that struggle entailed strained family relationships, financial difficulty, violence, and/or the loss of loved ones. As is clear in the following quote by Karen, a Chinese American senior, these similar experiences of struggle did not unify students of different racial backgrounds:

I think a lot of students are kind of like ashamed of their struggles... A lot of people are ashamed of their background even though a lot of other people share the same kind of characteristics. Since they aren't really sharing, other people don't know, so there is no solidarity.

An outspoken Black student named Maya raised her hand. “I wouldn’t go to school there. I would be discriminated against. When I was in Michigan, the White kids would treat me differently because I’m Black. The teachers would do that, too.” Another Black student shouted, “It’s still like that, here!” A few students raised their hands to indicate that they would hypothetically send their children to the nearby town. “It feels like it’d be more difficult, but you learn more,” Darrell said. A Black student named Christian added, “It’s better opportunities. It’s more hands-on. It seems like a good high school to raise your child up.”

Le, a timid girl who immigrated from Vietnam three years prior, had also raised her hand. When Mr. Roth urged her to explain why she would prefer the other school to CHS, her face turned red and her already quiet voice became barely audible. “I would send my kids there because there’s less Black people,” she replied. Maya was indignant. “Hold on, did she say she would go to that school because there’s less Black people?” Mr. Roth nodded, and the class erupted in hoots and laughter. Christian asked, “Did she really say that?” Le was clearly uncomfortable. In an interview a few days later, she told me that she rarely spoke in class because it was difficult for other people to understand her halting English. Besides, she was by nature extremely shy. Yet, Mr. Roth had called upon her and she felt that it was important to give an honest answer. Discussing this incident with me privately, Le broke down in tears. “I live in Central City, there’s a lot of violence that Black people do.” She continued, “Because of what I say that day, people think I am racist, but I am not really like that. I still like Black people.”

“I can understand why Asians hardly like Black people,” Maya announced to the class. “Because when I ask my Asian friends, they all tell me that if they bring a Black friend home, their parents say, “get them out of my house!” The class laughed, as a few students chimed in with, “Uh huh,” and “Yeah.” Maya went on: “But I also understand the other side, the Black kids would always be robbing the Asians on the city bus and they’re afraid. That’s the truth.” The class buzzed with conversation for a while before Mr. Roth commented. “Part of the sentiment is that a school with more Black people is that, the kind of stuff going on there—” he was cut off by Jackson, a Black student, who said, “There’s crazy shit going on.” A Black girl named Shonda agreed, “It’s just the facts.” “I think it’s all about your mind-set,” considered Christian. Maya rejoined, “Everybody thinks it’s only Blacks doing bad stuff, but there’s Asians and Latinos gang-banging.” Lisa added, “Why is it always blamed on the Black students?” Mr. Roth weighed in. “Well, schools with high enrollments of Black students do also have lower test

scores. But the question is, does that have to do with the color of the students' skin, or does that it have to do with the conditions of the school?"

On their way out of the classroom, Maya asked Patrick, a Chinese American boy, "Are your parents racist?" "No. Well, but my mom is," was his reply. "That girl really offended me with what she said," Maya told him. Patrick thought for a moment then responded, "She was speaking her mind, though." Before leaving, Maya looked at me and asked, "Did you see that?" I nodded. "Racism!" she stated emphatically. Mr. Roth walked to the back of the room, where I was sitting. "Now that was interesting, wasn't it? It speaks to the quality of the racial interactions of the school that after hearing what they heard, after getting it in the chin, that Black students right afterwards said they understood where the Asians are coming from."

Asian Americans were located in a specific field of racial positions at CHS. Mr. Roth's class discussion reveals students' understanding of Black and Asian in terms of a normative relationship. For example, a classroom that included Asian American students was associated with higher standards. A Black student named Stacey is quoted above saying, "because there's Asians in that class, the teacher expects more." When Maya said that White students and teachers at the school she attended in the Midwest treated her differently "because I'm Black," another Black student pointed out, "It's still like that, here!" (in a school that was virtually non-White). In contrast, no one disagreed when Edwin, who was Chinese American, said, "Racially speaking, everyone thinks the Asian kids are real smart."

The particulars of the preceding vignette were unique to Mr. Roth's history class, but they provide a window into the school's unique racial dynamic: Whiteness still framed normative understandings of race, but these understandings were ideologically anchored not by a Black-White paradigm, but by an Asian-Black one. The Asian-Black racial binary was a symbolic economy, comprised of ideas, categories, and boundaries, but crucially, it had a material dimension and a concrete mode of existence. In the next section, I uncover the local meaning of Asian-ness within this Asian-Black paradigm and illustrate how it was lived in the organization of the school, in group dynamics and interpersonal relationships, and in the minds of Asian American youth.

The Meaning and Materiality of Asian-ness at Central High School

The portrait of Asian-ness in the particular social site of Central High School reveals the locality of race within the present, specifically its mutability and historicity. Asian American racial positioning can be understood in the context of historical developments in the American racial imaginary, namely the signification of "urban" schools and communities (particularly Black families) as deficient and pathological, potent since the Moynihan Report was published in the 1960s, and the more recent acceptance of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans into the American mainstream, on a path that has been analyzed against and compared with the historical trajectory of European ethnic groups from racial outsiders to White insiders (Roediger, 2006; Waters, 1990).¹⁷ At the local level, these trends combined with strong community racial consciousness to shape meanings of Asian-ness at CHS.¹⁸

On my first day at CHS, I jotted the following down in my notepad: "Do the students before me look and behave as typically 'Asian American'? Whatever that may mean, the answer seems to be no." Asian American youth at CHS did not look or sound like the collectively imagined entity portrayed on TV shows and in newspaper editorials about Tiger Moms and SAT prep classes: they did not play the role of a straight-laced, violin-playing token minority in a mostly-White suburban school.¹⁹ With respect to their appearance, Asian American students at

CHS did not try to conform to White mainstream culture. Instead, many dressed and spoke in the style of the local urban youth culture and borrowed heavily from their Black peers in terms of their material presentation of self.²⁰

In the popular media and in academic discourses, the conversational tempo regarding Asian Americans and educational success is mostly upbeat, although there has been controversy regarding discriminatory practices in their admissions to selective universities.²¹ CHS students were well aware of the popular framing of Asian Americans as “smart,” and as the following field note excerpt demonstrates, they sometimes problematized it:

The English teacher, Ms. Cisneros, projected a list of vocabulary words onto the screen at the front of the room full of freshmen. One of the words was stereotype. Anne, an Asian American girl, raised her hand. “A stereotype is like, in schools, Asians are really smart.” Karly, a Black girl, lifted her hand, too. “Wasn’t it on the news that Asians are the smartest ones? I swear it was.” Rashida, an outspoken Black girl, did not raise her hand, but asked, “Do Asians take that as offensive?” A Filipina American girl named Rowena spoke up. “Yeah, it’s offensive,” she said. “Cause it’s not always true.”

As I wrote in Ch. 2, administrators, teachers, and staff perceived Asian American students as deserving and engaged racial subjects and a “solution minority,” in spite of their academic heterogeneity (“quiet, well behaved, and smart” was how Serena, a Chinese American, described how Asian Americans were seen at CHS). However, that label was contingent upon on a cultural assimilation that they were at times at odds with. I found that many Asian American students desired to escape the racial and economic isolation of the urban ghetto, but they also identified with it, seeing the story of Central’s struggle as the struggle of their own lives. Like Lisa, the Cambodian American girl in Mr. Roth’s class, many Asian American students did not identify with “whitewashed” middle and upper class Asian Americans; namely, a class-based racialization differentiated their experience.

The popular trope of Asian-ness that circulated among students at CHS flattened these complexities, as mainstream stereotypes were reflected and refracted through the experience of young people ambivalent to their labeling. Invariably, Asian American students reported that, as a group, Asians were perceived as smart, engaged, quiet, good students (in terms of academics and behavior). Students like Rowena, quoted in the previous excerpt, opposed this stereotyping, but others did not. Indeed, Asian-ness carried normative status and authoritative weight not only because adults at the school saw Asian American students as valued fixtures within their idea of a good school, but also because some students also saw themselves that way.

Asian American students at CHS were held up as model minorities, but they were racialized not simply as good and smart, but also as urban and “at risk.” The following section analyzes shared characteristics that factored into how Asian American youth were racialized and how they themselves racialized Asian and non-Asian youth: Asian American students at CHS came from immigrant and refugee families; their daily lives were framed by poverty and violence (or worries about violence); they attended school in a racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse setting, but participated in self-segregation; and finally, although they were often scheduled into relatively higher level classes, the quality of education they received was nonetheless poor.

Children of Refugees and Immigrants

Between 1975 and 1980, a combined total of 400,000 Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian refugees arrived in the U.S. (Hing, 1993). They fled to declining industrial cities (and on a lower scale, to low-cost farming and fishing communities) across America, including to Central City. The 1980 Refugee Act limited their entry, but also gave them access to more state assistance than any group of immigrants in the past (Ong, 2003). Nonetheless, they possessed limited forms of economic, social, and cultural capital, especially compared with previous waves of Asian immigrants. The state's woefully inadequate provision of language and cultural training limited their access to the already narrow opportunity structure available to non-Whites (Hein 1995; Ima and Rumbaut, 1989). Most found low- and semi-skilled jobs that paid poor wages, provided few, if any fringe benefits, and extended scant job security. Racism against Southeast Asian "orientals," "gooks," and "chinks" exacerbated these economic conditions.

According to data drawn from the 2000 U.S. Census (Le, 2015), the group 'Cambodian, Hmong, or Laotian' had the highest rate of being not-proficient in English (44.3%) compared to Whites, Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Indians, and the six largest Asian American ethnic groups (Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Pacific Islanders, and Vietnamese). They have median personal incomes comparable to Blacks (\$16,000 vs. \$16,300), but higher than Latino and Native Americans. However, their median family incomes surpass Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans (\$43,850 compared to \$33,300 for Blacks). They are living in poverty at rates comparable to Blacks and Latinos but less than Native Americans (22.5%) and have the highest rate of receiving public assistance of all ethnic groups (9.9%). They are as likely to be homeowners as Blacks and Latinos (53.3%). They participate in the labor force at the same rate as Blacks (58.8%), almost tie with Latinos for having the lowest rate of having a high skill occupation (9.8% vs. 9.6%), and have the lowest median socioeconomic index that measures occupational prestige of all groups (18, compared to 44 for Blacks and 65 for Asian Indians).

The Vietnamese have almost as high a rate of not-proficient in English (40%) and the same median personal income as other Southeast Asians, though they have a significantly higher median family income (\$51,500). They are living in poverty (13.8%) and receiving public assistance (4.4%) at a lower rate than Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotians. They are also more likely to participate in the labor market (63.5%), have a high skill occupation (22.6%), and have a higher median socioeconomic index score (32). These figures are surprising when compared to the data for Asian Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, and Pacific Islanders. Most saliently, Asian Indians, Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos generally lead other ethnic groups (including Whites) in indicators of income and socioeconomic status; the margin between these groups and Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotians is widest. Koreans have a similar personal income (\$16,000) and median family income (\$48,500) as Vietnamese. Data on Pacific Islanders also reveals economic marginalization comparable to but less than Southeast Asians as reflected in the fields of living in poverty, high skill occupation, and median socioeconomic index score.

The disaggregated educational profile of Southeast Asian Americans in the 2000 U.S. Census reveals a stark disparity between Southeast Asian Americans and other ethnic groups, particularly South and East Asian Americans. The group 'Hmong, Cambodian, or Laotian' was shown to have the highest rate of having less than a high school degree of all ethnic groups (52.7%). This compares with 37.8% of Vietnamese, 29.1% of Blacks, 23.6% of Chinese, 15.3% of Whites, 12.6% of Asian Indians, and 9.5% of Japanese. They also feature the lowest rate of individuals with at least a bachelor's degree of all ethnic groups (9.2%). This compares with 13.6% of Blacks, 13.8% of Vietnamese, 25.3% of Whites, 40.8% of Japanese, 46.3% of Chinese,

and 64.4% of Asian Indians. Predictably, the Southeast Asian group also had the lowest rate of having an advanced degree (0.4%). The Vietnamese rate for having an advanced degree is 2.5%. This compares with the high of 12.5% for Asian Indians.

Southeast Asian Americans comprised 15.2% of people reporting Asian American and/or Pacific Islander heritage on the 2000 US Census (Ngo, 2006, p. 53). This generation of Southeast Asian American youth were born in or spent a majority of their lives in the U.S. Instead of war-related trauma or language barriers, the American-born second and third generation of Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian American students now confront problems that other minority, low-income, urban youth face, including struggles with and against failing schools and their schooling experiences, stereotyping, structural racism, poverty, criminalization, sexual vulnerability, and physical violence in their neighborhoods (Lee, 2005). Scholars also posit that schools represent a space of challenge for Southeast Asian American youth who struggle 1) within schools to achieve high grades, to graduate, and to enter and persist in institutions of higher education; 2) against schools, officials, and their school experiences, particularly when their schools facilitate alienation and racism; and 3) in facing multidimensional obstacles of social life in America (Lee, 1994, 2005, 2006; Ngo, 2006; Pang *et al.*, 2004; Um, 2003).

Asian American students at CHS were the children, or more usually the grandchildren, of these refugees, as well as the children of immigrants from other Asian countries. Students whose families were from Laos were usually ethnically Mien or Hmong. In interviews, I learned that their parents were often also born in Central City, or were very young when they arrived in the U.S. Asian students at CHS were also first generation immigrants, mostly from China or Vietnam. The significant presence of Chinese American students at CHS and their shared experience of racialization with Southeast Asian American youth prompted me to analyze the racial construction of 'Asians' as an umbrella signifier, rather than limit my study to Southeast Asian Americans as I originally intended. Moreover, Asian American students at CHS often had backgrounds that merged ethnic identities and origins: they were Vietnamese-Chinese American, Chinese-Cambodian American, Vietnamese-Cambodian-Thai American, Mien-Chinese American, etc.

Chinese American students were in fact over-represented in the advanced academic tracks and in student leadership positions. However, many Chinese American students were also struggling academically and unremarkable within the academic-social status system of the school. First generation Chinese immigrants who were still English Language Learners were particularly marginalized in school life. Vietnamese American students were also spread across the continuums of academic performance and of social inclusion and recognition. Cambodian American, Mien American, and Hmong American students were active in Leadership class and other high-profile sites of involvement, and were among the students recognized for academic achievement by teachers, administrators, and staff. However, as is evident in the student narratives drawn upon in this chapter, they were also more likely than Chinese American students to struggle academically.

The adult relatives of my informants typically did not complete college and were employed in low paid jobs, if they were employed at all. Many worked in the urban ethnic economic enclave of Chinatown or its Southeast Asian equivalents. The residential patterns of Asian American students at CHS added to what Frazier (2010) refers to as an evolving, "complex Asian American geography" featuring both isolation and assimilation (p. 91). They generally lived in the neighborhoods surrounding CHS, in Chinatown or in a densely populated district where Southeast Asian refugees and immigrant families lived side by side with Latino

immigrant families and Black families. A smaller proportion of CHS's Asian American students (mostly Cambodian Americans) lived far from CHS, in a section of town referred to as "deep East Central City," where a higher concentration of Black families resided. None of the students I spoke with lived in the hills of Central City, segregated neighborhoods of mostly upper-income Whites and East Asians.

Poverty and Violence in Central City and at Central High School

Two other keystone features of Asian American students' personal narratives were poverty and violence, aspects of social and civic life in common for many of Central City residents who lived in the vast 'flatlands.' Asian American students from Central High were very aware that the derelict and dangerous neighborhoods they lived in were undesirable, and a common bond among Asian American students was their openness about their material conditions, even though those conditions may have been a source of shame. Jackie, a Cambodian American girl who dropped out of CHS after she became pregnant during her sophomore year, called her part of town "a dirty place, where there's not a lot of good." In another example, a Cambodian American boy named Eddy had a sophisticated recognition of his poor material environment. The following excerpt from my field notes describes how he saw the apartment complex where his family lived:

Eddy wore a big square faux diamond stud in his left ear, an over-sized white t-shirt, and baggy dark blue jeans. He was sitting with his friend, Valerie. He was supposed to write about where he came from for history class. The heading of his assignment was "Sunrise Place," the name of an apartment complex in Central where his family lived. According to Eddy, most of the residents were Cambodian or Mexican. He contributed to a video about its run-down past, lawsuit over the building's conditions, and improvement, created in the AYO (Asian Youth Organization) video production program. He finished the program last year, which he called "a hella long time ago." After the lawsuit, his family of eight moved out, but his aunt and cousins still live there. When I said, "Tell me about Sunrise Place," Valerie laughed and imitated my voice, making it sound very proper. Eddy simply responded, "Sunrise Place is really ghetto."

As Jean Anyon astutely captures in *Ghetto Schooling* (1997), schools are fundamentally influenced by the political economy of cities. Students had an intuitive grasp of this link, often describing the economic and social problems of Central City as a frame for understanding the problems of their school. For instance, the following comment was typical: "Central is a cool place, but it's a ghetto place, too. The schools don't have a lot of money." Asian American students were aware that their neighborhood school was undesirable to middle and upper class families, who avoided it in part because of the racial composition of the student body, its low ratings on popular school ranking websites, and concerns about safety.²² Donna, a Vietnamese American student, was somewhat incredulous at the norm of racial and spatial segregation:

You get used to it. I never had any White friends before. It's like, they're all gone. They're here, but they're all in the hills, where it's safe. I consider it normal. But it's still like, where are all the White people at?

Like other students at the school, Asian American youth were constantly alert to possible dangers. I spoke with a racially mixed group of freshmen boys, who spoke over one another to tell me, “There are lots of fights at this school. Like, everyday.” Asian students also described incidents of violence they experienced first-hand. Vang, a Mien American, shared the following anecdote about witnessing an assault:

I think Wednesday, 5th period, I was going to my locker room and this Asian kid who I didn't know was coming out the bathroom, and an African American was talking to him. First, they seemed like they were friends, and then the Asian person, he got really red, like he was very nervous. Then the African American was like, “I'm going to beat you up.” I was like, “What's going on?” And the Asian kid looked at me and we connected. He looked pretty scared, like very fearful. I just told the African American like, “Back off, don't mess with him.” And then he was like, “Alright, whatever.” He backed off.

In a couple of instances, teachers complained that outsiders interpreted their teaching experiences through the prism of popular films like *Dangerous Minds*, which portray urban schools as bastions of youth violence. They resented outsider assumptions about what their students were like. At the same time, Central City was among the most violent cities in the country (in terms of violent crime per capita), and this degree of violence had a deep impact on students and school staff alike. At the start of the fall semester, a well-liked student was shot and killed as he walked home from the Central High open house. In another incident, a student brought a gun onto campus and accidentally discharged it in a classroom (fortunately, no one was hurt). And in yet another incident, I was conducting an interview with a student when we heard the distressed voice of the principal come onto the PA system to urge students and staff to comply with a security lockdown. My informant, Jason, the multiracial Black-Filipino president of the student body, sent text messages to his friends. We learned that a student was shot at the bus stop just on the other side of the chain linked fence that separated Central High's football field from a busy street. While I was shocked, my informant was unfazed. When I pointed out how calm he was, he explained that he had previously seen someone fatally shot in his neighborhood.

Asian American students also told me about the sense of foreboding that accompanied them off-campus. For example, Dylan, an attractive, outgoing Chinese-Cambodian American boy who wore a baseball cap everyday told me that when he and his friends “go out in Central,” they fear that “something could happen. Like waiting at the bus stop, you could get robbed.” Similarly, Heidy and her friends Amanda and Vicky, Asian American girls from Leadership class, shared stories of “getting mugged.” Heidy, an artistic, elegant, petite Chinese American senior, said she, her mother, and her aunt all experienced robberies. One day, someone on a bicycle pulled Heidy's purse from her, dragging her along. On another occasion, her aunt's brow bone was broken when the assailant “socked her” during the robbery. “It makes me so mad,” Heidy said. “Central has so much going for it, but what I hate is that once you let your guard down, then that's when something bad is always going to happen to you.”

Heidy's friend Amanda, who was also Chinese American, told me about her boyfriend, Rick. “I made him go to Washington,” an alternative continuation high school. “He was doing bad in school. He wasn't going to school.” Rick lived 17 blocks from CHS (Amanda lived 14 blocks from school, on his route). She said there was not always a city bus available to take him to school, so he would walk. “On those days, he got mugged.” On the days he did not attend

school, Amanda said Rick stayed home “because it’s safer than doing something around town.” Heidi and Amanda told me that students were often mugged just blocks from the high school or in front of the school itself. When I asked by whom, they said “other students.”

I heard firsthand accounts of this experience from Victor and Asha, a Mien American boy and an Indonesian American girl whom I met in an afterschool tutoring session. We were discussing perceptions of being Asian when Victor asked me, “What would you do if a Black guy came up to you with a gun?” I said, “I would run away!” Asha added, “Yeah! That’s what I’m saying.” Then Victor said, “How you gonna run away when he’s got a gun at you? He’s pointing a gun at you and telling you to give him all your stuff. What would you do?” “What would *you* do?” I asked in turn. “I would stand my ground,” he said. I later learned that Victor’s questions were based on actual events that occurred two weeks prior. According to Asha:

Victor and I was walking when this guy came up to us. We were about a block away from school. He flashed his gun and stared at us. He told us to give him everything we got. I had my whole paycheck in my purse and my iPod and my iPhone. I was like, “Shit! What am I going to do?” But Victor stood his ground. We was hella scared, but he acted like he wasn’t scared. Just then, Cyrus (an adult staff member) saw us and he saw the guy with the gun, too. He yelled out, “Hey kids! Let’s get going.” So with him watching we walked over to the school. He just asked us if we were ok. Actually, we even knew who that guy was. He wanted our stuff, he needed money. I was hella scared.

What I assumed was just a hypothetical question (“What would you do if a Black guy came up to you with a gun?”) was drawn from and reflective of a real experience. My answer, run away, was not a plausible choice. Asha told me that she “doesn’t trust nobody” and “never feels safe.” In our interview, she said repeatedly, “Central is dangerous,” “there’s a lot of racism,” and “I just don’t trust anybody.”

Safety was a frequent topic of conversation not only among youth, but also among adults observing youth, for good reason. According to survey data, only 53% of students felt safe at school, compared with 70% of students in the district.²³ The school’s salutatorian, Nancy, a Chinese American girl with a sheepish smile and mild demeanor, told me that she had been part of a “fishbowl” activity put together by administrators who wanted to gain insight on student issues. According to Nancy, she was part of a small group of students who described aspects of school life, including feeling unsafe at school, while the adults listened to their conversation. Maya’s comment in Mr. Roth’s class that “the Black kids would always be robbing the Asians on the city bus and they’re afraid,” reflected what Asian American students themselves said: many were afraid. Nikara, the senior class president, said that Asian Americans felt the need to “protect” one another at CHS:

Compared to other schools, Central High is more of a friendly environment race-wise. But I personally feel like a lot of the Asians at Central High feel like they have to protect the other Asians. I don’t know why.

This fear sometimes contributed to a social construction of Blackness that negatively racialized Black people. Consider the following comment, by Nancy, the Chinese American salutatorian: “Black people are always the ones fighting, causing trouble. Around here, most the people who walk the halls aren’t Asian, typically” and the following quote by Karen, the Chinese American Vice President of her class:

A lot of the racism, I believe it comes from people thinking that, “Oh, I went through more than you, and my family struggles more than you, so it’s okay to take from you in the case of stealing.” Sometimes they think that Asians have more money, and they could afford to get more, so that’s why a lot of times when people steal they steal from Asians.

Later in conversation, it became apparent that when she referred to “people,” Karen meant Black students. In her eyes, “a lot of the racism” was the result of Black students’ mind-set, which helped them rationalize “stealing” from Asian Americans because they thought they were materially better off. This is particularly interesting, because besides being active with student government at CHS, Karen also played a leadership role in APIYO, a youth organization that advocated social and racial justice through critiques not of racial minorities’ attitudes or practices, but the opposite; they invoked White supremacy and institutional racism. I will return to a discussion of how students managed understandings of race in relationship to organizations like APIYO towards the end of this chapter.

Phoenix, a Vietnamese American boy, was one of a few local youth interns for a statewide organization I call Demand Justice Now (DJN) that aimed to “build youth power to fight for racial and educational justice” by engaging them in political action. Phoenix told me of his involvement in a campaign about school violence. He was charged with interviewing his classmates to understand “why people are not diverse.” Phoenix shared what he learned:

What I have noticed is like, the Asian group, the Asian cliques avoid Black people and they don’t even know it. I remember I did this interview of students about race and violence. Because last year, our campaign was about school violence. So like, we tried to figure out why people are not diverse. So I learned that the Asian clique, they don’t hang out with Black people or they don’t mix with other races. All the violent stuff, they put it on the Black people. But they don’t see like, the Asian people that are acting like Black people. Or they are just acting the same way. Just because they are Asian, they don’t see it, they don’t render it. I learned that there is a lot of hate. And like, where does that hate come from? You don’t even know.

Phoenix remarked that Asians avoided Blacks without even realizing they were doing so. From his perspective, Asians blamed Blacks for the violence they heard about, even though Asians were behaving similarly or engaging in violence themselves. (“*All the violent stuff, they put it on the Black people. But they don’t see like, the Asian people that are acting like Black people.*”)

Non-Asian students also reported feeling unsafe in both Central City and at CHS, but different racial groups experienced their lack of security differently. Phoenix said his organization’s survey found that Latino students felt the least safe at school, because they were more likely to be gang-affiliated. (District data on attitudes about school safety were not disaggregated by race.) The following excerpt from my observations from a math class shows non-Asian students’ nonchalant discussion of this topic:

I sat near a group of four that included Jasper, a Latino boy, Hira, a Middle Eastern girl with a head scarf, dimples, and sparkling eyes, Connie, a light-skinned Black girl who spoke with a forceful staccato, and Brenda, a tall Latina girl with long, gelled curly hair. They were discussing middle schools they attended. Brenda said, “Flynn is a whitewashed school. You might say

you get a better education there, but at Lincoln, we're familia." She said the last word with emphasis. Later in the conversation, she said, "It was easy to skip school there." "Me too," Hira said. Brenda added, "Sometimes I don't like Lincoln because it's too gang-related. I don't know what I'm talking about. Half of my friends are in gangs. But I'm Mexican, I'm straight."

Brenda's comments about Lincoln, the main feeder middle school for CHS, revealed a form of self-understanding regarding her safety and her identity. There was a conflict between her disapproval of her middle school "because it's too gang-related," and her belief that she was safe from those gangs because "I'm Mexican, I'm straight."

Self-Segregation in Classroom Settings

The following classroom vignettes convey how racial divisions materialized in routines and in the individual and group dynamics of students as they interacted with their teacher and peers. The teacher in this narrative, Mr. McDermott, was introduced in the previous chapter. He was an affable young White male who was relatively cognizant of issues of racial equity, saying, "It's sad because in my geometry class, those are the higher skilled kids, which has become probably de facto 90% Asians, and when I do have high-skilled African-American or Latino students, I feel like they don't feel as comfortable in that class."

I walked into Mr. McDermott's algebra class on a Wednesday in October and saw that a short-writing assignment was written on the board. Students were asked to write how they would respond to someone who wanted to fight with them, with the option of turning in what they wrote at the end of the period. Hardly anyone was writing, though I noticed an Asian American boy at the back of the room quietly working on a good-length paragraph. Half of the class was involved in a very animated conversation in which the students challenged Mr. McDermott to hypothetical situations that involved the potential to fight back against an aggressor. (It turned out that a fight between two Black girls had taken place in Mr. McDermott's class earlier in the day.)

Distinct racial territories were apparent at the class-wide level. The way the room was set up, the class was split in two. There were two large groups of desks, one set facing the front of the room and the larger set facing the first. Mr. McDermott was engrossed in conversation with the larger group, a dozen students sitting on the side of the room closest to the hallway. Every single body was turned to face the front of the room where Mr. McDermott was standing, so that these 12 students were sitting sideways at or atop their desks. They were predominantly Black, but also included a Latino boy, a Latina girl, and a Pacific Islander girl. About eight voiced their opinions, protestations, and feelings loudly and without hesitation. Of these, six were Black, one was Latina, and one was a Pacific Islander.

Except for the last seven minutes of the period, the entire class time was spent on the discussion generated from the write-up, some of which is excerpted below:

"Say someone comes up to you and wants to rob you?," someone asked Mr. McDermott.

"I would give them my wallet and walk away."

There were hoots and hollers of disbelief.

“What would I lose? Twenty bucks? I wouldn’t add to the problem. I would walk away.”

“That’s all you got in your wallet?,” a couple of boys asked derisively.

“I’ve got credit cards, I could just cancel those.”

“Oh.”

“Ok, what if someone comes up to you and your girlfriend, robs you and hits your girlfriend? What would you do?”

“I would take care of my girlfriend.”

The group was almost up in arms, talking animatedly with each other about how they wouldn’t back down.

“He’s too nice,” one of the girls says.

“What if what they’re trying to take is your girlfriend?” Ashley asked, adding a twist.

Mr. McDermott responded in the same calm manner, saying he would not try to fight back.

“You’re saying that if someone calls you a bitch and gets at your female you would just walk away?,” one of the Black boys asked. The volume of the group was through the roof at this point.

“How would it help me to become part of the problem?”

“Ok, forget that your girlfriend is hit. What if it was your child? What if some dude comes up to you and calls you out and starts fucking up your kid? You’re saying you wouldn’t fight back?” Ashley, Alondra, and Armon seemed confident that this twist in the hypothetical questioning would surely elicit a fight response.

“I would make sure my child is ok, I would call the police, and I’d get away from the situation.”

“But you can’t leave,” they challenged.

“Where is this?” Mr. McDermott asked.

“This is Central!” a Latino boy in a green hoodie shouted.

A Black boy continued. “This is Central, man. You’re by your house and you bring your child to a park and someone is messing with your kid, beating on him.”

“I would make sure my child is alright, get my child away, and leave.”

“You’re a fucking idiot!” Arman shouted, almost with sincerity. The other kids in the group stared at Mr. McDermott, and seeing him ignore the remark, turned to each other and laughed wildly.

On the other side of the room were eight students, all sitting in the two rows closest to the back wall. They left two rows in front of them empty. Two Latino students sat beside one another. The other six students were Asian American. On a scale of 1 to 10, the noise volume coming from the predominantly Black side of the room ranged throughout the class period between 6 and 10. The noise range for the predominantly Asian American side of the room ranged between 1 and 3.²⁴ While safety and school fights were important topics to all students, the members of the first group were vocal, but no one from the Asian-American majority group tried to speak up about the subject.

While observing in various spaces at CHS, including this math class, it became readily apparent that students were not taking part in race wars; they did not routinely openly espouse animosity towards other racial groups or engage in physical altercations based on racial group membership. In fact, most of the fights I witnessed or heard about involved individuals of the same race. Bullying was different: Asian American students told me about being harassed and threatened in the bathroom or at their lockers. In these instances, they named Black bullies. Hand-in-hand with this apparent racial quiescence, however, students participated in self-segregation, both officially and unofficially. Student self-segregation was readily observable within individual class groups and across class periods, particularly when students were allowed to choose their own seats, or at the start and finish of class when they were not. I stayed in Mr. McDermott’s room to observe different sets of students throughout the day and found different dynamics of segregation in his algebra class (the lowest level in the math track), math analysis, and geometry. Whereas non-Asian algebra students captured and maintained their teacher’s attention and dominated the scene throughout class, the roles were reversed in the subsequent periods, when they were the minority.²⁵

In the next period, which was math analysis, students did not discuss the fight. A group of girls giggled and gossiped in hushed tones in Cantonese. Two boys at the back of the room consulted one another in Cantonese about their math assignment. Others talked and worked, mostly paying attention. The volume level was low when Juan, the Latino boy with the green hoodie from the previous period, returned. He quietly asked Mr. McDermott if he could get his backpack. “What does it look like?” “The black one.” Mr. McDermott handed it to him and he left the room. Looking up, I noticed that he was wearing his hood, and a plaid scarf was wrapped around his face so that his mouth and nose were covered. I wondered if he concealed himself so as to guard his expression from others’ view. This thought was interrupted by an Asian American boy student, probably the most vocal student in the class, who leaned confidently back in his chair and said “ghetto” to the girl next to him. The Asian American girl sitting beside him smiled in agreement.

At the start of 6th period, I struck up a conversation with a tall, thin Asian American student named Nate. After we introduced ourselves, he asked what I was researching. “I’m interested in race, especially for Asian Americans, and what it’s like at an urban school.” “This is a good school to do it at,” he replied. “Why do you say that?” I asked. “It’s diverse. But there are a lot of cliques.” Pointing around the room, he continued, “Asians.” Pointing in another direction, he said, “Others.” Then pointing in another corner, he said, “Blacks.” From an all-Asian American group of desks, I overheard an Asian boy (visiting from another class) say to the

Asian American girl sitting next to him, “In my math class, I only know of one Asian that’s hella stupid.”

These comments encapsulate Asian American students’ recognition of the racial fracturing of students. Sometimes students, roughly divided along racial lines, engaged in totally separate activities and conversations (within the same classroom) and at other times, they were sociable and responsive to one another, meanwhile maintaining distance. Underneath this pattern of interaction ran an undercurrent of stereotypes (“*Racially speaking, everyone thinks that Asians are real smart,*” as Edwin said in Mr. Roth’s history class) and the implicit understanding that they were vulnerable at school and in the city they inhabited together (“*This is Central, man*”).

The following excerpt of field notes from an afternoon at CHS illustrates typical social configurations, prejudices, and spatial divisions within the classroom, during and outside of instruction time:

During the lunch break, I went to Ms. Lewis’s English class, where students seemed to have a special rapport with their teacher and with each other. Trinh and her Asian friend sat down with their lunches. I was by myself, seated near a group of Latina girls. Most of the group left, leaving only Josephina and Michelle. At that point, I saw that I was sitting in the crux of a V shape with the two Asian girls involved in their own conversation and the two Latina girls involved in a separate conversation. I had the feeling of being at a restaurant with different small parties, which did not interact.

From there, I went to Mr. Wilson’s art class. He appeared indifferent to the wide range of activities unrelated to art undertaken by students in his room, some of whom were not even enrolled in the class. They were supposed to watch a video about Vincent Van Gogh, but most did not make an effort to face the TV. Some students wore headphones, and one sang along loudly to the lyrics of a song. Small groups of Black students sat together and two Latino males sat together. Cantonese speaking students comprised their own group, speaking Cantonese. I asked an Asian freshman if he liked the class. He shook his head no, and when I inquired why not, he pointed at a group of Black boys.

I stayed for the next class, which was also spatially divided. A group of Black male students and one Black female student sat together, talking loudly without attempting any artwork the entire period. A Mien boy with a sports hat and headphones in his ears sat near them, drawing. Several Cantonese-speaking students were in the room, sitting in the same vicinity in which the Cantonese group in the previous period sat. A Chinese girl texted in Chinese characters on her cell phone, until her boyfriend came in the class, after which point they sat in each other’s laps and kissed. A Latino male sat by himself, drawing a floating head smoking a fat blunt.

At the end of the day, I returned to Ms. Lewis’s room to type up my notes. Several students hung around, though the bell signaled freedom. A Black boy, who was sitting with a group of Black boys, called across the room to ask an Asian girl wearing big hoop earrings if she was friendly with a girl named Sandy. “Damn, that’s my cousin!,” she replied. “It’s not like I’m on Facebook learning who all your family is,” he said, now midway across the room and

swinging between two desks. “What’s your mom’s name?,” he asked. “What do you really want to know for?,” she said. With that, they stopped talking. He returned to his friends and started rapping lyrics to a song.

A central dimension of this account is the naturalized separation of individuals of dissimilar racial backgrounds; among Asian American students (as among others), there was a propensity for interpreting the “social order as a natural order” (Ong, 2003, p. 11). Many Asian American and Asian students, especially first generation immigrants, reported that they did not have friends of a different race. Usually, Asian American students, like other students at the school, told me that they had a close friend or two of another race, but their friendship groups mostly comprised peers of the same race. As an outsider, I observed inter-racial interactions that were publicly visible; most occurred at the level displayed above: they were casual, friendly, but ultimately still guarded. These interactions were the seams of the constellations of relationships that defined the social landscape of the school.

Informal racial segregation in heterogeneous settings is not surprising, as formal integration and informal segregation are readily observable. However, school features impact how and the degree to which segregation happens, since “individuals choose friends but do so within the opportunities and constraints provided by the school context,” including tracks and extracurricular activities (Moody, 2001). At CHS, the cohesion among same-race individuals had a taken-for-granted quality, such that racial segregation was an integral part of students’ ‘common sense,’ their popular conception of the world (Gramsci, 1971). Trinh, one of the Asian American girls who ate lunch with her Asian American friends in the preceding vignette, shared her view of the segregated friendship groups at school:

Trinh: In the beginning it’s hard, because you don’t know where you fall in place. I’m not sure if you know this, but there are a lot of groups in our school. Not a lot of people would tell you, because it’s so normal. It’s like the norm to be with this group. So they can’t even tell themselves that they’re with this group, and there’s another group. They’re so used to it.

Yenhua: What’s normal?

Trinh: Me eating lunch with my friends, not really talking to anyone else at all during lunchtime. If I’m in a classroom, I’ll talk to them, because I have to. But if I had to choose, I would choose my Asian friends. I feel comfortable talking to them. I would feel really uncomfortable, me an Asian girl, going up to a predominantly Black group and saying, “Hi, how are you? Can I eat with you guys?” They’re going to be like, “Who is this Asian girl trying to fit in and trying to talk to us?” That’s how it’s always been.

Trinh recognized that most people were immersed in the experience of their group membership (“They can’t even tell themselves that they’re with this group, and there’s another group,”). Although she had a keen analysis of what constituted “normal” at CHS, she herself did not step beyond it. She was comfortable around Asian Americans like herself and uncomfortable approaching Blacks. The power of naturalized self-segregation was formidable. (“That’s how it’s always been.”)

Asian American Students' Non-Participation and Superficial Learning

So far in this chapter, I have featured Mr. Roth, Mr. McDermott, Ms. Lewis, and Mr. Wilson. While students described Mr. Wilson, the art teacher, as “checked out,” (“he’s old and wants to be retired, but he still needs the paycheck,” one student said), the other three teachers were exceptionally competent and caring.²⁶ In spite of the efforts of individual teachers like these, Asian American students, like their non-Asian peers, did not receive consistently high quality instruction. Instead, Asian American students shared the common experience of institutional disorganization and low standards, one which White families in the school district steered their children from.²⁷

In the eyes of the majority of CHS adults, high-achieving Asian American students were supposed to be the exception that proved the rule: CHS, despite its troubles, was a school where students could excel, become college-ready, and even gain entrance into colleges and universities like those in the University of California system. Students’ perceptions about this were mixed: 75% of surveyed students agreed “their school is preparing them for college success.” Though this was lower than the 79% rate of students surveyed district-wide, three quarters of students still reported positively on this question.²⁸ However, those who the school arguably did the best job in preparing for college shared a viewpoint that suggests that the true measure of Asian American students’ success warrants qualification.

I had the opportunity to shadow and interview Heidy when she was a senior at CHS, then keep up to date with her when she enrolled as an undergraduate at UC Berkeley. (She was the Chinese-American student who shared stories of family members being mugged.) She is an example of a student from a family accustomed to financial hardship, but who won a scholarship that paid for her postsecondary education. Prior to entering UC Berkeley and then throughout her college career, she discussed her lack of academic preparation for college with me. She expressed intense insecurity and emotional vulnerability, feelings connected to her lack of preparation combined with pressure to overcome her family’s economic limitations.

Asian American students spoke with a fondness for aspects of school life at CHS, but none said they were expected to complete a high level of academic work, received a rigorous education, or regularly experienced deep learning. Take the examples of Audrey, a Japanese-Vietnamese American, Sarah, a Chinese American, and Nikara, a Cambodian-Chinese American. Audrey believed educators at CHS prioritized the process of getting through high school over holding students to high standards:

I feel like going to school here. I feel like the standards of what they teach here are like middle school standards. I think that you could just even pass, and you could just sleep through your classes it's so easy. You have to just get to such a low level to pass. I feel like, they just kind of want to have students do the least they can, or just do a little bit enough, just enough so that they can pass, just graduate from high school. And they just kind of want them to get in, and get out, and get through high school.

Sarah was also highly critical of teachers for letting “students coast” without having “learn[ed] anything”:

The teachers don't take their jobs very seriously. A lot of them do, but a lot of them don't. They kind of just let students coast along without like, having them

actually learn anything. Yeah, they will just pass the students along, just as long as like, you are trying, so you just go ahead.

The senior class president, Nikara was confident, gregarious, friendly, and upbeat. Long black hair framed a pretty face. When I asked her to share her general impressions about CHS, her response focused on the lack of teaching she encountered:

Nikara: There are really good teachers and really bad teachers here. With my bad teachers, I would just do work from my other classes.

Yenhua: Do you feel like you learned much?

Nikara: Only in Medina's class. In geometry, we played Mahjong in class. He said, you can talk on the phone, as long as you don't talk really loud. He just sat on his laptop. He didn't believe in homework, so we never got homework.

When I asked Nancy, the Chinese American salutatorian and a class officer, about what she learned in her high school career, she responded, "Actually academically-wise, you don't learn as much as someone from better schools. The classes are pretty easy, basically pretty easy to get an A, and even like AP classes aren't as challenging as you would think." Trinh, a Vietnamese American girl who did well in her classes, reiterated the same idea, but was also concerned for peers who were not on track for college:

Everyone says high school is supposed to prepare you for college, but I feel like they're just teaching us the standards. I feel like they should have more classes to prepare us. I'm scared. And I'm scared for those people who don't know what they're going to do after high school."

Audrey, the Japanese-Vietnamese American student quoted above, transferred to CHS from a neighboring school district with a larger tax-base and greater resources. Her AP English teacher was out on maternity leave for half the year, so she was taught by a series of seven different substitutes. She spoke of the differences she observed between her suburban school and CHS:

I don't know how it's an AP class. In my hometown, you actually had to study 2-3 three hours a night. Here, it's like 10 minutes. I can really see the difference. People are having trouble with literature and grammar because we're not learning any of that... Some of the teachers are kind of lazy in teaching. So it makes it difficult for students who are struggling because they keep like a certain pace. They don't want to help you. A whole bunch of students that I know, they are all struggling. It's really hard for them. They are not really like, understanding what's going on, they are like, "Oh, he is just assigning us all this homework" or "we're supposed to write essays like practically every single week, and I have no idea what I'm reading."

Audrey implied that though her peers were floundering, they did not receive the help they needed. Mr. McDermott, a White math teacher whose classes I described above, pointed out that quiet Asian American students knew how to "behave" like students, but said that was problematic, because "they don't really ask for help." However, knowing how to perform as obedient and respectful students was a valuable skill, because it buttressed adults' perceptions of

them as deserving students. Asian American students who I spoke with generally thought the positive attention they received was earned, saying something along the lines of, “CHS is what you make of it.” In fact, in my classroom observations, I saw a jarringly high level of non-participation among Asian American students.

The following narratives illustrate the diversity of classroom experiences among Asian American students. The first example is taken from my observations of an economics class taught by one of the reputedly “better” social studies teachers:

A few students in Mr. Kruger’s class led a discussion about the Consumer Price Index, while Mr. Kruger interjected often. There were five Black students and 12 Asian American students. Two of the Asian American students put their heads down on their desks, one temporarily and one permanently. Another Asian American student wore headphones and read a comic book. Three of the Black students rested their heads down upon their arms, atop their desks. Mr. Kruger moved the conversation along vigorously, seemingly unconcerned about those with their heads down. He did not try to stop them, neither asking if they felt all right or chastising them. An Asian American girl, Dali, rested her head on her desk, her face turned to the back of the classroom. A Black student lifted his head and rejoined the conversation as if his lack of participation up until that point was irrelevant. When I looked again in Dali’s direction, I saw that her eyes were closed.

In this example, students’ signs of non-participation were outwardly obvious: heads down, headphones, a comic book. The teacher’s acceptance of the status quo is disturbing, but not unexpected, as giving up was normalized. I discussed this observation with Trinh. She commented, “There’s so many people that don’t go to class. It’s a loss of hope kind of thing. That’s normal.”²⁹

The second example comes from a math class that was virtually all Asian American. I was introduced to the class by Emmy, one of Mr. Roth’s student helpers.³⁰ Effusive and informative, she was a cheery Mien American sophomore who was enthusiastic about joining student government and Leadership. When we first met, she took me on a tour of the school, giving me inside information on teachers as we walked past their classrooms together. She told me that she had a close relationship with a teacher in the past with whom she used to exchange text messages, and in her AP biology class, I observed Emmy ask her young female teacher a battery of personal questions.

Mrs. Macias, a Chinese American teacher with a Spanish surname, taught Emmy’s math analysis class in a strong Chinese accent. She switched back and forth between English and Mandarin, depending on whether she was addressing ELL students or the general class. Students were required to take 3 years’ worth of math classes to graduate. At the start of the year, 60 students enrolled in Mrs. Macias’s class. Because of space restrictions, half of the students withdrew to take the class either at the local community college or over the summer. 30 students remained, all but one of whom was Asian or Asian American (he was a Black male).

Emmy commented that her math class was the class she least looked forward to during her day. Earlier, she commented that she never wanted to miss school, even when she was sick, because she did not want to miss what was going on in her AP classes. This class had a different tone than her AP biology class or history class, both of which I observed.³¹ There was less space per student in a much smaller classroom. The lesson seemed more rushed than intentionally

paced. Emmy complained to me that Mrs. Macias did not pay equal attention to everyone. I observed this firsthand as the teacher tended to ignore the back of the class. She told me that she did not learn very much, because “my teacher moves fast and I have to do a lot on my own.” Emmy recently missed school and was having a hard time following along. The look on her face as she tried to keep up was worried and pained. Halfway through class, Emmy asked the girl in the seat in front of her if she understood the material. Neither of them did. When Mrs. Macias moved onto the next page before Emmy had a chance to copy everything from the image projected at the front of the room, she became panicked. The two girls moaned that Mrs. Macias was moving too fast.

The Asian American boy in front of Emmy read a novel. The single Black male student in the class asked to use the bathroom, but only returned a significant amount of time later, accompanied by another student who was not enrolled in the class. Mrs. Macias did not notice them as they entered and took their seats. Emmy turned to me several times to ask me if I understood the math and could help her. Mrs. Macias turned her attention to Emmy for the first time during the period, asking if she had done her homework. “No.” “Are you paying attention?” “Yes.” Later, when Mrs. Macias detailed the upcoming homework assignment, Emmy sighed, “Oh, kill me.”

Besides her history class, Emmy’s schedule was filled with classes in which her peers were mostly Asian American. As I wrote, her AP classes and her math analysis class varied in tone. Emmy’s AP biology class, for example, was well structured and supportive, but her math class was overcrowded and confusing. Advanced Placement courses, which predominantly served Asian American students at CHS, were supposed to be more “rigorous” than “regular” classes. However, measured student mastery of the content material was poor. The following table shows that AP course completion rates increased over the three year period of 2008-2010 (starting at a very low 13%), but a mere 22% of CHS students actually achieved scores high enough to receive AP college credit (compared to 33% in the district).³²

Table 2
Central High School and district advanced placement (AP) course completion rates and exam passing rates.

	Central High, 2008	Central High, 2009	Central High, 2010	Central School District, 2010
AP Course Completion Rate	13%	21%	37%	25%
AP Exam Passing Rate	18%	22%	22%	33%

Source: Central High School Progress Report.

At the end of May, I attended a spaghetti and salad celebration dinner for the AVID program, which targets and supports students with mid-range grades as they move through high school and, the program hopes, towards college. About 70 people, including teachers, a handful of parents, and students, gathered together in the library. Students wore AVID sweatshirts that declared, “Decades of College Dreams.” One of the teachers explained to the crowd, “Besides supporting you through high school and into college, one major part of AVID is to push you to reach your full potential, and that means pushing you into A.P.” Students were recognized with

certificates for participating. As a Black female student returned to her seat after retrieving her award, she muttered aloud, “Even though I didn’t do that well in it...”

Very often, I heard students discuss which classes were “good for getting an A but not learning anything,” and which classes required “more work, but you learn more.” Some classes and teachers were known to be “hecka hard,” while others were, “Oh my God, boring as hell.” There were a few classes about which students said, “you might as well not take it,” and “I promise, everyone says you don’t learn nothing in there.” Asian American students were especially proactive about managing their schedules, openly discussing which teachers to avoid and loading their schedules with classes in which “you learn more.” The senior class president put it succinctly: “We tend to take the AP classes. We know which classes are good, so we fight for them.”

However, teachers’ finite resources limited even these proactive students, who were most successful at persuading counselors to get them into desirable classes. CHS teachers complained on several occasions that Central City Unified School District teachers were paid much less than those in surrounding districts, although the cost of living in the region was among the highest in the nation. Partly because of this, and partly because of the high demands (in terms of time and emotional energy) the job demanded, many of the most competent and caring teachers could not be retained.³³ As one teacher put it, “I think one of the main things is that the people who care and put in effort, they’re asked to do more and aren’t valued.” After ten years at CHS, another of these leading teachers, Mr. Medina, was also demoralized.

On several occasions, I discussed issues with students and institutional problems that also eventually pushed him to leave his position as the AP U.S. history teacher and the chair of the department. It was a late October afternoon when we discussed the barrage of interruptions and distractions that took precedence in another class that I had recently observed. “I know that when a kid had Janet for English or Mikey (Roth), they’ll know certain things,” Mr. Medina said. “They’ll be able to write a paragraph. But if they didn’t have them, then they come in my class and it’s like I have to start from scratch. Or after they have me for 10th grade, if they have Bowser the next year, in 12th grade they’ll start all over again. I’m doing catch up work.”

Mr. Medina shook his head again, half-stretching. “There’s no accountability. No one’s on the same page. You can never win the war. It’s frustrating, and it’s knowing that next year, it’s going to be frustrating, too. Things never change. I need to get out of here. I’ve never felt like this this early in the year.” After pausing, he reflected, “But, I love the kids. And this is my classroom.” Referring to a departmental meeting that took place the previous day, Mr. Medina added, “Some of my colleagues showed up half an hour late. It’s the same people who come late every time.” A couple of years after our conversation, he also left his position at CHS.

Being ‘Asian’: Non-Political Ways of Identifying

The term ‘Asian American’ is a socio-political construction that is the product of American race-making processes, including the incorporation of ethnicity into race (Lowe, 1996; Espiritu, 1992; Kibria, 2002). Despite the fact that a large proportion of Asian American students were 2nd and 3rd generation Americans, they generally did not use the labels Asian American or Southeast Asian American to identify themselves politically. For most of the students I spoke with, “Asian” had more personal and institutionalized meaning than “Asian American,” a term whose political identity and history lacked resonance. When I asked, “How would you describe yourself racially or ethnically?” students typically identified with their families’ ethnic origins or responded “Asian.”

On the other hand, Asian American youth in Central City were exposed to a racial politics and movement to highlight Asian American history and identity, through their involvement in community-based organizations that targeted urban youth for education and enrichment. Community based organizations like the Asian Youth Organization (AYO), the Asian Pacific Islander Youth Organization (APIYO), and Demanding Justice Now (DJN) had a large and effective reach among Central High youth.³⁴ Two of the largest organizations (AYO and APIYO) specifically addressed the challenges of low-income, urban Asian American youth. Students who participated in these programs were likely to have encountered the label Asian American.³⁵ However, even interviewees involved in these organizations typically referred to themselves as Asian, rather than Asian American.³⁶

For some, the lack of resonance of formal racial and ethnic categories was also true of the term Southeast Asian American. When I was first introduced to Ms. Meier's Leadership class, which was predominantly Asian American, I told students that I was particularly interested in Southeast Asian American students.³⁷ Ms. Meier asked who in the class was Southeast Asian, but some commented that they did not know. After I explained which countries were in Southeast Asia, almost half of the students raised their hands. However, this did not mean that the distinction was unimportant. Students like Sheila, for example, (who was Mien-Lao American and Thai-Hmong American) socialized with Asian Americans of a specific ethnic profile: "There are a lot of Chinese kids at school and I don't really talk to them, I just really talk to the Southeast Asian kids."

Youth created their own labels for understanding divisions among Asian Americans. An example of this comes from an interaction with two girls, Linda, who was Mien American and Suriya, who was Cambodian-Lao American. "What's Southeast Asian?," Linda asked after I described my own background as Southeast Asian American. "You know, from Laos, Cambodia, or Vietnam." Suriya said, "You mean the gold chain Asians." "What are gold chain Asians?," I asked. Linda responded, "Kind of gangsta. I don't know, ask her [Suriya], she's the one who said it." Suriya explained, "You know, the people from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, all up in that area, they like to wear gold chains." According to Suriya, Southeast Asian Americans were racialized in a different way than "whitewashed" Asians; they were "kinda gangsta."

The following excerpt illustrates that a shared ethnic background could serve as a point of connection. It is also an example of how students had distinct impressions about types ("hella Laotian") but muddled the formal names for them, interchanging race and ethnicity:

I discussed ethnic backgrounds with a table of students, including Jason, who was Mien American. He asked me what my race was, though he actually meant ethnic background. I said I was Asian American, but my family was from Laos, and he said, "Oh for real? That's cool. Do you know how to count to ten?" He was impressed when I began counting. He made a production of learning how to say the numbers as I counted them off. "What is your last name?," he asked. "Ching? That's weird. There's a Mien last name like Chin." "Well, my dad's Chinese. My mom's last name is Arriavong," I told him. "Oh, that's hella Laotian."

Asian-ness was both a source of cultural group membership and an abstract, externally imposed identity that was insufficient to unite individuals with different, sometimes competing interests who were called 'Asian.' Notably, non-Asian students and teachers, administrators, and staff elided the ethnic subgroups and simply referred to individuals as Asians.³⁸ Moreover, Asian

American students of diverse ethnic origins became racial subjects (that is, they were hailed as Asian) through interpellation (Althusser, 1971); the meaning of Asian-ness that was operationalized as identity was filtered through race-making processes. Asian-ness signaled either a pro-school, engaged model minority subject or a contradiction of the myth: Asian Americans at CHS were located across the school's academic and social spectrums, but they were understood as super-achievers or boundary-crossing "Black Asians" or "ghetto Asians." I will now turn to these two groups, beginning with those who were seen as "high-achieving."

High-Achieving Asian Americans: Defining Sites of Engagement

In the Spring, I attended an open house for the Science Academy (SA), themed "Dial Into Science Night." The event was hosted in a shiny new building, part of an addition to the CHS campus that was completed during the course of my fieldwork. Upon entry, I was handed a flier featuring a drawing of an iPad with apps labeled biology, physics, chemistry, environmental, health, and engineering. The question, "What's Your App?" was sprawled across the top.

Landon, an Asian American boy with a Korean pop star haircut, addressed the small group of students (and a few families) in attendance. "Which academy is the academy of college?" he asked the crowd. "It's SA!" Then Landon highlighted statistics that set it apart: "All the seniors of the SA class of 2012 are going to college. 27 are going to UC's. 9 are going to CSU's. 3 are going to private schools. We were able to get 22 scholarships total. 9 people got full rides, including two people who got the Gates Millennium Scholarship." These accomplishments were indeed laudable, especially since the 2010-2011 graduation rate for CHS students was only 70%.³⁹ According to a counselor whom I interviewed, only a quarter of students graduated "UC-eligible" (i.e. they successfully took the set of courses required to apply to any of the University of California institutions).

Among the academies that divided students into subject-interest cohorts and the school into several smaller school communities, the science academy stood out for its racial exclusivity. As I wrote in the previous chapter, SA, the "academy of college" was also widely understood to be the "Asian academy." Janice, a Chinese American girl who was a member of the SA, explained participation in the academies in terms of race, subject interest, student motivation, and administrative practices:

SA is more the Asian academy, and VAAMP is the African American one. SA is more sciences related. You have to take an AP class senior year and an extra science class. I guess more motivated kids go there. VAAMP is the art academy. I heard that administrators try to put more African Americans into VAAMP because that way they'll easily get the AP credit, so it's pushing them up. They have an extra study hall.

Academies were not only academic tracks that united students by subject-interest and guided them through high school in a "small school" or community cohort, but they actually constructed and intensified identities for students. Sarah, a Chinese American student was explicit in explaining who was aligned with which academy: "There's the SA Asians and there's the VAA Asians. They don't get along. The VAA Asians think the people in SA are stuck up, and the SA Asians think the VAA Asians are dumb." This comment is revealing for how it clarifies how students saw divisions among themselves: "SA Asians" and "VAA Asians" constituted distinct ideal types that represented Asian-ness. Asian American students who

belonged to the “Asian academy” were seen as exclusive, whereas the Asian American students who belonged to the academy known to be “diverse” were labeled “dumb.”

Kimberly, a Vietnamese American girl, hinted that teachers had a hand in perpetuating these stereotypes: “I heard some teachers, like the SA teacher, thinks SA is for smart people. The stereotype of SA is that only Asians join that academy.” A Vietnamese American girl, Nina, said recruitment and retention of non-Asians were issues. “I don’t know why, but there are more Asians than any other group. I guess other people feel discouraged to join. Usually other people, they will drop the SA academy.” The senior class president, Nikara, chose not to be a part of the academies. She described their insular nature, their power to track students along racial and ethnic lines, and their “personalities”:

There’s a lot of tracking at CHS, especially with the academies. The SA is majority Asian. Their head teacher, he’s not really supportive of outside people. VAAMP is mainly Southeast Asians, not Chinese. They’re Lao, Cambodian, Mien, basketball players. But then the VAAMP teachers aren’t supportive of non VAAMP people, either. VAAMP does not talk to SA. SA is more conservative, towards themselves. VAAMP is more out there, loud. Each academy has their own teachers.

CHS was nicknamed an “Asian school” in part because Asian American students were the “leading crowd” (Coleman, 1961). There was a preponderance of Asian American students in school sites that were relatively high-profile and high status, and that enjoyed the sponsorship of gatekeeper adults. These included the SA, Leadership, student government, and Link Crew. The fact that Asian American students were at the helm of these programs and organizations was important, because they gave students a platform to gain the attention of gatekeepers such as the principal, who said the student officers “run everything” and “could be CEOs”; guidance counselors, and teachers like Ms. Meier (who was the student activities director), who had an especially close relationship with the principal and who spread word about scholarships, student trips meant to broaden their horizons, and other opportunities for edification.

A key difference in the puzzle of stratified involvement among Asian American and non-Asian students was that Asian American students felt comfortable talking with these gatekeeper adults. A sense of efficacy enabled them to believe they were entitled to change aspects of their school environment. For example, I asked Nancy if she felt that she had the capacity to make a difference. She replied, “I want to try to create something that will actually last at our school.” Also consider the following comment by Trinh, a Vietnamese girl in Leadership class:

I really would like to see a lot of Black people and colored people come in and take those classes. There are a couple and I commend them, because it’s predominantly Asian people. But they don’t really think about, “Oh, I can change things.” Let’s say the school lunch sucks, but they don’t do anything about it. They just complain. Asian students know how to talk to the principal or Meier, rather than other people. I feel comfortable telling Ms. Meier anything.

In this example, Trinh spoke of two different strategies students used for dealing with grievances. Whereas “Black people and colored people” vented their frustrations to other students, Asian American students took their problems to adults who had the capacity to help

change their situations. Though both sets of students responded when they were unhappy, Trinh characterized Black students' responses as complaining.

Perhaps the most visible of these platforms, Leadership was a club that was also a class (students were graded and received credit). According to the yearbook, Leadership consisted of "Associated Student Body officers, class presidents, and students who are actively involved in school." Ms. Meier led the class in a room crammed with supplies, colorful decorations, student work, and photos of recent CHS graduates. The volume level was often high, and students enjoyed the freedom to move around. When I asked the senior class president what advice she would give to an outsider who was unfamiliar with the norms of the school, she replied, "In order to survive at Central High, you need to speak your mind. Get involved. Join Leadership, because you'll feel like you're a part of the school."

As I wrote in Ch. 2, Ms. Meier was mindful of the heavily Asian American racial composition of Leadership and tried to recruit non-Asian students. The class had a 2.0 GPA requirement, and because it was an elective class, students who failed their core classes replaced Leadership with the ones they needed to re-take. The result, Ms. Meier explained, was fewer Black students: "I lost six kids at the half way mark and four were African-American, and they didn't leave because they wanted to, but they left because there was something else that they had to make up." Nancy, the salutatorian, also said the group made sincere efforts to diversify, but was stalled by academic requirements:

Leadership really tries hard to try to get people involved. It always does end up as the same people. Leadership is full of Asian people because you need a good GPA and be able to take an elective your senior, your junior year. The ones that are available are the ones that did good, and they don't have to retake a class.

Other key school spaces that were identified as Asian were the student government and Link Crew, a high school transition peer mentorship club led by Ms. Meier, whose purpose was to "serve as the school's ambassadors by helping new underclassmen adjust to high school life." Besides acting as "ambassadors," they helped students register for classes and even handled the distribution of their peers' transcripts.⁴⁰ The following tables show the racial composition of student participants in these programs and clubs over three years. They illustrate a heavy Asian American presence and give credence to students' perceptions that Asian Americans, as a group, were the most involved in "hard classes" and extra-curricular steering of student affairs:

Table 3
Central High School Science Academy by race.

	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Asian	50	33	45
Black	2	2	4
Latino	1	5	1
Other ("Middle Eastern")	0	1	0

Source: Central High School yearbooks.

Table 4
Central High School student class officers by race.

	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Asian	28	27	26
Black	0	0	0
Latino	0	0	2
Multiracial, Asian-Black	1	1	0

Source: Central High School yearbooks.

Table 5
Central High School Leadership class/club by race.

	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Asian	29	40	29
Black	13	3	8
Latino	2	1	3
Multiracial, Asian-Black	1	2	1

Source: Central High School yearbooks.

Table 6
Link Crew club by race.

	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012
Asian	47	65	57
Black	1	1	1
Latino	2	3	2
Multiracial, Asian-Black	1	0	1

Source: Central High School yearbooks.

Both adults and students recognized members of these groups as the most “engaged” and “involved” members of the school. As I will show, they also saw themselves in this light. Yet, a simple perusal of the CHS yearbook pages featuring student clubs, sports, and other activities reveals that students of all racial backgrounds were actively involved in the life of the school. Nonetheless, student involvement was racially stratified across domains. The student leadership domain was associated with Asian Americans, and thus, Asian Americans were seen as “leaders.” Over and over again, Asian American students were identified as “involved” and “engaged,” whereas Black and Latino students were not.

The support programs targeting mid-range students, like AVID and AYO, which offered mentorship and tutoring, were associated with a racially diverse group that more broadly reflected the school’s demographics. The sports programs were racially stratified by sport, with volleyball and swim team leaning Asian American and football and basketball leaning Black. Like the SA, student government, Leadership, and Link Crew, these more diverse arenas also provided students with a home base and nurtured their sense of belonging at CHS. I discussed

this with Brandon, the school's head football coach. A Black former student who graduated from CHS in 1994, I asked him if the school had changed much:

"I see the same cycle," Brandon told me. "What do you mean?," I asked. "Kids falling through the cracks. Not only falling through the cracks, but... if the kid doesn't care and the parent doesn't care, the system doesn't care. I'm invested here, since I went to high school here. I don't think students should have to pay because adults can't get their act together – administrators, teachers, coaches."

"He's one of yours," Ivy, the AYO afterschool tutoring coordinator teased, as different football players sauntered into the room with chips and sodas in their arms. "Are you going to be the one to tell them to work on their homework or am I?" "Half of them don't do any of it no ways," Brandon responded good naturedly. "I've got 14 that don't make the grade to play."

Brandon, Ivy, and I stood around watching. Ivy said that she had been thinking of giving the students an incentive. "What kind of incentive do you think they'd really want?" she asked Brandon. "Football," he replied flatly. I told him that I noticed that there were isolated spaces in the school where people felt like they belonged and had status. I observed AP classes and Leadership class, which tended to be dominated by Asian American students, but pointed out that there were other spaces like sports where students derived status.

He listened and nodded thoughtfully before replying. "Yes, but I try to tell them sports isn't the end all. Because sports ends. And after that, where are you? Did you graduate from high school at least? Are you going on to college?"

In highlighting the unequal value the school placed on non-academic domains where non-Asian students (especially Black and Latino boys) found status and esteem through talents such as athleticism and rap, I am not suggesting a shift in school pedagogy to incorporate these talents into the formal curriculum. Instead, I highlight them to suggest that schools need to seek meaningful ways to incorporate these academically marginal students into academic as well as non-academic domains, so that their full membership in the school community is valued. As this conversation conveys, the unequal value of these racially stratified sites of belonging was clear to Brandon.⁴¹ As student athletes, football players (who were mostly non-Asian, Black) were required to maintain a threshold GPA, but as Brandon said, many did not "make the grade to play." The tutoring they received, supplied by AYO, was not enough. Brandon was unhesitant in indicting the education "system" for failing those students at the very bottom of the academic pool. I will analyze their experiences, first from the perspective of Asian American students, then from the perspective of Black students, later. First, I will examine how Asian American students at the top categorized their peers.

High Achieving Asian Americans: Ways of Categorizing

As I wrote, Asian American students who were recognized as engaged and high-achieving shared the view that their school inadequately prepared them for college, though they were held up as model students and minority subjects. Not insignificantly, these students were

academically privileged in a way their non-Asian peers were not, except for a very few exceptions. I also demonstrated that these exemplar Asian American students exhibited efficacy with regard to their educational lives that others did not. They enjoyed a unique sense of institutional belonging, of feeling valued and having a sense of ownership over their school.

Nonetheless, interviewees spoke of an atmosphere of distrust and fierce competition, even among friends, while alluding to an unrelenting backdrop of socio-economic hardship. For them, the promise of college was the promise of escaping the urban ghetto. High-achieving Asian American students who were involved with the heart of the student leadership structures revealed a spectrum of racial beliefs and complex participation in the unique racialization at play at CHS. Living with expectations associated with the model minority role, Asian American students expressed notable agency in determining (for themselves and others) who and what types of racial and educative subjects were possible.

They actively categorized themselves and others, especially grouping Asian American students in relation to academic achievement orientation and ethnicity. I asked Trinh, “What do you see everyday that you never stop to think about?” Her answer highlights lines of division among groups of Asian American students:

That there are groups. There are Asian Americans, but there are a lot of cliques. There are a lot of groups within Asian Americans. We're not all bunched up together. There are things we all relate to, but when it comes to friends, we wouldn't really hang out... I wouldn't want to hang out with Asian Americans who are so competitive, who are academically driven, who do so many scholarships and stuff like that. If they invited me to hang out on the weekend, I would wonder about it, "OK well, why?" ... I think it's really messed up that people who win all the scholarships keep it all, because there's other people who are like, "I don't have enough money for school."

Although Trinh was a well-liked, strong student who received admission to a University of California institution, she looked down on the cutthroat attitudes she saw around her. Her comments suggest that a key division among Asian American students related to their academic behavior, describing a type of Asian American student as “competitive” and “academically driven.” The salutatorian, Nancy, echoed this categorization: “You can call yourself Asian, but not every Asian is the same. Like, all Asians are supposed to be good at math, but they're not, you can see Asians at calculus, but you could also see Asians taking the same class year-after-year.” Like students of all racial backgrounds, academically successful Asian American students described the student body as extremely cliquey, both across and within racial groups. Consider the following comments, by Nikara and Sarah, who separately described the competitive nature of the academically driven set of Asian American students. Nikara, describing students in Leadership:

Central High is very cliquey. My group of friends is really tight-knit. I think they like to feel dominant. We all know who hangs out with who. Like if you name a person, we can name four people they hang out with. We all know each other's business. If you name someone, we know all their grades, their GPA.

Sarah, discussing students in the SA:

We compare each other, like we compare what schools we're going to, where we applied, our GPAs, who's ranked where, and some people are really proud of that and they like to brag a lot. The people who are in ESA, I could tell they're the kind of people who are really competitive. They have this weird superiority thing, like they think they are the better academy.

Nancy believed that the type of student who took AP classes shared the same ethnic and cultural background as herself: "The majority of people taking AP are Chinese. It just happens to be a lot of Chinese people." Although she said, "it just happens," Nancy ultimately attributed Chinese students' educational initiative to their family backgrounds: "I think - I don't know if this is true, but - I think like within the Asian ethnicities, the Chinese parents are the ones that are mainly pushing them, versus like other ethnicities."⁴² Nikara, the senior class president, also pointed to cleavages among Asian American students that related to immigration and ethnic background. She alluded to some familiarity with the different educational profiles of East and Southeast Asians, pointing out that although they were technically Southeast Asian, Vietnamese American students were taking advanced classes:

Between the Asians at school, it's split between the immigrant Asians and the ones that are born here. It's very divided. Every year it's like that. Then all the Asians in the AP classes are Chinese and Vietnamese. I know Vietnamese is Southeast Asian, too, but there aren't Cambodians and Miens in AP."

Asian American students' descriptions of the stereotypes that circulated at school varied, as did their attitudes to them. In the next example, Trinh described a peer who did not like being defined by the stereotype of a "Cambodian girl who drinks and is loud" and said Black students in particular perceived Chinese American girls as passive. The racialization of space (residential neighborhoods, to be specific) also figured into how students assigned normative value to ethnicity and categorized one another:

I grew up in the 50s, which is deep East Central. It was mostly Black and Hispanic. I was one of the few Asian people growing up in my neighborhood. If you took a picture of my neighborhood, that's what you'd see. When I moved here (the district adjacent to the school), there were Mien people, Cambodian people, all these Asians.

There's the Mien and Cambodian people who don't do drugs, and there are the Mien and Cambodian people who do drugs, who are "bad" kids. I know one Cambodian girl, she doesn't like being defined as the loud Cambodian girl who drinks and is loud, doing all that bad stuff.

There are definitely stereotypes. For Cambodians, you're really bad, you're in gangs, you live on 23rd Ave, you walk around all day, you gamble, you drink, you're going to drop out. For Chinese, it's like, she's going to college, she's really good at math, I can copy her test and she won't say anything about it. The passive Asian girl, the passive Chinese girl. Everyone holds these stereotypes, especially Black people.

Whereas Trinh implied that the constructs of "bad" Cambodians and "passive" Chinese were problematic, in contrast, Nancy felt that local stereotypes were light-hearted, and did not

mind them: “Actually I feel like stereotypes are joking and quite humorous, and that’s just sort of like, Asians are smart in math and things like that.” Janice, a Chinese-American girl in the Science Academy, pointed out the corollary of the notion of Asian Americans as smart: “A stereotype here is that African-Americans are, you know, they’re not smart as any other groups.”

High-Achieving Asian Americans: Racializing Involvement

High-achieving Asian American students held a range of racialized beliefs about non-Asian students, but whether they fought against or reinvested in stereotypes, the theme of the conversation was often school involvement. According to Audrey:

The Asian people here are kind of dominant people... like Latinos or African-American people in our classes, I don’t know, they are just not really like at that level where they are really wanting to take charge of like how they want to see their school.

A Vietnamese Cambodian girl, Irene, repeated a theme I heard often, which was that the Leadership group was disparaged for setting itself apart, but no one else wanted to step up: “Leadership gets the most recognition,” but other students “look down on us. Think we’re hella cocky. Like we think we’re all that. But you’ll see, when it’s time to run for student council, the Asian groups will be competing, but no one else is going to run.” When it came to student positions, Asian American students tended to vote for their friends.⁴³ As Janice related, their friends were usually Asian American: “I don’t really like hanging out with other groups, because I just stay with my friends. They’re Asians.”

Yet, Asian American students who were in Leadership or SA did not readily recognize that their racial exclusivity was intimidating to outsiders. For instance, Karen did not understand why the people who wanted to be “involved” “happened to be Asian” and why non-Asians “just don’t respond” to the efforts of the Leadership team to reach out to them:

For all four years I was treasurer, secretary, and now I'm the Vice President of the class, and what I saw for my own class is that only Asians ran for the positions. Leadership class tried to get the word out and do announcements, so they did attempt to get people involved. But then people don't exactly sign up for it, or they don't want to. I don't understand. The people who sign up or are interested happen to be Asians. The past couple of years more people of other races started to run for office, but then their friends don't vote. It's just the other people are not voting for candidates. In Leadership, we do really try to outreach to people, but people just don't respond.

Nikara, the senior class president, held a very different perspective. Like Karen, she was active in APIYO. Unlike her friends in Leadership and in student government, she criticized the dominance of Asian Americans in those positions:

I think it makes the other ethnicities feel like they're lower. I have the Facebook account for Central High. This Black person wrote, "Vote for me for prom king." Someone wrote, "Are there any Asians running against you?" He wrote, "yes." Then someone else wrote, "Oh, you're not going to win then. Asians overpopulate and they're going to win. They always win." I don't want that to happen. So I didn't vote for my friend. I'm tired of seeing Leadership

people win everything. I kind of want to give other people room, too. Because I feel like if you are involved in school activities, you'll have a more likely chance to graduate and you're going to be more passionate about going to school.

This passage captures how the Asian-Black binary was at work in students' expectations and predictions about the nature of their social world: insofar as an Asian American student was in the competition for prom King, a Black student should not expect a chance to win. Unlike other high-achieving Asian Americans in her peer network, Nikara sensed that the hierarchal relation among different racial groups of students made non-Asians "feel like they're lower." She wanted to "give other people room" at the top, because she recognized the importance of students' involvement in school-related activities to their academic enthusiasm.

Nikara was one of the only Asian American students at the apex of the leadership structure with whom I spoke who explicitly disapproved of the racial status quo. In the following quote, Nikara described social dynamics in Leadership class. In her eyes, students who were "expected to be leaders" were the most exclusive. She saw that year after year, non-Asian Leadership students tended to "step back" in the context of that space:

When it comes time to do group projects and things, the people that are expected to be leaders are the most cliquey. All my friends, they're in student government. They make sure they get special privileges. Every year I noticed, I always see the other ethnicity students, the Latinos and African Americans, they'll always be the ones that step back, they're in the back of the room, not really saying anything... But then when you see them with they're friends, they're loud and outgoing. I think they feel intimidated, but they shouldn't be.

Speaking of her social circle, Nikara said, "They're judgmental. I think if anything, the Asian kids are really racist. They'll talk about how the Black people are standing in the hallways, always really loud and stuff." As I have shown, Asian American students who were seen as "high-achieving" and who identified themselves as "involved" shared varied perspectives about the racially stratified phenomena of engagement in student leadership activities, but a major line of division that organized these perspectives centered on Asian American students' approval or disapproval of the binary stratification of Asian Americans and everyone else.

High-Achieving Asian Americans: Views of the Racial Structure

Virtually all Asian American students described CHS as diverse and multicultural. Janice, a Chinese American girl, found evidence of diversity in the school's acknowledgement of Black History Month and Cantonese club. Like non-Asian students, she referred to multicultural week as proof of the school's embrace of multiculturalism, even though the only activities associated with it were the food fair, an addition to the morning announcements that highlighted the achievements of prominent racial minorities, and a few minor events during lunch time that had nothing to do with diversity or multiculturalism:

It is really diverse, actually. Like we do a lot of activities and, I can't really explain, it's like all around very multicultural. We celebrate Black History Month and we have Cantonese and all that. Oh, this week is actually multicultural week, so we are going to have a food fair tomorrow. We try different types of food from different cultures.

Also like the adult members of their school community and like non-Asian students, Asian American students noted the relative lack of cross-racial antagonism or violence at CHS. For instance, Janice was unaware of the controversy surrounding the Black Student Union's feeling of being snubbed by Leadership and the Cantonese club with regard to the Black History Month banner, which I wrote about in Ch. 2. Nikara said, "The thing is, we don't try to do things to hurt people. We all mind our own business." However, high-achieving Asian American students were very cognizant of group-level stratification. Like Nate, the Asian American boy in Mr. McDermott's math class who pointed out various racial groups in his class, Audrey (who was Japanese-Vietnamese American) observed the atomization and distance among the groups:

I don't really know, it's just all the races like, there are your Asian people, then there are like, Latinos and then African-American. They are just pretty much split up in their own groups. But then there are occasions where they do mix with other races, but then that is kind of rare... I feel like they have these differences, and everyone keeps kind of a distance between each other.

In Ch. 2, I demonstrated that the meritocratic sorting practices of administrators, teachers, and staff were inflected with race. Asian American students who were most engaged in academic extracurricular activities and who were identified as having a pro-school attitude also noticed the institution's handprint in patterns of stratification. I asked Irene, who was Vietnamese-Cambodian American, what, if anything, she wanted to change about her school. She brought up the school's racial dynamics. I followed up by asking, "What would you like to see done differently?" Her answer focused on classes and highlighted the stratification effects of achievement tracking:

I'm not sure, but it has lots to do with the classes. Like, I noticed that in the AP classes it's mostly Asians. That's where it starts to segregate where the Asians would go to the harder classes, and then the others would maybe stay around and linger in the regular classes, or maybe a few might go to the higher classes, but it's not always the case.

Similarly, Trinh indicated that a different recruitment policy was in order. Her answer also reveals her perceived blindness on the part of administrators to the isolation of different racial and ethnic groups at the school:

Trinh: I think the VAA academy, they promote that more to Asian students than Black students. They should promote SA to Black students, so everyone can get to know each other more and become friends. That should be a first step.

Yenhua: Do you think the school does a good job of trying to promote unity?

Trinh: No, definitely not. Ms. Kinkaid, she's an administrator, she sees that we're all different races, but she does not see how we're all in groups. We're all races and colors, but we're not meshing. She really denies it. She doesn't see it at all. When you take a step back and think about it, you can really tell.

Trinh suggested that the academies try to draw in more students who were not traditionally associated with them, but she also hinted at the insufficiency of this approach: "In class, there's Chinese immigrants, Mien people, Black people. They all get along really nice. But

then at lunch, you can see that it snaps back.” The tendency to “snap back” to the racial status quo of division was powerful. Asian American students explained this tendency in terms of a cumulative history of self-segregation and racial segregation, part of an arc of development starting in elementary and junior high schools and leading into high school. Consider the following quotes by Trinh, Nancy, and Karen, who were all Asian American girls from Leadership class:

Trinh: We came from different places. I think it all started with middle school. There was the West group and the Lincoln group. The people I hang out with today are the people I hung out with from the very beginning.

Nancy: The neighborhoods around here are Asian homes, like Asian families, and so the two middle schools that get transferred here have a lot of Asian people. Then in high school, in 9th grade, you get put in “families.” It’s like a filter. Somehow, it just happens. As it went from Freshmen to Senior year, I had classes with majority Asians.

Karen: My best friends are people I grew up with since elementary school and middle school, so it’s no surprise that they are Asian, because in elementary school they actually separated us by race. The teacher would speak that language in case you needed help or you parents needed help.

Friendship networks also played a part in how Asian American students concentrated in racially-stratified activities, organizations, and classes. Nikara gave the example of Leadership class. Its main purpose was to foster involvement, but Leadership students had a habit of only attending their own events. Considering the highly stratified nature of extra-curricular programs at CHS, this meant that the most lauded student leaders at the school only showed up for events associated with Asian Americans:

Leadership is an elective where seniors join because of their friends. Half of Leadership, I’ve known them since elementary. So we’re all really close already. In Leadership, the main goal is to be involved. But when there are other events put on by other people, you don’t see any Leadership people there. I don’t know why. It might be because we aren’t getting graded on it. I know a lot of people only do things for the grade. A lot of it is, if your friends go then you go. I think a lot of us are afraid to do things without someone that we’re comfortable with. We had a car wash in the beginning of the school year. One of my classmates came, I didn’t even know she was from Central High. She was African American. When I looked, she was over by herself washing cars. I said to my boyfriend, what’s wrong with our friends? How come no one is talking to her?

Unlike her peers in Leadership class, Trinh participated in AYO. This large non-profit organization originally focused on Asian American youth sidelined by “the community’s Black/White social paradigm” then expanded to serve gang-involved Southeast Asian American youth.⁴⁴ Its latest mission was to support all Central City youth. Asian American students who were in Leadership associated with a different, similarly large, Asian-focused youth

organization, APIYO, while other Asian American, Black and Latino students associated with AYO. Like Nikara, Trinh noticed that the “popular” Leadership students did not attend other groups’ events, including the more “diverse” AYO organization’s events:

I think I’m the only one in Leadership in that group in AYO. They don’t really go to AYO stuff. They’re the popular people around here. I think AYO is more diverse. There’s more non-Asians there. AYO tries to reach out to the colored people. Not Asians, but everyone else.

Sarah was a Chinese American girl who left Leadership after one year because she disapproved of the atmosphere of the group. Like Nikara, she reflected on the racialized social structure with a critical eye. She believed that Asian American students were given an unearned benefit of a doubt by other students: “It’s more racial here than other high schools, like they think all the Asians are like, over-achieving. Even if you aren’t in class and you don’t do anything, people still think you are.” She also saw that unfair advantages were conferred by teachers and staff: “If you forget your work and say, ‘I’ll turn it in,’ [the teacher] will be okay, you can turn it in later, but then if somebody else, like a non-Asian will come, they will be like, “No.” I think it’s harder for them to impress a teacher.” In this telling quote, Sarah faults teachers and staff for assuming they could predict how students were going to perform based on their appearance:

They automatically assume when a student walks in the room, they know how they’re going to perform. When they see me, they think I’m going to excel. It’s weird, because they’ve never met me but they think I’ll do better than other people. In this art class, I was sitting by three or four Black and Latino students, and the teacher came back and asked everyone to put their phones away except me, “the quiet Asian.”

Asian Americans in the “Regular” Track

Louie (2004) writes that Asian Americans, as a group, “arguably hold a special place in the American collective consciousness as one of the quintessential immigrant strivers, especially in education” (p. xiv). The social construction and personal reality of being seen, and seeing oneself, as Asian at CHS were framed by social-economic hardship and the American Dream of class mobility. Like their peers, Asian American students whom I interviewed talked about having too little money not only for discretionary purchases, but also for basic goods like lunch. They described family lives fraught with sacrifice, severe financial anxiety, and class resentment. Also like their non-Asian peers, they spoke of wanting to make their families proud by finding an answer to these dilemmas in education.

Yet, they confessed to buckling under tremendous pressure “not to mess up,” that is, not to extinguish the limited educational opportunities within their reach. Unlike some Asian Americans who were tracked into higher level classes, many Asian American students on the regular track did not win life-changing academic opportunities in the form of college admissions and scholarships. Instead, they spoke of plans to attend community college and then transfer to four-year universities. They referred to the experience of siblings or relatives who began classes at community college but eventually gave up on post-secondary education altogether, confirming widely known research on the very low transfer rate of community college students to four-year universities (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Grubb, 1991). They hoped not to follow the same trajectory, but lacked a plan to avoid it.⁴⁵ Other Asian American students had no plans for postsecondary

education at all; their highest educational hope was to graduate from CHS or from an alternative high school (upon dropping out of CHS).

The majority of Asian American students at CHS had no academy affiliation or participated in the Art Academy, AVID, or the newly developed Health Academy. They took classes whose mixed racial profiles reflected the school's demographics. Some participated in free afterschool tutoring and mentorship programs, such as the one offered by AYO. Some were ushered through the college application process by external youth mentorship programs or internal ones, like AVID, but most were unsure of the path ahead. For these students, high school graduation was the moment their families looked forward to, when they would pour their pride and love into celebration. In this section, I discuss Sheila and Vang, whose experiences typified those of Asian Americans tracked onto the "regular track."

Sometime mid-December, I spent 6th period in choir class with Mr. Newmark and a dozen students (one Asian American, one Latino, one Pacific Islander, two multiracial Black, and six Black). "Are you a new teacher here?" I asked Mr. Newmark. "Yes. I started in October, so you'll see I have the remnants." During class, half of the students spent most of the time focusing on singing and half were distracted. One boy sang enthusiastically for the first half of class then spent the second half with his head on his desk and his eyes closed. Arthur, a Black sophomore who I recognized from the Fashion Club, repeatedly walked across the room to answer the door and to poke his head into the hallway every time someone knocked on the door.

Another Black boy made faces and stuck his tongue out at the teacher. Both girls and boys wandered in the choir area, still in sight of Mr. Newmark and a big piano. A Latina girl borrowed the cell phone of the Asian American girl in class and blared hip-hop music through purple headphones she wore the entire time that she was present. Meanwhile, Mr. Newmark led the group in physical warm up exercises, singing doh-reh-me-fa-so-la-ti-da, the Carol of the Bells and Silent Night. Throughout these songs, he told students to sit up, stand up, go back to their seats, and responded to their requests to go to the bathroom.

Sheila was the Asian American student in the choir room (she was Mien American). Describing her classroom experience, she said, "I mean, choir, yes it was fun but our teacher, he couldn't really deal with the students, like they are rowdy and so he quit on us. Now we just have to sit and watch movies." Some of Sheila's friends were the "rowdy" kids: "They hang in the hallways... I mean I don't really judge them. I try to encourage them. Like, you should go to class, but I'm not going to be like, 'You're bad because you don't go to class, you're stupid.' You know, I'm not going to say that."

Sheila's attachment to the schooling process was middle of the road: she mostly went to her classes, but described many, like choir, as "kind of a waste of time." She would graduate from high school, but did not identify with the pro-school zeal of the high achievers. Her definition of a good student was someone who "put in effort to try and come on time, have your materials, participate, and ask if you need help." She was an average school performer tracked into the "regular" academic track within which the expectations for her and her teachers were irregular, at best, and in this, her story was the story of the majority of Asian American CHS students.

Choir class is an example of a marginal school space like Mr. Oparah's science class, described in Ch. 2, and Mr. Wilson's art class, which I depicted in the section, "Self-Segregation in Classroom Settings" (on p. 65), where disorder and a lack of learning were not only tolerated, but expected. At CHS, Asian American students, especially but not exclusively those who were Mien and Cambodian American, were enrolled in these types of classes. They also spent time in

them even when they were not enrolled students. For example, I previously described Mr. Wilson's art class, where unenrolled students could be found. Like their peers, Asian American students went to his class and others like it because they expected that their presence would be tolerated, they knew they would have a degree of autonomy, and moreover, they knew who to expect to find in them. A result of this lack of structure was that more fights broke out in these spaces. Mr. Roth, whose room was down the hall from Mr. Wilson's room, frequently commented about the fighting that took place there or in the hallway outside it, and occasionally interrupted his own class to check on disturbances coming from art class. Like students, the administrators, teachers, and staff were cognizant of these dynamics, as evidenced in the concern generated among them by Mr. Wilson's consideration of a room change.

Vang's narrative also provides insight into how Asian-ness was constructed and lived by average and struggling students at CHS. He was ethnically Mien. As a teenager, his mother left Laos to escape war and to search for "a better life," but she found that life in the U.S. was a "struggle." His mother found a job paying less than minimum wage, and worked long hours during most of his childhood. Vang's father was out of the picture. In the living room of his house, a framed photo of his younger brother's elementary school graduation hung sentinel over an array of mismatched furniture. Like countless immigrant students before him, he longed to succeed for his family: "I'm just trying to grow up and do good so I can support them later, make them have a better life."

The road to this goal was not a straightforward one. By the time Vang was 12 years old, he was caught stealing car parts ("I was detained"). He had a cousin who served nine years at San Quentin Prison for armed robbery. Vang explained that their family's finances were stretched tight. In desperation, his cousin, along with three family members, attempted to rob an armored vehicle holding cash. Witnessing that, he said, was like a "wake up call." Nonetheless, Vang was stealing car parts with relatives and friends into high school. He said he finally stopped because he felt guilty.

During our interview, a ring tone rang on Vang's phone. I teased him about the song before I learned he had chosen it in memory of a friend who was killed in a gang-related murder. Vang described his friend as a 'role model' and a 'community leader.' "He was just a good guy and people would look up to him." Vang stressed that his friend was part of an Asian gang because he felt gang affiliation was necessary for his family's protection, and explained that the gang provided people with money, housing, and food: "Like, they would go to the grocery store and actually buy a lot, and they just give it out to people that really needed it." Vang's own father had also been a part of a gang when he first moved to the U.S.

In this context of financial anxiety and family stress, Vang struggled throughout school, but by senior year, had a self-reported 2.0 GPA. He used the word "path" to describe his changing relationship to education:

My path basically—when I first started off, I wasn't really doing so good. I kind of strayed off from the education path. Basically, I didn't go to school, I just stayed home, stayed in the streets, around this neighborhood... Now my goal is just finish high school; everyone is very excited about that. And then after that I will probably go to junior college... I guess I want to just stay home and relax a little bit and it's must cheaper.

In differentiating his path from the relatively higher-achieving Asian Americans at school, he said, "They're Asian, too, but they have more support. They have more money. They have

tutoring and that stuff.” When I asked if he ever took advantage of the free tutoring offered by AYO, he said he “just never felt like it.” He did not participate in any clubs or activities and was not part of any academy. Vang said he was accepted into the California State University, East-Bay, but stated that it was too expensive to attend. He added, “Every little penny counts when it comes to my family.”

Vang believed that when it came to Asian Americans, there were two extreme types who commanded respect. The first type included Asian Americans (like himself) who stood up for themselves physically. They sent the message, “don’t screw with me”:

In middle school, people of other races stereotyped me to be a nerd. I was like, “test me if you want.” When I got in a fight, my reputation skyrocketed. If you don’t defend yourself, you get picked on... I’ve started seeing the pattern that the same kids get picked, and they get picked on the very next day, and the very next day, and they don’t stand up for themselves.

The second type included Asian Americans who were “very focused, if you do something in school, they’ll tell on you. They belong to the popular groups.” The latter group was “very well known,” but both groups were respected, albeit differently. “Basically, if you mess with [the second type], you’ll probably get screwed, also. If you’re in the middle, then you’ll get stomped on.” Vang said that he “mostly hang[s] out with Asians,” but he believed the same categories of students existed in every racial group at the school. These categories were “the ghetto people,” “the school people,” “the in-between people/the average, normal people who are just trying to get by” and the “complete fuck-ups.” This last category of Asian American students experienced academic marginalization and came to terms with their shortcomings in plain sight.

Asian Americans Falling Through the Cracks: Perspectives on Schooling and Education

Some Asian American students felt like they were quietly falling off a cliff, with no safety net to meet them at the bottom. Their academic alienation and sense of failure cannot be parsed from the context of the alienation they felt as adolescents coming of age in a setting of geographically concentrated poverty, what Gilmore (2007) calls a “forgotten place” (p. 31) vulnerable to the “organized abandonment” of globalized forces of labor and capital (Harvey, 1989, p. 303, as cited in Gilmore, 2008). Often, their parents did not know how to help them find a foothold in school, though they themselves had hoped education would provide their children with the opportunity of socio-economic mobility. The model minority expectation was at once close by and far away: it informed how adults and peers saw them on a day-to-day basis, but it also presented the quandary of why their experiences were a contradiction to this myth. Understandably, among all the students at school, they had the most “ambivalent relation to the hegemonic concept of the ‘model minority’” (Ong, 2003, p. 256).

The following narratives shed light on how Asian American students understood their academic struggles and failure. For Somi, a Cambodian American student, peer social group influenced academic effort and motivation. She was friendly with some members of the Leadership group, who she described as people who “have to get things done. They don’t procrastinate.” She and her friends had a different approach: “We’re like, I’m going to get this done, but not now.” When I asked what she thought contributed to this difference, she did not talk about contrasting mind-sets or attitudes towards schooling, but referred to the groups

themselves: “I think it’s the cliques. It’s because Leadership people hang out with Leadership people, and they have to be on top of everything. I think that’s what they learn from each other.”

Like other CHS students (Asian American and otherwise) who I interviewed, Somi had something of an all-or-nothing approach to her education (“*if you’re not doing good, you’re failing*”). Her aunts and uncles dropped out of high school. If successful, she said she and her cousin would be the first in their family to attend college. In fact, Somi was unsure that she would even be able to graduate from high school, and said she would enroll in community college, but did not understand the timeline or requirements for graduation or transferring:

Sometimes I feel like school is a big drain on me. I come to school to make my parents proud, and sometimes it takes a toll on me too much, and plus like family problems. I cut classes just to like calm down and just think about things. It’s like you have to do good, if you’re not doing good, you’re failing. Graduation is almost here, I’m scared that I can’t graduate, like I don’t have the full credits to graduate... Sometimes I need to just get away from everything.

Another element voiced in her narrative was “family problems.” This was a common theme in the narratives of Asian American students who discussed their academic problems with me. Consider the stories of Phoenix and William.

Phoenix was Vietnamese American. He was slight in stature and had long bangs that were dramatically cut in a sharp angle that ended at his left ear. Phoenix’s story captures the extraordinary ordinariness of falling through the cracks, as race, class, the demands of family, and discarded educational aspirations intertwined in the practice of everyday. I first got to know him when I conducted preliminary research, from 2007-2008. We became reacquainted during my fieldwork, three years later, and grew close enough that he came to my home for Thanksgiving dinner. We conducted interviews at school and at his house, where I was able to meet his 12 year old brother, Steven.

Phoenix told me that he began “cutting school” in elementary school and by the time he was a senior, he barely passed half of his classes. So spotty was his attendance that when I shadowed him in Ms. Rand’s economics class towards the end of the school year, a student he was paired with for a group activity did not recognize him. When I was his tutor, he drew a beautiful picture of a tree for me to keep. The only class that motivated him to return to campus each day was art. (In fact, Phoenix told me that he often attended one of his morning classes, left during the middle of the day, then returned for his afternoon art class.) He had a positive rapport with Mr. Casey, his art teacher, and was proud of his work: “I do painting and we get posted around school. So I feel ownership over that.”

I wrote in Ch. 2 that the retention of Black and Latino students in AP classes was a challenge for teachers and administrators, but the retention of students in “regular” level classes was a bigger problem. For example, Phoenix and Mr. Casey agreed that art begins as a pretty full class, but that by the end of the year, the class size always thins out. There was a quality of submission to the expectation that a segment of students would leave. One teacher described the state of the school in the following way: “This is a school where students are always coming and going.” Another teacher summarized the progression of students through the school year and through high school more bluntly, likening it to a “time bomb”:

It's a time bomb. In the beginning of the year, they're all happy. By this time of year (mid-October), they're getting discouraged... You know why teachers fight over teaching juniors and seniors? It's not because they're more mature. It's because the dead weight has left.

Asian American students like Phoenix were among those students who left school, rationalizing that it “was getting me nowhere.” He took care of his brother, Steven, and was a paid youth intern for Demand Justice Now (DJN), a community-based organization. He explained that school was a low priority for him, compared with family and work obligations. He added that he informed his teachers that he planned to stop attending their classes:

Phoenix: Steven is like, my responsibility now. I place Steven above school, so like I wasn't really worried about school, I was more worried for him, like taking care of him. I would basically cut school early, just to go home and cook food for him. Because I come home around 8:00, because I have work and stuff. When I come home, my step dad locks his bedroom door and Steven is out in the living room, wandering alone. There's no food to eat, so I was like, “Oh shit, I got to take care of Steven.” I kind of went through the phase where school was getting me nowhere. Kind of like, “I'm going to be here forever, I might as well as just keep on working.” I told my teachers I was going to cut their classes, too.

Yenhua: What did they say?

Phoenix: They just asked me why, and I was like, “I have other priorities.” Steven was more important, and work was too because it gets me money.

Phoenix was open and frank about his life and peppered his testimonies with wry humor and sarcasm, but he was clearly angry. Despite having a strong sense of duty that compelled him to care for his younger brother, his relationship with his family was extremely strained. He spoke of the “internalized racism” of his parents and Asian immigrant community, a term he learned as an intern at DJN. He felt he was treated worse than the rest of his family because he was darker than them:

When I grew up, my mom and step-dad didn't like me because I was darker-skinned than all of them. I was always affected mentally by that whole skin color thing. Asians are really racist. Even if they aren't racist, it's this internalized racism thing, right? If someone of their kind has darker skin, you treat them with a lower class manner.

Even though he was chronically truant, Phoenix said that school was “a healthy environment” because he could escape the tension and anger at home. “I feel more safe because I have all this bull shit at home, right? Being at school, I usually leave all the family shit at home.” He argued with his mother, was ignored by his stepfather, and most of all, he fought both verbally and physically with his older brother. Phoenix’s friends were mainly Black. He said that protected him from his brother: “I don’t have to worry about getting into a fight with my brother because I know over at school, he won’t do shit to me, because he’s scared of the Black people.” The protection he gained through his friendship with Black students extended into a general sense of protection, including against other Blacks:

I remember this time, I went to the restroom, and I may look frail, but I'm not afraid. Anyway, this Black kid, he acts like I'm going to be terrified. He's like, "Hey, give me your money." I was like, "Do you even know who you are talking to?" I can say one word and he would actually get jumped. And so then I called someone to come in there, and then he was all, "Oh wow, I was just kidding, bro."

Another Vietnamese American boy, William was not academically driven either. He had been born premature and was a physically diminutive and shy figure. He transferred to CHS from a military school and wrote poetry to deal with his anxiety. He was something of a loner. Of the few friends he had, most were Black. When I met him, he was sitting in the library with three Black girls. I noticed that one was Kenya, a daughter of one of the security guards. The sound of boys speaking Cantonese was audible over the clacking of computer keyboards. There was a wall of sound in the hallway and cafeteria beyond, but the library was calm. William, Kenya and the other girls surfed the web or rested their heads sideways on the table, talking. They shared stories of friends having babies at a young age and people they knew who had been shot.

On the day of William's interview with me, the sky was a powder blue. School had let out, and we stopped into a liquor store to buy a chocolate bar and a soda, then went to a park near his house. We sat in my car, talking. Traffic noises faded in and out, and the cheerful chirping of birds filled the air. William talked so softly that I had to strain to hear him. He read one of his poems aloud:

*From sunrise to sundown,
parent's give birth to you,
as age started to pass,
days gone,
ready for school,
always messing up,
next it hit, parents pass away,
need money to survive through
Tragedy of everyday life,
people without jobs, food,
living in the struggle,
life or the torture,
minimum wage and low labor.*

Like his peers, William spoke of his family's financial difficulties and "living in the struggle." As expressed in his poem, he frequently mentioned that he felt that he was "always messing up."

He might not even receive a high school diploma. What were his possible futures? He knew he needed “a way out,” but also saw that education would not be his channel of escape.

In her dissertation on Muslim girls, citizenship, and national identity in a French high school, Keaton (2001) discussed the trouble the girls had in drawing “real meaning” out of a dominant idea that was contradicted by the inequitable conditions of their existence:

The difficulty arises in attempting to realize this concept (of citizenship) and give it real meaning for young people who live underprivileged existences. Yet, they are expected to abstract those differences, work hard, achieve, and become productive, un-anxious citizens despite the multiple forms of discrimination and racism that they confront in a non-porous society (p. 20).

A similar difficulty arose in Central City, where students were expected to rise above the circumstances of their spatial, racial, and economic ghettoization and work hard to become productive citizens; however, there were also many spaces where they were not expected to abstract their differences, but rather, were encouraged to draw from their experiences of poverty and racism to reach school-sanctioned goals. These spaces existed in the community organizations that cultivated cultural and community pride among CHS youth, but they also existed in the school, where the array of student work displayed on bulletin boards in classrooms and in the hallways evinced an official recognition that students were living “in the struggle.”

Nonetheless, inherent in the curriculum and support programs at CHS was the expectation that students should improve not only academically, but also in personal terms (“make something of yourself”), and moreover, that the aim of such improvement was college, or failing that, legal and productive work. William resisted the “college-for-all-discourse” (Nygreen, 2005) that was dominant in Central City schools which suggested that the end goal of students’ present efforts should be college. (Tellingly, classes on the “regular track” were referred to as “College Prep.”) This discourse sought to make students feel empowered, but alienated students like William, who saw not only that college was out of reach, but that without it, few alternative pathways “out” of poverty existed.

College isn't the way out for everybody... first of all, I'm not going to make it. Then you have to pay a lot of money. And like, for me to grow up in the hood and stuff, I guess it's more harder on us. Because like my dad and my mom, you know, they don't make a lot of money.

On the other hand, there was a deeper utility in the discourse itself for certain students, even when college was not a realistic option. I realized this when, one evening, I invited a novice CHS teacher to join me for dinner. While preparing our supper, she played a song whose message was essentially, “I can be all I want to be, if I try hard enough.” It reminded me of Central Unified School District’s lofty motto, “Believe and Achieve.” I asked her what she thought of this message vis-a-vis her students, since the reality was that working hard was not a guarantee of socio-economic stability and not all would make it to college. Her response made me realize I had been looking at the efforts involved in the college-for-all discourse as an empty promise, when in reality the discourse itself served as a buoy:

I'm honest with the fact that not everyone is going to go to college, but you have to consider the audience of the message. All teachers deal with this message differently, and all kids are different. For a lot of kids, you have to

keep telling them that positive message to get them in the door, to keep showing up. You have to make them believe that hard work will get them somewhere so that they'll try.

In schools, race works as a social and educational construction of meanings and identities (Lewis, 2003), under operation within the prevailing framework of meritocracy, the belief that students succeed or fail as a result of their individual efforts. A powerful aspect of the myth of meritocracy is its affirmation that “education is power.” This slogan implies that academic success should enhance individuals’ access to the opportunity structure, and more generally, new knowledge has the potential to confer potency, authority, and control. The type of power that seemed to matter to William related to economic wellbeing (“*knowledge equals money*”), especially if it was recognized by his family; in the end, he “wanted to make [his parents] proud.”

Yet, if the organization of schooling was meritocratic and Asian Americans were supposedly proof of this, how could failing Asian American students relate to it? The following exchange shows William holding tentatively to a belief in the idea of education as power, all the while wrestling with how to make sense of his own agency, responsibility, and capabilities vis-à-vis his academic failure. There was a disjuncture between William’s idealized hope for his future and characterizations of his educative self (“*School is just too much*” / “*I’m lazy*”). His statement, “I just feel that I’m doing something wrong” indicates that he felt this disjuncture acutely:

William: I just don't believe in - I mean like I do believe that education is power, and knowledge equals money, but like - I don't know, it just doesn't fit me... Because like school is just like, too much... too much work, and like you know, stress. I'm lazy, because, I don't know. I just don't feel like doing anything.

Yenhoa: Why not?

William: Whenever there is a gloomy day, I don't feel like doing anything. But looking at the blue sky, I just feel that I'm doing something wrong. Because I know what my parents been through, you know, traveling from Vietnam just to be here. So I wanted to make them proud and strive for the best.

Average and Struggling Asian American Students: Perspectives on the Social Structure

Like everyone else, Asian American students with average and poor grades were acutely aware of the racially segregated nature of the school’s social structure. Take the example of Phoenix. In the following passage, he enumerated the groups that he noticed and described with whom people in these groups were open to associating. Immigration background, generational status, and racial group affiliation all influenced how he categorized his peers (e.g. as “Fresh Off the Boat” or “FOB Asians” and “gangster” or “ghetto” Asians):

Yenhoa: What do you think about how people interact at your school? What does that look like from your perspective?

Phoenix: It's really, I think segregated is the right word. We have the cliques that are usually Asian, and then Black people will just hang out with Black people most of the time. And then even within the Asians, there's FOBs. You

know, fresh off the boat. I don't mean to call them FOBs, but that's how people usually understand them. Then there's the Asians that were born here. Then there's these gangster Asians, ghetto Asians. They hang out with Black people and the Mexicans know them. Very few White people hang out with them.

Like the high-achieving Asian Americans, Phoenix discussed institutional stratification beginning prior to high school:

It's kind of hard. I think they purposely segregate you in elementary school, because all the kids, the Black kids have one class. All the Asians have one class. Then when you get to middle school, you get scrambled around, so all of a sudden it's like, "Oh God, why am I with this person?"

Sheila, the Mien American girl from choir class, offered an incredible analysis of her peer social structure. She drew on the concepts of de facto and de jure segregation that she learned in Mr. Roth's regular history class. I had asked if racial issues were discussed in school, besides in history class:

We don't really talk about it, but in school I see a lot of racism. Like if you go into the cafeteria, you will see all the Asian students together, all the Black students together and all the Latino kids together, so it's like pre segregated. Like, you can't just go up and be like, "Oh! I'm going to stay with these Black kids and then they relate to you like, "What are you doing at our table?" So it's kind of segregated. In history we learned about like, de jure and de facto, it's kind of like that. Without even saying, "You have to stay with your own race," it just happens.

As Sheila observed, the boundaries separating racial groups were powerful. Many Asian American students who were academically middle-of-the-road or struggling did not challenge the racial divisions that existed. However, these Asian American students were more likely to be in classes with non-Asian students and had more Black and Latino friends in their social circles than higher-achieving Asian American students. Their ways of seeing and racializing non-Asian racial minorities were neither uniform nor simple. For example, Sirch, a Chinese-Vietnamese American student, reflected on a social world in which race drew him in multiple directions. As a result, his perceptions of non-Asians were complicated. As an intern at APIYO, he learned about the concept of racial oppression. Applying this concept to his own experiences, he said that racial minorities were potential "oppressors." He gave the example of "gang members oppressing other minorities" and said that Black people "always talk really slang" and are "gangster." Yet, his feelings about these characterizations were mixed:

I understand what I'm thinking is wrong, but also I can't take any chances being in Central. Sometimes it gets to you. The stories you hear, it's really violent and the minority's always involved. You think like, 'Oh my god, I just need to be careful.' I guess that kind of affected me in a way. Every time I'm around an African American group, I constantly watch myself, but you know if it's an Asian group, I would lower my guard.

Sirch was deeply impacted by his fear of violence at the hands of Blacks, but he revealed that his own Asian American friends had also been involved in gangs. "I was friends with a

couple of gang members, but luckily at that time I knew the whole gang situation, like, why they do it, why it exists. And I wasn't—I'm not at that stage where I would easily fall into the gang life." When I asked him if any group in the school held disproportionate privilege or power, he said, "Now it would be hard to say... I think it just really depends on the victim's beliefs." For instance, "if a young boy saw that African Americans were dangerous, then from his point of view, African Americans would be the oppressor." He said that Asian Americans were most recognized at the school and White students had the least recognition, since "everybody knows there are only six of them." Then, he changed his mind and thoughtfully shared reasons why he believed Latino students were least recognized:

It feels like they don't make a presence. I don't feel their presence at Central high. I don't feel their presence at all. I mean, I've seen them around, but then they don't, I don't feel their presence, you know. They haven't done anything. There's nothing for me to accuse them of because they just seem like really on the down low. So I guess in a sense that the lowest recognized would actually be the Latino folks. To me, I feel like I've never heard from them. I've never heard their voice, their actions, anything.

Sirch was attempting to make sense of the uneven, often tricky relationships among individuals of differently racialized and racializing minority groups. Within these reflections was a working out of the racial field: Blacks could oppress Asians, if they were afraid of Blacks; at the same time, he said Asians were most recognized and Latinos were least visible of all. In the next section, I discuss average and struggling Asian American students' opinions of their group's privilege.

Average and Struggling Asian American Students and Racial Privilege

When it came to the academic attention they received, academically mid-range and academically marginalized Asian American students gave a report with opposing strains. They described classroom scenes in which they were short-shifted and pushed to the sidelines, because they or their classmates were seen as unwilling to learn. However, like their higher-performing peers, they also identified behavior among teachers, counselors, or other adults that was biased in favor of Asian American students. Take the examples of Sheila and Mark.

Sheila said that she felt comfortable approaching CHS staff for help because of the attention she received by virtue of being Asian American: "I mean as an Asian student, I feel like I get a lot of attention. You know, if I really needed something like I can go there and like ask them for anything." She shared an example of "favoritism" whose scale was class-wide. Sheila's math teacher reportedly taught one side of her classroom, where the "Asian students"/the "smart kids" sat, and neglected the unruly, non-Asian side:

Some teachers, like they do favoritism. The Asian students will sit in front and the other students will sit back, because you know, they are rowdy, obviously. In my math class, like the smart kids or whatever that she feels they are, will sit on one side and we will sit on the other side. So she would split us like half-half. If she thinks you're loud, she's like, I'm just going to teach the other kids, you know. I was shocked. I was like, "Oh, really?" Like, I think she should just teach all of us and mix every group, like you shouldn't say, "Oh, I am just

going to sit you guys on one side and put the other students on that side so I can teach them easier.”

Although Sheila was Asian American and sat at the front of the room (the side that was addressed), she was concerned for the “loud” half of the room that was neglected. Many times, I heard loudness and quietness used as markers of race and indicators of the “teachability” of students (as in the previous quote).

Mark was a Thai-Cambodian American basketball player who played for the CHS team as well as the AYO basketball team and a team in an “Asian league.” He remarked that he was more “rough on the edges” than his “smart” Asian American friends. His GPA was a 1.6 at the time that I met him. As a basketball player, he was required to meet a GPA threshold, but he explained that he believed the coaches did not seriously monitor his academic performance because he was Asian American:

Mark: They helped me keep my grades up, but its kind of funny because it's racist. They never really check my grades. Because sometimes my grades will be slipping, like I would have a barely passing grade and they won't check it. Because I usually have a good GPA, but lately I have been slipping. I'll be worried but they just never check.

Yenhua: So why did you say that where racist?

Mark: [laughter] It's like, because I'm pretty much the only Asian, and all the Asians, they really don't check up on us and our grades, because they know we always do good. So I kind of use that to my advantage.

Mark provided a classic example of how the model minority myth operates in diverting attention away from academically struggling Asian American students: adults presumed that because Mark was Asian American, his academic performance was sound. (“They know we always do good.”) In fact, he was struggling academically. He said he “used that” to his “advantage,” but he did not receive the academic scaffolding he needed. As an Asian American member of the school’s basketball team, Mark had the chance to cross racial boundaries of friendship choice as well as cultural representation, how he presented himself to others. This next section addresses Asian American students’ instances of racial boundary crossing.

Racial Boundary Crossing

Racial boundaries and social structures are not already constructed nor do they get made ‘out there’ somewhere, but they are constantly being made by people like those at CHS, at the center of their own socio-cultural world. They were participants not only in experiencing and explaining this world, but in making it. Thus, although the language through which Asian American students discussed race mirrored the pre-existing divisions and inequalities of the larger racial structures of society, their speech acts were also building blocks in the continual contestation and reconstruction involved in race. Consider the following excerpt, in which racial values were simultaneously drawn upon and generated:

Yenhua: Did you like growing up in Central?

Edward: It's alright. Yeah, I would say it's alright, because the area where I live is mostly Asian.

Yenhua: And you like that?

Edward: Yeah, it's less diverse.

This exchange was part of a conversation I had with Edward, a Chinese American boy, Jetuan, a Black boy, and myself. I was helping Edward and Jetuan as they worked on an assignment in Mr. Roth's history classroom, during lunch time. Both boys had only a minimal grasp of the material, and both displayed a very low mastery of written English in their work. They seemed to be friends. I was astonished when Edward said he liked Central City because the area where he lived was "mostly Asian," and "less diverse," because he said it while sitting right next to Jetuan, who did not even flinch. Edward's comments and Jetuan's lack of reaction are indicative of the racial values and boundaries that were being created to organize social relationships at CHS.

Boundaries among youth also constituted an important issue in the work of community organizations serving youth who were identified as "at risk." This was evident at a showcase I attended, which featured short movies created by Central City youth about topics that were important to them. The youth's films were guided and developed by the video production arm of AYO, and many of the participants became involved through their AYO case managers, after being identified as "at risk." The MC, an adult staff member who led the project, spoke into a microphone to address the small, racially diverse crowd (of mostly adults) in attendance:

Central is segregated, not only by race but very much by neighborhood. We try to bring youth together from across boundaries. There are boundaries of race, language, culture, neighborhood, color—not just the color of their skin, but the colors they choose to represent.

The racial segregation of Central City, which the MC referred to, was interwoven with the multilayered racial segregation of Central High. The segregation of school life occurred at an institutional level, through the organization of tracks, academies, and dumping ground classes, and academic extracurricular programs, through the semi-formal tracking of youth-targeted community organizations, and at the informal level of peer friendship groups and, as the MC noted, gangs. Yet, despite this layered network of segregated relations, CHS students occasionally challenged and reshaped the prevailing racial norms that combined to sustain boundaries.

Jasmine and Yomaira were examples of "at risk" students who problematized racial boundaries and the cultural rules of their milieu. They were superficially attached to school, both in outlook and practice. Jasmine was Cambodian American and Yomaira was Black. I sat with them at a table in the lounge of the school's newly opened Wellness Center as they discussed whether or not another girl was Asian or Black. "She's not Asian, she's half Black," Jasmine said. Yomaira retorted, "She's not Black, either! Do you see her in class, running the class?" "What makes someone Asian or Black?," I asked. Their answer, which turned towards the differences they perceived between Cambodian Americans and other Asian Americans, illuminates how students contested the meanings of 'Asian':

Jasmine: Asians aren't supposed to be ghetto. Cambodians are the most ghetto.

Yenhoa: What does ghetto mean?

Jasmine: Not proper, making up words, you don't have as good of an upbringing. Cambodians, they live more in the hood. I've seen a lot of Cambodian girls who only hang out with Black girls, where they're the only one. Like me.

Yomaira: I say all the time, Jasmine's Black. She ain't even Asian. An average Viet, Mien, a smart Asian, they're stuck up. She keep it real. That's why I call her Black.

Jasmine: We already know they think they're better than us academically. They don't help with work in class when I ask for help. They say they don't know how to do it, but you know they get A's. There's this boy, he always helps these two Asian girls but he never wants to help me. I really think there's hecka Chinese here, the ones in AP classes, the ones that like school; there's so many of them. Even if I'm so nice to them, they act exclusive.

Yomaira: I think it's better if you have some different people around you.

As these comments show, these girls were sensitive to student status groups, which they helped to racialize. Jasmine was the only Cambodian American and the only Asian American in her social circle, which was otherwise Black. Her views of Asian Americans, especially the “Chinese,” “the ones in AP classes,” and “the ones that like school” were similar to her Black friends. In Yomaira’s eyes, Jasmine was not Asian because she “was not stuck up” and “kept it real.” In short, her orientation to schooling and her disapproval of the exclusivity of the racial hierarchy not only set her apart from other Asian Americans, but qualified her as “Black” in her friend’s eyes. In this, Jasmine and Yomaira re-invested in the dominant conception of Asian-ness as pro-school and racially exclusive, but reconfigured the site of belonging for embodied Asian-ness: Jasmine could belong as Black.

During Homecoming week, students dressed up in the colors associated with their class. Notably, the majority of students who appeared at school decked out in this attire were Asian American, including members of the Leadership group, class officers, and their social networks. They wore school shirts, put body paint all over their faces and arms, and had dye and ribbons in their hair. “Does everyone dress up?” I once asked a group of Asian American girls from student government. “No. The non-Asians don’t. I wish everyone would have school spirit, but they don’t care... If they dressed up then it would be making a statement. Their friends would say, ‘Why are you doing that?’” Meant to express “school pride” and “spirit,” dressing up during Spirit Week communicated the claim to a pro-school orientation. The symbolic value of these costumes was clear to Jasmine and Yomaira:

Jasmine: The other Asians don't associate with everybody. When it was Spirit Week, all the Asians knew to dress up. How did they know? No one told us. They be on the down low about all the clubs and stuff.

Yomaira: The Asians keep stuff a secret.

Jasmine: It's all about the Asians. They have everything. They have more opportunities. They know everything. Like Homecoming, you already know they're gonna be voted for. They had this big thing for Chinese New Year. They try to make it sound like they did hella shit for Black people, but they didn't have a celebration.

Yomaira: I think Asians are going to rule this motherfucking world.

Jasmine: It's just because you go to this school!

Whereas the Asian American girls from student government assumed that non-Asian students did not care about school pride, Jasmine and Yomaira indicated they had not known they were supposed to dress up. They accused the pro-school students of purposely keeping knowledge of student affairs “a secret.” Jasmine, who was Cambodian American, spoke about Asians from the position of someone who did not identify as Asian, saying, “It’s all about the Asians, *they* have everything. *They* have more opportunities. *They* know everything.” She and Yomaira were convinced that Asian American students were in control, and Jasmine recognized that their position was contextual and specific to CHS (“*It’s just because you go to this school!*”).

As we see in this conversation between Jasmine and Yomaira, students’ relationships to school and academic achievement were central concerns in how Asian American students produced racial distinctions, categorized themselves, defined Asian-ness, and categorized peers who were not Asian American. Just as I showed that high-achieving Asian American students made sense of their practice of staying within racial boundaries by pointing to their shared pro-school orientation, Asian American students who had the opposite orientation referred to it in order to explain why they were members of non-Asian friendship groups, especially Black ones. Consider Phoenix, the Vietnamese American intern. He was in danger of being unable to graduate:

I hung out with Black people as long as I can remember. I kind of realized I don't really blend in with Asians, anyway. When I got to high school, and they were all talking about and worrying about their grades like it's the end of the world. They got 99% and I was like, "I'm happy with D minus and look at you guys, God damn." So it was like, what's going on here? They were always talking about their grades, so I was like, "Oh God, I can't hang out with these people." Sometimes I just say to them like, you guys worry about too much about grades, just have fun sometimes, relax.

Unlike Phoenix, Mark (the Thai-Cambodian American basketball player) was an example of an Asian American student who maintained close friendship circles with Asian American students, but who also crossed boundaries by befriending Blacks. We became acquainted in Mr. Wilson’s art class, where he sat with a group of Black girls: Latoya, Katrina, Tamicka, and Alani. Alani had a large burn on her stomach that she said she got while cooking over the weekend. She, Tamicka, and Mark got a pass from Mr. Wilson to go down to the Wellness Center so that she could be seen by a nurse. The three returned to class with packs of condoms, which the two girls displayed on the table. As they compared colors, flavors, and sizes, I asked the students about the racial breakdown of the groups in school. Latoya made a passing comment that ascribed Blackness to Mark: “He’s Black, anyway. Look around. Not to be rude, but these

other guys (the other Asian Americans in art class) aren't like Mark." She said that he was in a Black-oriented sport and "he's different." At that point, I asked Mark what he thought of the assessment. "I'm not Black. I'm just Asian and I'm out-going." Latoya saw Mark as Black because she racialized elements of Mark's personality as Black. Later, in an interview, he reflected on this exchange:

I have more in common with my Asian friends. We're really close and I pretty much consider them my family because they help me in times of need... I thought it was funny [when Latoya said I was Black] because I'm Asian obviously, and they just think I act different from the other Asians. They are smart and I'm just a little rougher on the edges. That's how I am, I guess.

Sheila told a similar story of how class background and neighborhood environment influenced her friendship choice. The Asian American youth who she counted as friends were all Southeast Asian American. Blacks and Latinos were among her non-Asian friends. In this quote, she describes being labeled as "ghetto" by her Black childhood friends:

Since I was young you know, I always felt that it's important not to just stay in your cluster. I hang out with different people. Sometimes I hang out with a mixed group of students, like Latinos, Blacks and Asian. I feel like it's important to not just stay in your group and like expand, you know, expanding horizons. Mix the groups, don't just stay with my Asian students.

I mean growing up in Central, I guess it was hard because my parents, they are low-income and like, I would hang out with all types of kids. I wouldn't just stick with Asians, so I was this little ghetto girl, that's what they are called me, you know. Like my African-American friends, when I was little, they were like, "Oh, you're ghetto."

Asian American students associated "ghetto" with Blackness, using it as an identity label for non-conforming peers. In this example, however, Black youth racialized Sheila as "ghetto" because she did not "stick with Asians." (I will discuss how Black students thought about "ghetto" in Ch. 4.)

Sirch, whose parents also came of age in Central City, described what he associated with the notion of ghetto:

Ghetto, first thing that pops into my mind, ghetto Africana-Americans, broken houses, loud music and kind of shaky streets, no grass, and just not really a pleasant place, that's the first thing that appears in my mind.

Alternately, Phoenix's discussion of ghetto is an example of how students sometimes played with the term, revised it, and turned its value on its head:

Phoenix: Like to me, ghetto is a style of living. For example, you have this bag of noodles that's supposed to be cooked in a bowl, but you don't have a bowl so you take a plastic cup to cook it in there, that's really ghetto.

Yenhua: Why?

Phoenix: Because the way you do it is like out of the ordinary, and I think that's my definition to ghetto.

Yenhoa: Something out of the ordinary?

Phoenix: Ghetto is—I guess clever. The way people use it around here is like gangster and stuff, but it's like—I guess it's also out of the ordinary. Like a ghetto Asian would be an Asian that acts more Black than Asian.

When Asian Americans performed “ghetto” behavior and identities, they were called either “Black” or “ghetto Asians.” In this usage, the ghetto subject could not be Asian; to be both required explanation, a modifier to the noun. Carmen was a Chinese American girl who was an example of one such “Black Asian,” as a fellow student described her. She was one of two Asian American girls who I noticed were a part of a group of 24 Black girls in the Colored Girls Reading Club, a book group that was led by the librarian until her position was closed for lack of funding. I wrote the following in my field notes when I met Carmen, when I was a volunteer judge for senior project presentations:

Carmen wore plenty of blush, had false eyelashes, drawn on eyebrows, and bleached hair. She said, “I don’t speak no Chinese.” Her senior project was about maintaining one’s native culture. Unlike a couple other students I judged, she did not have notecards and got lost and stopped talking at different points during the presentation. She kept remarking, “Roth (a teacher judge), you making me nervous.” She stated, “Language contributes to who you are... English is the dominant language. If we don’t got different languages, then everyone would be the same. It’s bad, ‘cuz then we just all be the same.” She mentioned that none of her friends were Chinese. At some points, she looked as if she was going to cry, though she never did. She told Mr. Roth he was a “jerk” for being hard on her. In the end, she failed her presentation because, he said, she was unable to communicate her thesis or supporting evidence beyond her personal opinion.

As Carmen crossed the racial boundary of what was expected of her as an Asian American girl, she straddled multiple identities. Similarly, Somi was a Cambodian American girl whose friendship circle was diverse, who straddled identities of race and gender. Her height was on the short side and she wore baggy, masculine clothes. Her hair was cropped in a men’s style cut. She was genial and good-natured, but carried herself in a no-nonsense kind of way. She said that she was perceived “like a thug” by people who did not know her: “I recently made new friends, and like the first thing they said was, ‘I thought you were like a thug or something,’ because of who I keep in my crew. I’m okay with that, if that’s how you shake me, but I’m not really that type of person.”

Jasmine, Yomaira, Latoya, and Somi’s new friends—who were imagining her as a specific type of person (a ‘thug’)—as well as other students at CHS, were involved in “making up people” (Hacking, 1999, in Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 12) as a way of organizing and reorganizing the boundaries of their social world. As I have shown, Asian American students were racialized as certain types of racial beings, but they also rejected normative expectations that were set for them. The reflections of Asian American racial boundary crossing at CHS point to how students’ understandings of Asian-ness were constructed not in a vacuum, but on a field of racial meanings, judgments, values, and positions. Next, I analyze the role of racially conscious, youth oriented community-based organizations in this field of positions.

Anti-Racist Youth Organizations: Asian American Students as People of Color

In the preceding chapter, I demonstrated that adults at CHS by and large institutionalized a color-blind, multiculturalist perspective of race. In their after-school and beyond-school lives, Asian and Asian American students at CHS were exposed to a more incisive racial critique that centered on pan-ethnic Asian American identity and critiques of White supremacy. These competing scripts, or narratives, made specific types of racial identities available: those that were race-neutral, and those that were race-conscious. I uncovered a disjuncture in students' behavior at school and their stated racial ideals, which I highlight to draw attention to tensions within the discourse of anti-racism and White supremacy that influenced racial politics and youth activism in Central City and beyond. The following vignettes exemplify the complex racial understandings of Asian and Asian American students who participated in racially-conscious, youth-focused community organizations:

"Please raise your hand if you've ever felt racial tension in your schools and communities!" the MC, an Asian American high school student named Manny, yelled into the microphone. Most of the youth in the room raised their hands in the air. "Many of us have common struggles, and our schools have not taught us about our people's histories. We want to become critical thinkers to analyze power and its place in history," he continued. The bright, gymnasium-like room of the Asian Cultural Center was packed with over 300 people, some standing in the aisles. Most of the audience were students, but there were also families and community members. With only a handful of exceptions, everyone in the room was Asian American.

We were all there for APIYO's Spring Festival, a showcase event that took place at the end of the school year. The lineup for the evening included Asian and Pacific Islander cultural dances, a "guerilla theater" performance, and spoken word poetry. I recognized several students from CHS in the audience and in the performances. Many of the performers were also CHS students. Karen, a senior class Vice President and member of Leadership, was a co-MC.

"How many people in this room came to this country because of war?" Many hands went up. "Hella hands, right?," Manny asked, then read from notecards. "When our parents came to America, they faced so many struggles. We demand that in our schools, learning about ourselves isn't a luxury, because we're just as important as anyone else." He introduced a Tahitian cultural dance. Then a theater group was next, performing an act about the struggles of immigrant families: intergenerational conflict, language barriers, war trauma, parents' forced to work "slave jobs," substance abuse, and violent neighborhoods.

During one scene, the sound of gunshots reverberated across the room. After a pregnant pause, a couple of student actors fell to the ground. A Black student actor entered and prowled around stage while pointing his gun. The crowd was riled up. I looked around the room, where perhaps 99% of the audience and the performers were Asian American. This "social justice" space had repeated the racial stereotype of Black on Asian violence that Asian American students at CHS had been relating to me all year. In the next scene, a Latino actor played an employer who was exploiting a family of Asian immigrant workers. Curiously, there was no portrayal of Asians exploiting other Asians in their communities.

A student came on stage, rapping about "...money, power, patriarchy, capitalism, racism..." When a turn of words resonated, people in the crowd snapped their fingers. "They're adding more power to the Whites, taking it away from the community." At this, the crowd clapped in loud approval. I glanced over at the single White youth I could find in the room, trying to imagine his reaction. "The big puzzle piece that's missing is my self-identity... Do you

know the percentage of students of color in the Central City school district?” Karen was back on stage, reading from notecards. “93% of students in the CCSD are students of color.” The audience murmured. “Shouldn’t we learn about our histories in our schools?” she said.

Manny spoke next. “In APIYO, we don’t just do art and cultural events. We also fight for students. So if you join APIYO, you will definitely learn to be a leader.” He spoke about the wars in Southeast Asia and the refugee experience, and then turned to the present day:

School is not relevant to our lives. We want to learn about our parents and grandparents’ culture and history. We also want to learn about power. Who has the money? Our communities are hella broke. And who’s in prison? Hella people of color. The War on Drugs targets people of color. It has to do with the cycle of poverty. What are we supposed to do when there aren’t any jobs?

At the end of the night, there was another statement of purpose. “Ethnic studies opens our eyes to the social injustices in our society. It also provides a solution, because it gives us a way to look at the world from our own perspective.”

Through observations and interviews, I identified a strong tension within the multiple racial narratives in Asian American students’ lives, which included the colorblind, multiculturalist racial discourse offered by administrators and many teachers and staff at CHS, those that they learned through social-justice oriented, racially critical community youth organizations such as APIYO and AYO, and those they formulated for themselves and lived out in the classrooms, hallways, cafeteria, sports fields, other spaces of CHS, and in their beyond-school lives.

Working in partnership, the youth-focused community organizations were both intrinsic and extrinsic to the social structure of CHS. This was apparent to me when I joined a crowd of 120-150 in the school’s cafeteria to cheer on the AYO basketball players. As each player was introduced, the crowd shouted and clapped with applause. I realized this was their time to shine. Watching the elaborate program, it struck me that afterschool programs were a significant part of the high school experience of a major portion of students. There were many such programs. In another example, I observed an afterschool meeting of the Fashion Magazine Club. The club advisor was not a teacher, but a woman from an outside organization. She gave a presentation about her career in the fashion industry and as a publicist, using the words “empowered,” “progressive” and “fashion” together.

Phoenix, the DJN intern, stated that he derived a sense of ownership from his role within the organization: “I take ownership kind of, because I actually help organize.” Karen told me that at APIYO, she learned about “who has power in society, and how it controls other people.” Because of their explicit aim to influence youth’s views about power and race through education and advocacy, these organizations played an important role in the racialization of CHS students as politicized racial subjects. In combination, these groups formed a community organization apparatus that focused on a system of White supremacy and institutional racism while seeking to build a coalition of “people of color.”

Because Asian American youth’s relationships to racial power at CHS and in Central City were complex, even the notion of “people of color” could be confounding. Consider how Trinh, a Vietnamese American, defined minorities and people of color for herself:

Asians are the majority here, so the other races are the minority. Sometimes I feel I’m more American than Asian. Since I’m the majority, I feel like I’m not

as colored as other people. The majority of my classes are mostly Asian people. Let's say there's the token Black guy. He would be defined as colored, because everyone else is not Black... If you look at the US, the majority is White. The minority is the colored people. That's what everyone says. For me, the minority is colored people, people of color.

Trinh's definition of these terms was specific to the context of CHS. Because Asian Americans were the largest group, she saw non-Asians not only as numerical minorities, but as valid racial minorities. As a student tracked into advanced classes, Trinh attended classes that were "mostly Asian people," perhaps peppered by "the token Black guy." For her, racial minorities who were not Asian American were people of color.

The presenters and performers of APIYO's Spring Festival argued that students would connect to histories that related to them, but I observed many lessons in U.S. History classes at CHS about the Vietnam War in which Asian American students displayed boredom and a lack of interest. I also observed lectures on the Civil Rights Movement, focused on the role of Blacks, where although many Black students were engaged, Asian American students were less engaged. As I wrote at the start of this chapter, the political identity and history behind the term "Asian American" lacked resonance in the classroom. The presenters also implied that students drop out of school because of a lack of connection to the curriculum, a problem that would be solved by the addition of Ethnic Studies classes. I strongly agree with the potential value of Ethnic Studies for high school students, properly infused in classroom curricula or beyond. However, there were problems in the application of APIYO's anti-racist education. The following excerpt is from a conversation I had with Sirch, who was an intern at APIYO:

Sirch: At APIYO, we want all the youth to understand other people. We usually say that White people are always superior, but then some interns and some site coordinators say, "Not all White people are bad." But sometimes they don't say that, and the youth instantly think of White people as enemies in general. Then when they see a positive White role model, you know, it's like, "screw him, I'm pretty sure he's bad inside." So APIYO has a lot of power, they just don't know how to use it correctly.

Yenhoa: Interesting. Do you think that many of the youth believe whatever is said at APIYO, or do you think they're critically making up their own minds about racism, how racism works in society, what it means from their own perspective?

Sirch: The youth don't really learn that much at all, because we usually spend workshops on one topic for an hour or just 30 minutes. And of course it's not—it's not enough time for it to sink in, but then it's kind of up to us whether we want to let it sink in or just stay outside.

Yenhoa: What about as an intern, do you think the interns question what they're learning and what they're teaching the other students?

Sirch: No. I honestly do not. We usually have seven to nine interns at each site. I would say two people understand what they are talking about. Other people just go along because being in intern means being paid a \$200 stipend. A

really big thing I don't like about APIYO is, they tell the youth information, they don't tell them to dig deeper inside.

Sirch's comments show that Asian American students were exposed to anti-racist rhetoric, but the White supremacy model of racial dynamics did not necessarily ring true. This is also apparent in the following quote, by Nikara. She was also an intern at APIYO:

When we talk about racism, we always talk about White people as the bad people. I think that's exaggerated. I just feel like they have benefits that they don't realize. A lot of them aren't bad. We just view it as bad because of all the examples that they use.

At APIYO's Spring Festival, AYO's showcases, and those of several other organizations (like DJN), I observed students repeating this racial discourse to audiences of supportive peers and adults. I then observed these same students in their school lives, where most continued to self-segregate by race and ethnicity. APIYO taught youth that knowing one's racial history and identity would help them care about their educations and fight White supremacy, but in fact, these lessons did not translate to a changed dynamic at school. There was the very strong tendency to "snap back" into place.

An anthropologist, di Leonardo (2004), contends that we are prone to "naturalize the racial/ethnic present, and to elide its historically contingent and politically constructed character." Central City's community organizations are locatable within a historical moment of pan-ethnic Asian American identity politics⁴⁶ as well as a public moment of crisis for Blacks, who regularly protest anti-Black racism (especially at the hands of police) on Central City streets. Asian American community organizers worked on the assumption that these two campaigns—to empower the Asian American community and to end anti-Black racism—were characterized by shared attributes and interests. Aligned in their concern with racism and institutional power, groups like APIYO projected a vision of activism guided by people-of-color solidarity and racial consciousness.

Racial activists, especially those who guided the racial values of Central City youth, critiqued the color-blind racism of the mainstream society, including the color-blind multicultural discourse of the high school institution. However, they generally did not recognize the limitations in their own "critical" or "social justice" vantage that was blind to how Asian Americans may occupy a position of relative privilege. I posit that it is necessary and fruitful to locate the vision of people-of-color solidarity in the specificity and partial perspective (Haraway, 1988) of its socio-historical location, in order to attend to its blind spots. Namely, I suggest that cross-racial coalitions would be strengthened by de-naturalizing assumptions of a common struggle, and teaching youth that within an umbrella of oppressed groups, hierarchy and different racisms persist.

Asian Immigrant Newcomers: Entering a New Field of Racial Positions

I sat in Mr. Roth's U.S. history class, observing student presentations comparing past and present immigration. As Zhenwei quietly talked about historic Chinese immigration, it became apparent that he had begun speaking English very recently. He spoke haltingly, unsure of himself. He wore a baseball cap, gold necklace, and Hollister shirt. Sophath, his co-presenter (who would speak about contemporary immigration from Cambodia) wore a black t-shirt, baseball cap, a slight mustache, and headphones hanging around his neck.

At one point, Juan and Sephir call out, “I can’t hear you!” Zhenwei tried to speak up, but his voice was still small. “The working men hated on the Chinese because they kept taking their jobs. The Chinese men formed enclaves so that they could have their own thing going on.” Sophath spoke about “discrimination towards Cambodians” in the U.S., saying, “I think immigrants are still resented today like how they were back in the day. Immigrants still work in places where they are low.” In concluding, he said, “Even if the immigrants aren’t Americans, that doesn’t mean they can’t stay. They don’t have to assimilate into American culture.” Of course, Zhenwei and Sophath themselves showed outward signs of assimilation.

Most of the Asian American students at Central High were 2nd generation immigrants (they were born in the US), and many of them were 2.5 generation (their parents came at a young age) or even 3rd generation Americans. As I wrote elsewhere, many of their adult relatives arrived in the U.S. as refugees. The newcomers were mostly Chinese (Cantonese-speaking), though they also come from other countries like Vietnam. They spoke very little English. I learned that for them, CHS was a bewildering place. The experience of entering into a new, different, and very specifically oriented racial field was disorienting.

In school life, they were marginal. They were generally not involved in student-centered decision-making, student cultural production, or debates about school life. They were also excluded, by and large, from the four-year college pathway, since the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes they were required to take often crowded out coursework that would make them eligible to apply to a University of California institution where they would qualify for in-state tuition, for example. However, many of these immigrant newcomers were integrated into the community organization apparatus, especially through the work of youth organizations centered in Chinatown. Thus, while they were peripheral to student activities on campus (besides Cantonese club), they heard the same social justice and anti-racist messages as their American-born peers.

About a week after the APIYO Spring Festival, Ming-Na invited me to conduct a focus group at her club’s meeting at the Asian Resource Center building. She was a first generation immigrant from China who had the brisk energy of a politician. Her schedule was busy, and she was always polite. I arrived about 5:45pm on a Friday evening. There were about 30 students sitting on chairs and a couch, in a big circle. No adults were around. A few people stood at the front end of the room with a giant notepad, asking questions and fielding responses from the group. All that was spoken was communicated in Cantonese. The group was discussing what their end of the year social event would be and when it would take place.

At the end of the meeting, Ming-Na stood up and introduced me, then asked me to introduce myself. I got up and suddenly the room felt very warm. I told the group I was nervous. I asked how many people could understand me clearly in English, since I could not speak Cantonese. Fewer than half of the youth raised their hands. I apologized and said I could understand Mandarin, but not Cantonese. I explained who I was and why I was there. After each sentence, Ming-Na translated everything I said to Cantonese. She was an amazing translator. I asked about the translated word for ‘race.’

At least half of the students were from CHS. Many people were not comfortable enough to speak up, but I felt lucky to have been invited to the last meeting of the year, where I could learn faces and hear insights from so many first-generation Cantonese speaking students at once. And there they were, under a banner that asked, in English and then in Chinese, “What does community organizing mean to you?” and a banner with the group’s name, “Power for

Immigrant Youth.” There were several photos on the wall of the club’s leaders, with the youth posed under the word “power.”

Rumbaut and Portes (2001) note the significance of ethnic communities and organizations as cultural and political resources for second-generation youth. My time with Asian and Asian American CHS students opened my eyes to how much the ethnic community, or enclave, mattered in shaping young people’s social lives, social views, and life opportunities in Central City. I saw hundreds of pumped up youth attend APIYO’s Spring Festival, watched a Mien American senior play basketball in on an outdoor court in Chinatown (as he did every day), listened as he called Chinatown his second home, and witnessed the first generation students of Youth Immigrants Building Power in action. All this underscored the ways in which ‘Asian’ identity was taught and concretized every day for Asian and Asian American students in Central.

First-generation immigrant students conveyed the trepidation they felt at school, mostly associated with an inability to express themselves in English. Like their American-born peers, none of these youth called themselves Asian American. Being around other Asians, especially those who shared the same linguistic and migration background, felt comfortable. I asked them if American school life was what they had expected. “There are too many Black people, I did not expect that,” one boy said in English. A girl added, in Cantonese, “When I went to my locker, a girl blocked my way. She was Black. One time she pushed all my books down on the floor.” Another girl rejoined in English, “not all Black student like that, some are friendly.”

As I have shown, student friendship networks were organized into cliques, which were highly racially homogeneous small groups. That many of Central City’s youth organizations promoted racial awareness and racial solidarity across races did not dull the edge of sharp ethnic and racial boundaries. Like their American-born classmates, first generation immigrant students both bought into messages of racial equality and still kept, on the whole, to people who were like themselves, both at school and outside of school, and in their own way, they still contributed to the racial hierarchy that characterized the social and academic landscape of the school.

Conclusion

Where did Asian American students fit into the racial, social, and academic landscape of CHS? Asian Americans occupied a superordinate position at Central High School: they enjoyed the most status, best access to resources, and greatest ability to make decisions that affected others. This was exemplified in how they were spoken of and how they saw themselves and others, their presence in high-track classes and leadership positions, their academic ‘success,’ and their positive relationships with adult gatekeepers. These trends were not uniform, however. Asian American students’ experiences of racialization and their responses to it related to their ethnic background, especially which of two umbrella groups they belonged to: Chinese and Vietnamese Americans or Cambodian, Hmong and Mien Americans. Other factors included the amount of time they had spent in the U.S. and their English language ability, their family influences and support, their experiences in tracked elementary, middle, and high schools, the neighborhoods where they lived, and their participation in supportive programs and organizations.

I have shown that the racial self-segregation of students was striking and persistent and demonstrated that the academic landscape of the school was also racially stratified, despite what I sensed were earnest efforts on the part of teachers and administrators to recruit Black and Latino students into AP classes and Leadership class, so that they could be ‘less Asian’ and ‘more diverse.’ For both Asian American students who were tracked into higher-level, Asian-

American dominated classes and Asian American students who were struggling and falling through the cracks in more racially diverse classroom settings, institutional stratification and self-segregation persisted in spite of the school's official rhetoric of colorblind multiculturalism.

Student self-segregation also persisted in spite of the non-profit community's broad and ubiquitous discourse, led by adults, of "solidarity" among "people of color" against the "struggles" that Central youth have shared common. The community organizational apparatus mentored and academically supported students, strengthened relationships among them, exposed them to important community resources, and gave them positive outlets for their abundant energy. They did commendable work in educating youth about race, in the process conferring a sense of "empowerment" through better understandings of identity and community. Donna, a Vietnamese American girl, said her experience with APIYO "makes you learn and grow a lot, it makes you feel important."

However, this racial education did not lead to cross-racial solidarity, which was a chief goal of many of the organizations. Moreover, it did not offer a way to understand inequality and differences across groups racialized by the racial power structure that they critiqued. A salient point that stood out in my discussion with the Chinese immigrant students of Power for Immigrant Youth was that they, like many of their American-born Asian peers, were afraid of their Black classmates. This was a complex problem that neither the school nor the community organizations succeeded in addressing. The latter educated youth about racism, but young people were not educated about racism in their own communities and peer groups in a way that penetrated their fear.

In his ethnography of capitalist culture, reproduction, and resistance in a small Texas town, Foley (1994) contends that "schools are sites for popular culture practices that stage or reproduce inequality" (p. xv). Asian American youth did not interrupt the racialization processes that were institutionalized at their school; that would have required massive coordination and a reorganization of their identities and priorities. Asian Americans were valorized relative to Blacks and Latinos in part because neither the school nor the organizations problematized the benefits and privileges Asian American students were conferred, nor did they pay more than lip service to the comparative advantages and disadvantages shared by different Asian American ethnic groups and generational cohorts.

In *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Prashad (2000) investigates the American Orientalist 'logic' of a 'racist contract' that constructed South Asians / South Asian Americans as superior to Blacks. These groups, South Asians and Blacks, engaged with a system of representation that placed them in hierarchy, but they did not enter "from the same place":

The ethos of identification requires that we be scrupulous about the different histories of differentiated groups, that we not assume that all people come at identification from the same place (p. x).

The actors in the social landscape of CHS—the youth themselves, the adults who taught them inside classrooms and the adults who educated them about social issues outside of classrooms—would benefit from a deeper understanding of how their school community exemplified the dynamic changes of an uneven racial landscape. Such landscapes witness shifting demographics and give rise to nuanced and sometimes surprising changes of position. Such was the racial landscape at CHS, where Asian American students' racial and educational upper hand was a barometer not of racial progress, but of the growing inequality among groups.

Chapter 4, The Racialization of Black Students

It will be seen that the black man's alienation is not an individual question. (Fanon, 1967, p. 11)

I think in some ways they're scared. We're not all mean. Some of us are ignorant, but I don't agree with ignorance. – Adante, a 17 year old Black student

I want to be something in life. – Keisha, a 16 year old Black student

Black students comprised 32% of the student body. This means that they accounted for the second largest racial demographic on campus, after Asian Americans (44%). Over the 12-month period in which I conducted fieldwork at Central High School, I gained a sense of how Black students there perceived racialization processes, as well as how they were both affected by them and helped keep them in motion. In addition to numerous informal conversations with dozens of Black students, I conducted in-depth interviews with ten Black students and two multiracial Black students. Additionally, I held an informal focus group with the members of an African American male intervention program geared towards freshmen.

This chapter highlights the experiences and perspectives of Black students at CHS. In the analysis that follows, I describe what racialization looked and felt like for them. I examine how their school lives were impacted by racial categories that were under construction, negotiation, and sometimes challenge, and I investigate the role of Black students within these processes. My analysis demonstrates that there was both fluidity and durability in how Black students defined, redefined, and lived out the category of Blackness. It also reveals considerable agency as Black students co-constructed, resisted, and transgressed those categories, although their agency was severely limited by structural conditions within and beyond the school environment.

Through the perspective and experiences of Black students, I demonstrate that what it meant to be Black was constrained by an Asian-Black binary that charged racial dynamics at school. Ultimately, the effects of these dynamics were deleterious to the school as a whole, but they were particularly harmful to Black students as they struggled to formulate a valued sense of themselves as academic subjects and as racial beings. Nonetheless, Black students found limited ways to express agency, especially in the use of varied survival strategies; they drew on these to negotiate an environment that was sometimes hostile to them and to make meaning. In their meaning-making, Black students both resisted and internalized discourses of the model minority and oppositional minority.

This chapter is arranged in five sections that reflect how the racialization of Black students was organized and signified at Central High. In the first section, I discuss the fluidity and durability of racial categories for Black students. I then extend this to address the experiences of multiracial Black-Asian American students. The subsequent sections analyze Black students' agency in the co-creation of categories and their resistance to them, survival strategies for navigating school life and racialization, and the marginal school spaces where they dwelled.

The Fluidity and Durability of Race: Blackness at Central High School

The decolonial intellectual, Franz Fanon (1967), used the term “the fact of Blackness” to describe what it meant to have no choice but to live in relationship to a racial hierarchy that defined Black as inferior to White (p. 109). Thus, the animating condition of the Black individual’s existence was a racialized relation: “For not only must the black man be black, he must be black in relation to the white man.” For Fanon, the ontological “*state of being a negro*” referred to an internal experience of living in a society that demanded of Black people that they confront their Blackness (p. 110). At CHS, the cultural and educational construction of Blackness as a social “fact” required that Black students account for the deep stereotypes and expectations that circulated about them.

As students experienced it, Blackness was not static, but was both conceptually fluid and durable. As a normative category, Blackness expanded and contracted to include anyone who identified or was ascribed with qualities that were popularly associated with Black students, families, and communities. In this sense, there was a slippery dimension to its existence. Yet, the social and educational construction of Blackness largely reflected broader societal assumptions about Black deviance and deficiency. The remarkable durability of shared notions of Blackness was evident in the social reproduction of not only stereotypes and beliefs related to Black individuals and groups, but also in their currency as a means to explain patterned racial stratification and unequal experiences and outcomes at the school.

At 1:15 pm on a sunny Thursday, I sat on the school steps, watching students stream off of the city bus after the lunch break. They headed back to school alone or in small groups; a few were Asian American or Latino, most groups were Black. Occasionally, an interracial group of friends passed by. A Black vice principal walked briskly past me, while the security guards, Black men and women armed with blaring and crackling two-way radios, looked on. Black female janitors swept up potato chip bags into dustpans. A Black sophomore stopped to show off the tattoos on his belly to one of the women collecting litter, who stopped her work to admire them. The visibility of Black members of the school community was undeniable. Blackness, or the set of shared ideas regarding what it meant to be Black, was striking in its enmeshment in the common sense of students and staff.

In the analysis that follows, I will discuss how and why Blackness served as a referent for many number of things, but at the moment, it is worth noting again that Blackness was a highly useful idea. Adults and students used it to make sense of interpersonal interactions, the formal and informal social structures of the school (e.g. academic tracks and friendship groups), and normative ideas of academic success and failure, on a daily basis. I heard staff and students talk off-handedly about Black students and “Black people” or “Black folks” so frequently that it was apparent that the cultural norm not only recognized, but also was built upon, the idea that CHS had a partial but very definite Black identity.

Like other racial categories, Blackness existed in degrees rather than absolutes. Black students did not necessarily see themselves as *only* Black. Sometimes, they felt Black but not fully or totally so. For example, I interviewed Naomi, a stylish and petite girl who came across as self-assured but aloof. She earned C’s and D’s in her classes. Her friends were often brash, but she was soft-spoken. We talked for a long time about stereotypes of Blackness, and what it was like for her to go to CHS as a Black girl, before it finally became clear to me that for Naomi, ‘Black’ was a slippery signifier:

I am Black, but I'm not. I'm not really raised like a Black person. My mom and grandma, they're hecka light. Sometimes I forget. The fact that I'm Black. They're not ghetto, I guess you can say.

Naomi implicitly related Blackness both to skin color and to the notion of “ghetto;” it signaled the specificity of what it meant to be “raised like a Black person.” Being both light-skinned and not aligning with notions of “ghetto” led Naomi to consider herself neither absolutely nor at all times Black. The previous self-ascription of race also demonstrates that membership within the category ‘Black’ (and in social groups associated with Blackness) was conditional upon certain ways of being (e.g. of acting, speaking, dressing, and academically performing). While comportment was a condition of group membership, who belonged was a question of authenticity. In “Appropriating Blackness: Performance and Authenticity,” Johnson (2003) writes,

“Blackness” does not belong to any one individual or group. Rather individuals or groups appropriate this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups (p. 3).

For Naomi, “they’re not ghetto” signaled racial inauthenticity; saying “they’re not ghetto” was meant to communicate something along the lines of “they’re not really Black.” While Naomi’s insights demonstrate the delimiting, demarcating, and exclusionary functions of naming Blackness, there were also examples of its inclusionary function. For example, a group of Black and Latina students informed me that their teacher, Ms. Moore, was Black. I was taken aback, as this teacher appeared to be of uniformly Asian descent. She was married to a White man, but she was not multiracial. Yet, the students called her Black. They explained, “That’s just how we think of her. I don’t even see her as Asian American,” and “Like, it’s cause of how she act.” For the non-Asian students, occluding Ms. Moore’s Asian-ness and instead appropriating Blackness for her was a method of closing distance between themselves and their teacher. Students actively placed themselves and others, and were placed by other students and staff, in distinct racial categories. As the example of Ms. Moore shows, these racial ascriptions did not necessarily align.

Enactments of Blackness also depended, to some degree, on social context. Students performed different ways of being a student in different settings, which were then racially coded in how they reflected upon individuals. For instance, students acted differently in classrooms versus hallways, or when they were in front of an audience of peers versus an adult. For example, I observed Damon, an energetic Black ninth grade boy, in class and one-on-one. In class, he was good-natured, but was also reliably one of the first students to interrupt class each day by jumping, walking around the room, and making short verbal outbursts. I also had the chance to observe Damon in an after-school tutoring session run by AYO. I worked with Damon individually, helping him with his homework. He was quiet, calm, and respectful. I learned later from his English teacher that he “bragged” about working with me, proudly telling her that I “would help him get into college.” In class, a peer commented about Damon, “you act Black.” In this comment, she defined Blackness as academically oppositional.

The phrase “acting Black” underscores the performative aspect of racial identification, and gestures at the conditions that mediate race in specific cultural contexts. Black students sometimes acted differently in environments in which Blackness was *expected* to bode ill compared to those in which it was neutral or bode well. An example was Demisha, a Black

senior who comported herself as two types of student, and who was subsequently racialized as two types of Black student, in divergent contexts. Compare the following two excerpts from my field notes, which describe her in different settings on the same day. The first context was an economics class, taught by Ms. Rand, a middle aged White woman. The class was comprised of a disproportionate number of Black students:

When Demisha and three other Black students arrived late to Ms. Rand's economics class, the first thing she told them was, "Either come in and be quiet or leave. Do not talk to your friends. I'm not having this today." Students were matched with partners and assigned a country. They then went around the room trading cards that represented national resources, like currency or energy. The kids got into the game, but it was difficult to see the bigger picture of the activity.

Demisha was assigned to the "Argentina" group. She forcibly grabbed some cards from another group, which was comprised of Asian American and Latino students. "We were in the middle of a trade. You're a terrorist," the Asian American male student told Demisha, who had by that time walked away. "We got jacked," another of the Asian American kids said. Demisha laughed and returned to give the cards back.

A Black male student noticed another Black male student loudly clucking his tongue and said, "This nigga here is making African noises. Am I the only one seeing that?" The boy was part of the Nigeria group. Demisha told some students not to trade with the Nigeria group "because they some weak niggas. Don't fuck with them niggas. Don't trade with them." She was clearly a friend of the members of the group, so her warning was made half-jokingly.

After class, I talked with Ms. Rand one-on-one, with James (a Vietnamese senior) present. The only others present were a few students from 5th period, almost all Asian American, who sat in the room eating lunch. We talked about the previous day, which I also observed. Ms. Rand was evidently embarrassed, describing it as "crazy." When I ask her why she thought the class could have been so misbehaved, she said the following: "I like to be frank. It's because there's so many African American students."

James interjected, saying, "No, Keith acts up and then everyone just follows." "Do you think that's what it is?" she asked him. "Yeah, I have a class with [another teacher] and it's like this class, and they're all Asian in there." "Really?" she asked incredulously. "Asian students and they act crazy? I can't believe it." Her eyes and mouth were wide with disbelief. "I love my Asian students."

When I informed Ms. Rand that I was focusing my research on Asian American students and race, she told me that she'd be curious about what I found and that there was a lot of segregation. "A place can be really diverse and segregated," she offered. I agreed, and said I noticed that there's also a good deal of self-segregation among students. She said again, "I love my Asian

students. You know, honestly I think they're the backbone of the school." Choosing my words carefully, I asked, "In what sense do you mean?" "Well, I mean academically, socially, and in terms of cultural values." She added that she likes all students.

The second context was a Senior Awards Night, in which the principal, counselors, and others publicly commended seniors for academic and other achievements:

That evening, I went to the Senior Awards Night, which was a ceremony meant to honor graduating seniors who received various scholarships. The auditorium was a third full. There was a mix of Asian American and Black students, with only a couple of small groups of Latino students in the audience. There were some parents and several teachers, almost all of whom sat in the far back. I was surprised to see students from Ms. Rand's 4th period class, the ones whose behavior she was so upset by. Demisha received an award for sportsmanship, a recognition chosen for her by her softball teammates. The boy from the Nigerian group who was making "Africa noises" was also present, supporting Demisha with whoops and hollers when she proudly collected her award.

All the major awards were awarded to Asian American students, and Black students won fewer and smaller scholarships. Of the awards Black students were given, they were more likely to be sports awards than academic ones.⁴⁷ At the end of the ceremony, the audience waited over twenty minutes while Ms. Meier and a few students from Leadership class fumbled with the projector. A slide show of photos set to sentimental music finally appeared on the overhead. The slide show mostly featured students from Leadership class, the vast majority of whom was Asian American. This was not especially surprising, since they likely created the slide show. Nonetheless, I was unsettled at the fact that they were apparently unaware that many of the people in the audience would feel disconnected from the slideshow.

As we milled around after the program ended, I introduced myself to Demisha, reminding her of who I was in the context of observing in Ms. Rand's class. She responded, "Oh yeah, 4th period. I'm wild in that class." I asked her if she liked the class and she said, "No, I don't like it. I mean, I like being with my friends, but Ms. Rand and I don't have chemistry."

These excerpts feature Demisha acting "wild" in Ms. Rand's class, then graciously accepting recognition of her sportsmanship that same evening. They feature her being racialized differently in the two situations. In the first, she both projected and was perceived along the lines of the oppositional minority stereotype, a Black girl misbehaving. In the second, she broke the stereotype; she was a member of the school community whose contributions mattered. What accounted for the difference?

The demands of the social fact of Blackness included the need to respond to the racialized expectations of teachers, staff, and their peers, and to conform expectations for themselves with or against those of others. It pushed them to look inward, to see what being Black meant to them. Demisha explained her misbehavior in Ms. Rand's class through their lack of "chemistry." Indeed, interpersonal interactions with teachers mattered a great deal in terms of the type of student that individuals embodied in specific settings. Yet, the enactment of "wild" student could also be seen in light of Ms. Rand's negative stereotypes and expectations about Black students. She openly espoused these beliefs ("I like to be frank. [The misbehavior is] because there's so many African American students.")

It seems improbable that such hostile racialization would *not* impact student behavior. Ms. Rand's dismissive attitude towards students who gave her problems undeniably contributed to the climate in the classroom. She was not alone. I also recorded first-hand observations of similar practices among six other teachers, four of whom were White and two of whom were Black. These six teachers (about a third of the teachers whose classrooms I observed) had reputations among students (and among a few less guarded teachers) of being ineffective pedagogically and particularly punitive towards Black students. As I argue in Ch. 2, Ms. Rand represents the more extreme and vocal model of what were, unfortunately, more quietly but widely held notions of Blackness.

W.E.B. DuBois once maintained that "Black people are the magical faces at the bottom of society's well" (in Bell, 1992, p. v). Students across racial, academic, and social backgrounds told me that the stereotype of Black students that circulated at the school included: "ghetto," disruptive, violent, loud, not smart. Black students were thought of (and sometimes thought of one another) as some or all of those things. Some students, teachers, and staff saw them as unwilling pupils and classmates, lazy or perhaps roiling with pent up disappointments. Black students described their peers as lazy, but never as stupid. (They always pointed out that anyone had the capacity to succeed, with effort.) According to the common stereotype, Black youth were to be feared.

Probably more than students of other racial backgrounds, Black students experienced the socio-cultural and educational construction of race at great cost. In academic terms (including the life chances that accrue from positive academic experiences and outcomes), as well as emotional and psychic terms, Black students were the faces at the bottom of the well. For the most part, Black students experienced their relationship to Blackness in overwhelmingly negative terms. This is not to say that they viewed Blackness negatively or that they viewed themselves negatively because of their Blackness. Rather, Black students demonstrated an acute sensitivity to the ways in which the social construction of Blackness operated as a normative category filled with negative associations, and this knowledge shaped their own ways of being and acting as students at the school.

As was demonstrated in Ms. Rand's comments, the subjective experience of the social fact of Blackness related not only to Whiteness, but also to the Asian American model minority stereotype. Stereotypes about Black students sharply contrasted with the popular stereotype of Asian American students as "smart," "engaged," and "quiet." For Black students, the dominant expectation was to fit the mold of the trope of an oppositional and deficient racial subject. Shared notions of what it meant to be Black were not called forth in isolation. Individuals and groups (both Black and non-Black) suggested what Blackness was and gave it normative value, but these ideas were shaped by the anchoring relationship of the Asian American model minority to the Black and Brown deviant minority subject locations.

The racial formation of Blackness (the construction, negotiation, and reinforcement of Black as a socio-historically constructed normative category) emerged through and against complementary constructions of Asian-ness and, in a different way, of Latino or Brownness. Blackness was understood at CHS through locally specific understandings and productions of meaning; telling the story of Asian American students at CHS would be absolutely incomplete without an understanding of the construction of Blackness and the perspective of Black students. The corollary is also true. It is absolutely necessary to understand Asian American racial positioning vis-à-vis the model minority stereotype to tell the story of Black racialization at CHS. Neither can be understood without examining the racial field as a whole.

The tropes of the Asian American model minority and Black and Brown oppositional and deficient minority exist in many types of educational environments, not only urban ones (nor only urban ones with a preponderance of Asian American and Black students). They reflect a broader configuration of the racial and ethnic hierarchy within the nation's racial imaginary. However, the instantiation of these tropes as discursive anchors in *this* school reveal the extent to which Blackness and Asian American-ness served as ideological foils in a unique context where the Black-White binary was supplanted by an Asian-Black binary. The demographics of the school, the political and immigration history of the city, and the political and demographic character of the region all helped account for the binary's presence.

The school was situated in an area where Blackness was at once politicized and romanticized via the Black Power Movement and demonized through popular discourses of poverty and crime. Many Asian immigrants were also impoverished; Asian American students at CHS belonged to poor and working class immigrant families. However, Asian Americans in Center City also exhibited a smaller social distance to Whites, as compared with Blacks. Like Black residents, Asian Americans held prominent positions in professional and political spheres in the region. However, Black residents were more residentially segregated from White residents than were Asian Americans. Black students from CHS, who lived in the "flat-lands" of Central City, referred to having Black, Asian American, and Latino neighbors, but not White neighbors. For Black and other students at the 99% non-White school where Asian Americans comprised the plurality, Blackness was largely understood in relation not chiefly to White, but to Asian-ness.

In many respects, Asian-ness stood in for Whiteness; the latter was a category that was hardly ever mentioned. As I argue in Ch. 3, the value of Asian American-ness was conditional upon its proximate cultural likeness to Whiteness. Thus, while White students were virtually absent from the school population, Whiteness remained superordinate. In particular, the racialized tropes of the wanting student and the good student delimited students' complex notions of Blackness and Asian-ness, as well as their ways of living race. Black students at CHS lived the social fact of Blackness as an on-going project that socially and educationally constructed Black as negative, the flipside of the same coin that constructed Asian-ness as positive.

In the following narrative, a Black student's comments reveal the interrelation of the racial stereotypes at the school. Maya was a senior girl who had great presence, despite her petite frame. She was one of the most out-spoken, confident, and passionate students I met. Very close with a relative who was one of the first female members of the Black Panther Party, Maya was proud of her dark skin and told me she was taught, "Black is beautiful." In a tone that sounded simultaneously fed up and heartbroken, she communicated frustration at what she saw as the

differential perceptions of Black, Asian American, and “Mexican or Latino” students among teachers and staff:

People always say Asians get good grades, they're always focused on school, they're always quiet, they're always shy, they're perfect students. But I know that's not true, because I know some Asian students that get bad grades and don't care about school and stuff like that. People at this school, they just think that Asians are the best students. Everybody that's not Asian that's a student [thinks that]. Even some of even the teachers. They say, "Oh, all my Asian students seem to be getting A's in this class." Some teachers have said that.

Mexicans or Latinos, everybody says they really don't do good in school because they can't speak English, they're lazy and don't care. People say the same thing about Black people. They're lazy, don't care, cut class, smoke, drink, they're dumb, they never focus, always the class clown, always trying to fight someone. It's always negative. I never hear something positive about somebody that's Black at this school. They don't think that we can do anything. The Black students at this school don't care about their education because they feel that they're not important.

Mostly all the attention is, all the positive attention is placed towards Asian students. It's always negative with us. If we do something bad, we're attacked. If somebody that's not Black or Mexican does it, it's always overlooked. We always talk about that, like Asians not getting sent home over the dress code when we do. It's discreet racism, though. It's not, "I don't like you because you're Black." It's, "I don't like you because you have short shorts, or you're loud in class, or you didn't get this assignment done."

Like others, Maya saw that Black students were at the bottom of the academic hierarchy not only in terms of student outcomes, but also in terms of the attention they received. Maya's attention to “discreet racism” was uniquely sophisticated and bespoke the acuity of young people's understanding of their own oppression. (I will address students' limited vocabulary regarding racial consciousness momentarily.) Maya believed that the adults at the school expected Black students to fail (“They don't think we can do anything”). Her comments reveal a keen sense of injustice at the qualitatively different attention and recognition Black and Asian American students received (“all the positive attention is placed towards Asian students. It's always negative with us”). Ultimately, Black students were, in her eyes, seen as unworthy of positive attention.

The durability of Blackness as containing mostly negative stereotypes was somewhat astonishing, considering the innumerable counterexamples that were available. In spite of the dominant framing of Black students as oppositional and deficient, students richly lived out multiple ways of being Black and shared different, sometimes competing, notions of what it meant to be Black. There was LaJuan, a boy who proudly introduced me to his mother after the awards ceremony by telling her, “She's a graduate student and she read my paper.” Another example was Kenya, the daughter of a security guard whose senior project explored “Why Black People Have a Slave Mentality.” She said she accidentally stumbled upon Black Pride-related themes while reading an “urban novel.” When I asked Nick (a senior who I will introduce

shortly) what stereotypes circulated at the school, he replied: “That Black people... [pause] we all angry. But we not all the same.”

School officials gave lip service to the idea of “we not all the same,” but it was students who internalized its lessons and assimilated the possibilities it represented into their budding political consciousness. For example, I had the chance to observe as a group of ninth graders shared “Just Because” poems in English class. They were asked to write poems that employed “Just because” as the first words of each line, an activity whose implicit purpose was to help the class reflect upon stereotypes. I recorded the following notes about the poems; their delivery and content spoke to the notion of “we not all the same”:

A Pacific Islander student named Vicki read loudly, confidently, and with rhythm. Referring to Tongan stereotypes, she said, “Me is legit / so your assumptions need to quit.” The class received this recitation with claps, snaps, and hoots.

Tina, an out-going, pretty Black student who revealed in her identity presentation that she lived with a foster family, said, “Just because I’m Black doesn’t mean I’m going to kick your ass. / Just because I act ghetto doesn’t mean I don’t know how not to be rude or act my age. / Just because I’m light-skinned doesn’t mean I look like the next light-skinned ho. / Just because my life was horrible doesn’t mean I’m not a happy kid.”

Another Black girl named Lisa recited, “Just because I live in Central City doesn’t mean I’m going to hurt you. Just because I’m light-skinned doesn’t mean I’m mixed.”

Jackie, an out-going Filipina student, said rhythmically, “Just because I’m from Central City doesn’t mean I’m afraid to walk the streets... / Central City has its rough ends but it has more than meets the eye... / We all can’t have an easy life on the surface...” When she finished, Damon asked her, “Jackie, are you sure you ain’t Black?”

Monae, a Black girl presented, saying, “Just because I hang out with hella dudes doesn’t mean I’m fucking them. / Just because I have big lips doesn’t mean I suck dick. / Just because you’re hating doesn’t mean I’m going to kick your ass.” The class hooted and slapped their hands on their desks in applause.

Finally, Jasmine, a Black girl who was ignored by most of the Black students in the class because of her out-of-date clothes, read a poem called “What People Cannot See” about loving animals and wanting to become a veterinarian. The poem ended with the line, “I love myself endlessly / and that’s what people should always see.”

This excerpt demonstrates that students were very aware of the stereotypes that circulated about them and their community. It is also clear from the passage that varied ways of living in relation to the category of Blackness were possible. Racial boundaries were both sustained and trespassed there. For instance, during downtimes, the vast majority of the socialization that occurred was racially self-segregated. Vicki (the Tongan student quoted above) and a Latina girl

were firmly embraced members of the otherwise all-Black social group that took court at the front of the classroom. Towards one side, Latino males congregated. Towards another side, Asian American students kept to themselves. Yet, there were counter-dynamics. The theme of coming of age as an experience of struggle in the urban environment seemed to unite the freshmen in the class.⁴⁸ The group appeared to be especially close-knit and supportive (everyone listened respectfully to their peers' poems, and no one booed anyone else during the presentations). The biggest stereotype they appeared to want to shatter was about what it meant to be members of their community (or city).

At one level, these poems were about looking past surface-level stereotypes. They classified racism alongside bigotry and ignorance. They urged listeners to get to know more than the stereotype. At a deeper level, they also spoke to the final indeterminacy of racial categorization itself. The poems of the Tongan and Filipina freshmen sounded almost indistinguishable from those of the Black freshmen, and the enthusiastic reception they garnered from the class showed that they were accepted. When Damon asked of Jackie, "Are you sure you ain't Black?" he was extending an invitation to his Filipina American classmate into his circle, if only for the moment. He was also expanding the capacity of Blackness, as he understood it, to make room for her. It was already capacious enough for Vicki. Additionally, Jasmine's exclusion shows that Blackness was by itself not enough of a common denominator for being welcomed into the social group.

The stereotypes of Black students as oppositional, deviant, and deficient failed, in the end, to account for multiple ways of being Black that Black students attempted to extend to themselves and, remarkably, to non-Black students (like Vicki and Jackie) and non-Black teachers (such as Ms. Moore, the Asian American teacher whom they labeled Black.) I encountered another Just Because poem outside another classroom, stapled on a bulletin board alongside posters proclaiming, "'School Pride!,' 'Do the RIGHT THING' and 'Central High Leadership Presents... TGIF Winter Ball.'" It read:

Just Because I'm black doesn't mean I like rap

My racial identity is not my personality

If I listen to Rock, Metal, or even Blues,

It doesn't mean I'm white, it's just something I choose

Just Because I'm black doesn't mean I'm a criminal

The activities of the minority of my people are not

Derivable.

I'm not defined by my appearance

As I face the struggle of my cultural disappearance.

Just Because I'm black doesn't mean I speak slang

My genetics do not affect my phonetics

I speak proper English because that's how I'm taught

Your ignorance causes you to be a bigot.

Do you really think color means everything?

If so, you're naïve enough to believe anything.

Black is not my label.

As I stood in the hallway considering the poem's bald acknowledgement of racial stereotypes, I weighed my observations about racial stratification in the social structure of the school, the disproportionate academic marginalization and failure among Black students, and the general pattern of Asian American academic and social ascendance (measured by metrics, such as grades and participation in "leadership activities," that were valued by gatekeepers at the school). The words, "I face the struggle of my cultural disappearance" rang true as I read them. On the bulletin board, next to the "Just Because" poem, the exhortations of "Do the RIGHT THING" and "School Pride!" seemed tone deaf. The flier about the Winter Ball, organized by the academically and socially elite, predominantly Asian American Leadership class, felt out of place. Yet, the discomfiting juxtaposition of artwork from a student at "the bottom of the well" and the surrounding environment of optimism on the part of administrators and teachers about Asian American students' successes was quite the point, because as I argued in Ch. 3, the latter often justified the former. For Black students, Blackness was a social fact that encompassed the experience of inequality, stratification, and (in many cases) alienation that stemmed from an abiding expectation of inferiority.

As I will show, even multiracial students who seemed to successfully bridge the segregated domains of school life spoke directly about the expectation of inferiority.

The Fluidity and Durability of Race: Multiracial Black-Asian Students

In *Pure Beauty*, King-O'Riain (2006) writes, the "mixed-race body invites us to examine more carefully [the concept of] race work" precisely because it does not signify its attenuated importance socially and politically. Neither does it "destroy racism, but leads to a re-politicization and problematization of race" (p. 22). In this section, I turn to how multiracial students were encountered and assessed in light of conceptions of Blackness at CHS. I focus on Max and Jason, students whose narratives capture how race as social category and as identity is fluid, contextual, ascribed, and contested. Their experiences also convey the multiple tensions and possibilities associated with being multiracial Black and Asian at CHS.

At the surface level, these bright, confident, seemingly happy and socially very high profile students seemed to "fit in" across racially stratified spaces. However, Jason and Max both communicated a profound sense of being unaccepted and feeling like outsiders. There was a remarkably open quality that they shared, which made them popular with groups that were socially distinct and distant from one another. However, their open-ness seemed to help them thrive at CHS not because, but in spite of, a reciprocal level of welcome. This is important, because teachers and staff suggested that students be the ones to go outside their comfort zones to change the demographics and dynamics of racially homogeneous spaces.

Success in terms of gaining popularity among Asian American students often extended into academic success, since those social bonds made high-track academic spaces less hostile and threatening for the Black and Latino students who were minorities within them. The onus of "being a seed" of change was truly placed upon individual students, the most successful of whom

found ways to “be a bridge” and “accept people” even as they were cognizant of their own rejection. As these narratives show, what was being rejected at the school was the social fact of Blackness.

Max was an outgoing, charming, and often goofy senior who possessed a booming voice, was tall with broad shoulders and had the build of a football player. (He was on the football team and previously played on the basketball team as well.) I first learned that he was multiracial in Leadership class, when someone asked me if I spoke Chinese. Max overheard, and began counting animatedly from one to ten in Mandarin, showing off his Chinese language skills. I later learned that his mother was half Black and half Chinese and his father was Black. His maternal grandparents were the first interracial couple at their high school. Responding to a question about how he racially identified, Max said:

I identify myself as bi-racial. I mean, looking at me, you'd be like, ok, I'm Black, but I like to call myself bi-racial. Of course, they assume I'm Black... but most of them know I'm mixed, too. [Growing up] truthfully, I thought of myself as Black.

Jason's father was Black and his mother was from the Philippines. As with Max, I was not immediately aware of his Asian heritage. He was slim and conveyed a haphazard sense of style, with a slight Afro that was more the result of inattention than an aesthetic choice. He was soft-spoken and had a disarming smile. When I interviewed him, he was the president of the student body at CHS. I once met his family at an evening showcase of students' video projects for the immigration unit of their AP US History class. Jason and his family had just returned from the Philippines the previous day, where they had been visiting relatives. Max, on the other hand, spoke of his grandmother and mother being “cast out” from the Chinese side of his family after his grandmother married her Black high school sweetheart.

Both were charismatic and very popular, but in different ways and with different groups. While Max mixed seamlessly with the mostly Black students who congregated at the top of the staircase at the main intersection of hallways to socialize during passing periods and afterschool, Jason was reliably found with the Asian American crowd that took charge of school events; for example, he was often one of the only non-Asians who helped organize and showed up for events like the student-teacher dodge ball game (for Homecoming week) and the Teacher Appreciation Lunch (when students catered a staff lunch with home-cooked meals).

Both students claimed that Asian American students had a dominant position in the school. When I asked Max why he joined Leadership class the previous school year, he said he wanted to change the racial composition of the group because of its influence in the school more broadly:

Primarily, I joined it at first for a goofy reason, well maybe it's not a goofy reason. I joined it because I felt they didn't have enough color in that class and enough opinion from the colored people. A lot of the stuff around the school is really Asian-dominated... And you have a lot of different types of races, but everything around the school, at least a majority of things at school seem to be real Asian-oriented.

Similarly, Jason pointed out, “Asians are the dominant group. They're the ones that have the power in the school... It comes across with clubs like Kiwins, Key Club, National Honor Society, California Scholarship Federation, those big ones.” Besides serving as President of the

Associated Student Body (student government), he was involved with many of these clubs. Both echoed the common student refrain that “few minorities participated” and that the active students were “mostly Asian.”

Both actively tried to bring more non-Asian Americans into the circle. Jason spoke at length about his role in “bridging the gap,” that is, in getting “minorities” (non-Asian) involved in Leadership and AP classes and in extracurricular events that were sponsored by the Leadership group and the student government. Jason said that involving non-Asians in Homecoming Week and motivating them to attend prom was “tough” because they did not feel they had “input” in these events. Likewise, Max said that non-Asians complained about not having a voice in decision-making at the school, but that it was “partly the fault of us as the other people” for not becoming involved:

They don't want to be different. They felt like it's a waste of time because there already isn't people in there so they feel like they won't make a difference as one or two coming into the class... I tried to drag other Black people in the class. Some people just don't broaden their horizons. The Asian people are accustomed to being in Leadership class and stuff like that. So it's almost kind of like an expectation within the Asian circle and community to be in Leadership class and this type. As far as with the Black people, it's more about sports, catting off with some girl. Not necessarily saying one is better, but you don't really hear Asians complaining about sports, so don't complain about Leadership if you never speak, never give a voice. People always complain about Leadership class but they don't have something to say until the end result.

For both boys, membership “inside” Asian-American dominated spaces was conditional upon certain ways of being that were identified with Asian-ness. They spoke through their own experiences in ways that revealed that the issue of belonging was tied to race. For instance, a belief that Max shared in common with his Asian American classmates was the idea that students had the responsibility to speak up to make their voices heard in steering important elements of student life, but his narrative demonstrates that the legibility of such voices related to how the bodies that spoke them were perceived:

It would be hard to believe, a lot of the Asian students in Leadership class not necessarily—I mean, fear sounds bad, but—they feared me. I'm 6'1", I'm 230lbs. I've gotten angry at people in that class, not for no reason, and they were real defensive. I don't want to generalize, but particularly with the Asian people, they tend to take a little of what you say to heart. In that class particularly... They'll look down on you in a condescending way, kind of like they're better than you because of whatever... They do fear Black people to a point and other races to a point of stereotypes, really. That's what it comes down to: what they hear about Black people and how the school portrays people, as far as the students in the school.

Max spoke extensively about racialized fear, peer valuations of his worth, and how he contended with stereotypes that circulated at school and in the broader society. In the following quote, Max demonstrated keen insight into how others saw him and adroitly noted that the way they saw him foreclosed a fair assessment of his ideas. In his view, his Asian American

classmates “tagged” or associated him with a certain type (a threatening and intellectually inferior Black male), and in so doing, foreclosed the possibility that his opinions could “make sense.” Max recognized that his Asian American peers, whom he considered to be friends, positioned themselves in hierarchical relation to him:

The media portrays Black people as violent, anger-filled, thieves, murderers, stuff like that. I'm totally the opposite of that, but people just look at me, the people in our class look at me and they don't view me as their equal. You know, not smart. I know for certain that people in that class don't view me as equal. We have these open discussions... I'll say something... you can look around the room and you can see these looks like, “Why is he even talking? That doesn't make sense.” They put what I say in their mind, tag it to me, and say, “It can't make sense because he's saying it.”

Jason also raised the issue of belonging in our interview. Explaining that he was the only Black student in his junior year calculus class, he said, “I had to find my own way in Calculus. People have already made their preconceptions, they've already made their friends, so sometimes there's no way to go.” I interjected that I noticed that his friends were mostly Asian American and that in fact, a Vietnamese American girl described Jason and another Black male student, Peter (they were perhaps the only two consistent Black male members of the Science Academy), by saying, “I put them into the Asian category, they are really *nice* and they are really *involved*, and they hang out a lot with mostly Asians.” In fact, Jason asserted that his Asian American peers referred to him as Asian “all the time,” explaining that this was based on his friendship choices and his behavior:

I hang around with mostly Asians and don't act the stereotypical African American way, like maybe ghetto, talking a certain way, the preconceived notion of what African American is in Central nowadays: just reckless, rowdy, the type that causes havoc, just crazy, the type of person that doesn't go to school all the time, walking around the hallways, causing chaos, who doesn't really care about what's going on.

This narrative shows that Jason was racialized by his peers as Asian by being *not Black*. He socialized with friends who were Asian American, not Black, and behaved in ways that were not associated with the “stereotypical African American.” On the other hand, Jason said that Black students similarly told him, “You're not really Black.” When I asked Jason how he felt when he saw that the Black students at his school were not doing very well academically, his response spoke to the psychic cost of succeeding while others were left behind. It also spoke to a tension associated with being multiracial, of identifying with two “sides:”

It's difficult. It's quite hard to look at, because you want to see everyone do well. You want to see your own people do well. It's tough to see that you have one side do well and you don't have the other side doing well. It's frustrating.

As is evident in the quotes highlighted above, Jason and Max (like other students, including Trinh, quoted in the previous chapter) elided the terms “minority” or “colored people” and “non-Asian.” Tacitly, they understood minorities to be those groups that wielded the least influence and control over school and student life: Blacks and Latinos. Asian Americans were understood to fit another, unspecified category. Speaking of his friends, Jason said that Asian

Americans were stereotyped as “nerds, they stick to themselves. Everyone thinks Asians don’t like Black people.” Max pointed out that (real or perceived) academic superiority conferred a feeling of superiority among Asian American students relative to Black students:

Black people are violent, ignorant, stupid, disrespectful, they don’t listen, stuff like that. With Latinos, graffiti, guns, violent. I don’t really know too much about them. There are stereotypes with Asians, too: uppity, snooty, bourg-y , meaning they’re from the same place we are but they act like they’re not. They’ll act like they live in Beverly Hills, but you stay down the street from me. You come off as if you’re better than Black people because you have a 3.9 GPA... The Asian people in the class, I consider them my friends, even the ones who don’t look at me as their equal. I know how to accept people.

Students of all racial backgrounds broke the rules, but Black students were indeed often guilty of misbehaving in ways that were highly visible. They impeded others’ learning through their actions in the hallways or in class, and/or created a palpably unsafe environment. Often, it was other Black as well as non-Black students who disapproved of their behavior and vocalized the wish that things could be different. For example, Jason said he saw teachers “disrespected” by students, and it was “always black people” who were the guilty party. “Don’t act like the stereotype,” he said.

Jason, whose family home was located in a predominantly Black neighborhood of East Central and who previously lived in a rented apartment in a more Asian-populated neighborhood closer to the school, made sense of Black students’ “aggressive” behavior in relation to two factors. He believed that students drew upon different “survival” strategies and sets of understandings about other racial groups to navigate life both within and outside of CHS. He saw these locally specific behaviors and beliefs as sources of conflict at the school. Second, he saw Black students’ acts of aggression as assertions of worth. This implies a context, at school and within the larger society, in which Black youth held a defensive posture against imputed inferiority:

A lot of people take the bus from East Central and West Central. It’s hard for everyone to come together. People learn to be aggressive to survive and then they bring it to school... Some of the Asians don’t realize we all have the same struggles. We live in the same community... [African Americans from East and West Central] are not used to being around all these people, so then they’re not comfortable. African Americans might feel like being a bully because it’s the only way to feel like they’re not inferior, like to be comfortable... They’re not used to seeing a lot of Asians, a lot of Latinos, all in one place... So they might act out, act aggressive.

While Jason maintained that students struggled to come together because of the differences and prejudices they carried with them into school, he nonetheless believed that the school needed to play a role in dismantling racial stereotypes. “[Stereotypes], a lot of it’s from families, media, word of mouth, in the community, a lot of it comes from outside. That’s why history needs to be taught in schools.” Jason said that his father told him that he needed to “make it” in spite of an African American history of slavery and racism. When I asked if he believed his Asian American peers grasped a sense of that history, he answered no and spoke about his

difficulty with fitting in: “Some people think it’s easy, but it’s tough... I still can’t find a group sometimes. Sometimes they just don’t want an African American in the group.”

This response was particularly remarkable because Jason seemed so thoroughly liked, accepted, and at home with the “power elite” of the student body (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1998). As a multiracial Black-Asian member of a socially exclusive group that was almost uniformly Asian American, he was one of the few students who teachers, administrators, and other students suggested I speak with, because of his role as an ambassador for a diverse school. As he previously stated, his job was to “bridge the gap.” Yet, as my conversations with both Jason and Max, two of the multiracial Black students who stood out the most as active participants in Asian American-dominated spaces show, the strain on that bridge was significant.

Environmental Constraints to Black Students’ Agency

Administrators, teachers, and staff failed to address racially stark educational inequalities, ultimately validating and affirming the status quo of existing categorization and hierarchy.⁴⁹ As I showed in Ch. 2, adults largely reproduced broad stereotypes that denigrated Black students rather than challenge or problematize them and took for granted mechanisms, such as tracking and dumping, that racially stratified the student body. In this section, I will discuss school climate, student-staff interactions, and academic trajectories to highlight the relationship of environmental constraints to Black students’ agency.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon wrote, “It will be seen that the black man’s alienation is not an individual question” (Fanon, 1967, p. 11). Black students were widely recognized as occupying a subordinate position in the school’s academic hierarchy. Their academic marginalization bled over into social marginalization (with a feedback loop), and among some, into a feeling of alienation from school life and goals. As I will show, the question of whom or what was responsible for their academic struggles, social marginalization and alienation from school articulated tensions surrounding discourses of individual responsibility, students’ cultural backgrounds, and caring.

As with all students at CHS, the school’s limited resources curtailed Black students’ sense of personal efficacy. Unlike Asian American students, Black students’ agency was not bolstered by privileges that accrued from the model minority myth. Instead, an oppositional minority discourse mediated Black students’ negotiation of the academic and socio-cultural world of school. This meant, for instance, that when a class was almost filled to capacity, an Asian American student was more likely to be given “the benefit of a doubt” and admitted than was a Black student (see the example of Mr. Walter’s class, in Ch. 2). Black students’ sense of personal agency and institutional belonging were also constrained in subtler ways, as the following narrative illustrates.

One Monday morning in June, I noticed that the school gates along the main street were closed. This was not infrequently the case. A security guard prevented students who arrived in the middle of the period from entering until the next bell rang. The gates, like classroom doors that divided instructional sites from hallways, were a clear marker of domains. They separated the world of school from that of the street. A couple dozen students waited, sitting or standing near the gates. Most were Black or Latino. I considered whether the school was trying to prevent trouble by clearing hallways of tardy students, since an art teacher recently informed me that the end of the year saw increased fights and “kids acting up” because “they think they can get away with anything because it’s the end of the school year.”

I recognized a Black girl from Ms. Moore's ninth grade English class who had earned a reputation for aggression. She headed towards school and then walked away from it and off campus, after being turned away by the security guard. It was only the start of her high school career, and things were not going well. After identifying myself to the security guard, I was allowed past the front gates. A banner created by students in the art academy hung in a corridor at the main entrance to the school. It featured a woman and an elementary school-aged girl sitting together. They held a placard that read, "High Court Bans Segregation in Public Schools." On the right side of the banner was a poem, written by one of the art students:

Education not the same as it used to be

Barely got teachers, thank God it's free

Packed classes to capacity

There's barely enough space for me

Budget cuts ain't doing nothing

But causing chaos

Got teachers bumbin'

Now they got students barely

Even comin'

As I stood copying down the words to this poem, a skinny Black male student carefully swung open a door that separated the world of school from the teacher's parking lot and the city beyond, and darted his head into the hallway. He craned his neck to scope out the space, coyly peeking up and down and reminding me of a spy. Then, he swiftly ran back out towards the asphalt and gravel lot. Without exception and no matter what time of day I arrived at CHS, I noticed students walking in the opposite direction, away from the school. I wondered where they, like the intriguing boy who appeared as a spy, were going and what drove or drew them away. The poem that hung on the wall at the entrance of the school provided a partial explanation.

It signaled structural conditions that negatively impacted students' educational experiences, including budget cuts, overcrowded classrooms, and faculty attitudes. It plainly noted that some students responded to these conditions by turning from the world of school ("*Now they got students barely / Even comin'*"). My observations agree with the poet's analysis: I got the sense that for failing students and those dangling close to the edge of failure, their truancy, tendency to hang out in the hallways, and even the arguments and other micro-level contests they had with adults could be interpreted not only as signs of disengagement, but of a volitional response to marginalization and alienation.

They were not *only* self-destructive reactions; it was possible that they were also reasonable responses to the belief (whether true or false) that there was *nothing there for them*. If a student considered him or herself to be a lost cause *and* adult gatekeepers at the school reinforced that belief (or students believed they did so), then "disengagement" could appear to be a logical course of action. A Black junior named Areon summed this up neatly, saying, "Me personally, I think I need more motivation. Like, a reason." When asked to elaborate, she added,

I like school. I like to learn. But if I'm not getting anything out of it, if I'm not seeing a reason for me to be there, my whole attitude will completely change. I'll just be like, whatever. So I kind of like, I don't see the point of it. Because me personally, I don't care about the grades, I want to learn. I like knowing stuff. I'm smart, but I don't know the basics. I have concepts in my mind and I can figure it out, but I need to be a little more strong on the basics.

Areon told me that the “basics” that she referred to, which needed strengthening, included “spelling” and “multiplication.” Black students like Areon generally recognized education to be a path of upward mobility, but often, its footholds were out of reach. Black students’ performance on standardized tests showed that they had the special burden of making sense of racialized patterns at the school from the perspective of the bottom. An index of student performance was the Adequate Yearly Progress score earned by the school, as reported to the California Department of Education. In 2011, 24% of Black students were at or above proficiency for English-Language Arts compared to 59% of Asian American students and 31% of Latino students. In math, 17% of Black students met or exceeded proficiency, compared with 71% of Asians and 36% of Latinos.

Another index of student learning was the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). CAHSEE passage rates for CHS were on average higher than those of the district.⁵⁰ However, according to a school report, Black students constituted the only group whose passage rates did not improve compared to previous years:

Of all students that took the CAHSEE (all grades)... African American students' scores need to improve in both ELA and math. All other significant in number ethnicity groups continue to improve in both.

While 88% of Asian Americans passed the math portion and 74% passed the English Language-Arts (ELA) portion of the CAHSEE, only 48% of Blacks passed the math portion and only 51% passed the English Language-Arts portion of the test.

Finally, the Academic Performance Index (API) scores for students at CHS exhibited the same stark stratification: according to the report, “In the last 3 years API for all students has increased except for African American students and English language learners.” For the 2010-2011 school year, the API scores of Blacks was 520; Asian Americans (non English Language Learners) scored 740; and Latinos had a 607 API score. When I spent time with Mr. Garcia, a Spanish teacher, during his prep period one day, he showed me a piece of paper with this data. “Look at this,” he said, shaking his head. “Maybe something we’re doing is not right.”

The academic struggle of Black students at CHS was real, deepened by the sharp inequality of academic outcomes among Black and Asian American students, which mirrored trends in the district. As I wrote in Ch. 2, CHS was seen as a “good school” or “better school” than others in the district. The perception of its relatively good standing was not based on the experiences or academic progress of students as a whole—and definitely not of Black students—but was based on the “success” of Asian American students. (As I argue in Ch. 3, the true measure of Asian American students’ success needs to be qualified.) There was a striking incongruity in the official rhetoric of supporting all youth and the less equitable reality of racially stratified academic performance.

How did Black students act to co-produce racial categories in the face of overt stratification and obvious inequality? How did they respond to features of the educational environment that seemed to them to set them up to fail, and then how did they assimilate high

rates of failure among Black students into their understandings of themselves and of others as racial subjects? The following narratives about student-adult interactions provide a partial description of how students made sense of racialized inequality.

At the start of the school year, I stepped into the classroom of Ms. Duncan, a popular teacher with decades of experience teaching at CHS. I met her the previous spring, in the course of fieldwork I conducted before the summer break. Three Black female students surrounded her desk, including a girl named Queen whom I met in a history class. Ms. Duncan asked if I was returning to do more research. I said yes, and told them I was back after recently getting married. She and the other girls came close to look at my engagement ring, saying, “Ooh! You have a good husband, you keep him.” At that moment, a very serious looking tall Black man walked by the door. He observed hall stragglers as Ms. Duncan shouted hello.

“It’s a simple concept,” he said by way of a greeting. “Keep students in their classroom.” “How about this,” Ms. Duncan countered, “*Teach* students in their classrooms.” Queen remarked, “Teachers here don’t be teaching.” Another girl added, “If they really taught, students wouldn’t leave.” The man, who turned out to be a new vice principal, responded, “If I wasn’t learning, I’d leave, too.” He entered the room and walked over to look out at the view of the parking lot, trees, and city beyond. “Everyone likes to look at my view,” Ms. Duncan commented. He left, and Ms. Duncan told me that her classes were much more crowded this year, even though overall school enrollment had decreased. Her third period held 44 students. She leaned in to share that she actually liked the bigger classes, because students were quieter, better behaved, and produced better quality work in them. “I think they’re afraid that I’ll kick them out because they know there isn’t enough space.”

This interaction crystallizes how student truancy and disengagement were issues that were linked to the recognition, on the part of students as well as teachers and staff, that the material resources of classroom membership were limited. Ms. Duncan described students’ fear of being kicked out positively, believing it spurred productivity and better behavior. However, the competition for limited resources had the overall effect of discouraging students, particularly those who already had tenuous feelings of membership and belonging at CHS.

For adults and youth alike, Black student engagement was wrapped up in a highly racialized discourse of “trying.” Yet, this interaction surfaced the connection between disengagement and alienation. Some students’ believed that there was “nothing there” for them, either in terms of the curriculum, relationships with adults and more pro-school classmates, or their identification with schooling as a valuable part of their life trajectories. The “nothingness” that was so unmooring for academically marginal students, a heavily disproportionate percentage of whom were Black, had as much to do with their sense of having been rejected by elements of school culture as it did their rejection of appropriate school norms and expectations, such as attending class on time and completing assignments.

For many of these students, the school day was invariably filled with poorly managed classes where minimal teaching and learning occurred. In Ch. 2, I described classes that were widely perceived and experienced as marginal spaces. These were disproportionately populated with Black and Latino students. Administrators, teachers, and staff were aware of these “dumping ground” classes, and actively tried to steer me away from observing in them. Ms. Duncan and the vice principal’s comments excepted, the dominant emphasis among teachers and staff was students’ perceived rejection of schooling rather than a school structure that bifurcated “good” and “bad” students into “good” and “bad” classes with “good” and “bad” teachers.

One student told me that her teacher, Ms. Conner, was “ashamed” to have me observe in her class because of the behavioral issues that she predicted would arise (the teacher identified Black students as the source of those issues). They were classes the students experienced as empty time. When I asked a Black student named Nick when he was available to be interviewed, he responded that he was free during a period that I knew him to have class. That class (taught by Mr. Oparah and described in Ch. 2) had a reputation for the lack of learning that took place: “Fifth period chemistry. We don’t do anything in there.” In Nick’s eyes, there would be little to miss in refraining from attending class, because instruction and classroom management were so poor.

Cammie, a Black senior, described the “play atmosphere” of her chemistry class, taught by a Black teacher named Mr. Jones. In this example, motivation was clearly linked to academic efficacy, whether or not students felt confident that learning the instructional material was within their grasp. The chemistry class lacked a “learning structure” that could facilitate academic efficacy:

It’s a play atmosphere. It’s just that everybody is talking and it’s like there is no structure, so there’s no learning structure. So it’s like you don’t really care, no one really cares. No one really understands. I’ll ask someone, “Girl, do you understand this?” “No.” So ok, we are all at this table and no one understands how to do the work... One person does the paper and everyone just copies, and that’s the whole day.

Knowing her own weaknesses, Cammie craved structure and discipline, which she did not receive: “I know right from wrong, I know what I’m doing. It’s not like I don’t know what I’m doing. But at the same time, I need you to put that discipline on me. Like, ‘You’re doing this, stop doing it.’”

These structural conditions, located in the school environment rather than individuals, also limited students’ agency as they negotiated racialization. Maya, the out-spoken student whose early exposure to race consciousness came from her Black Panther relative, shared why she believed Black students were “cutting” class. She contended that her peers submitted to a loss of “hope”:

Well, I think they cut class because they’re falling behind, they don’t know the material, and they don’t care. They’ve given up hope because of what’s happened to them already. They get bad grades in the ninth grade, so they give up in the tenth grade. [They think] ‘I can never make that up, I can never do better, I already messed up, so it’s too late.’

Black students’ lack of ownership over or hopefulness about their academic trajectories and identities was simply seen by adults—if it was seen at all—as a problem of personal motivation.

This narrative demonstrates that the discourse of “trying” and of personal motivation was reflected in Black students’ own perspectives. There was a stated feeling among some students that their academic identities were set in stone through earlier experiences. I believe Maya’s insight was incisive. Her analysis reached the heart of the relationship between categorization and self-efficacy or academic motivation. From her perspective, Black students were seen as unworthy of positive attention. She recognized the damage of negative attention. Her comment touched upon the power of the educational environment, including the classroom setting and

teachers' express faith or lack of faith in students, to influence if and when students *gave up hope*.

In some cases, students like Maya mediated racialization by critically confronting the limitations of the school environment. In other cases, Black students internalized the dominant discourse of personal accountability to make sense of their own and others' academic experiences. They not only faulted themselves for their struggles, but also placed the locus of concern on individual students in order to make sense of the large academic gap between Black and other students. In actuality, learning and racialization were coterminous with each other, and neither process was individual, but was intrinsically jointly personal and institutional.

Nick's classroom experience serves as an example of how learning and racialization combined in the partnership of personal and institutional influences. Describing Black students, he made the statement (quoted earlier), "We not all the same." One of eight children, Nick was tall, wore glasses, and was friendly and engaging. He was involved in Leadership class Life Beats, a "rap-as-therapy" afterschool program run by an agency in the school's Wellness Center. Up until the year in which I interviewed him, he was a self-described "D student." At the start of his senior year, he underwent a dramatic turn-around. Trying to get at the heart of what made the difference for him, I asked Nick whether or not people at school and in his personal life intervened to help him alter his course throughout the years. They had, he said, but without real effect. It was not until the current school year that something "clicked." He explained:

I will be honest, when I looked on my schedule and it said AP literature, I would say, "oh man." I just got excited, so I just, I guess I was just really going to do the work. I guess because at that time I would say that I had an AP class, it made me feel really good. I was going around bragging and saying, "I failed English for like 3 years and now look what. [laughs]

Nick felt pride in telling others that he was enrolled in an AP class, but he was also proud that he *was* an AP student. A designation on his schedule (and ultimately, his transcript) identified him as a certain type of student, one who took high-level classes. This prompted him to see himself as a high-level student. That the difference in how Nick saw himself was dependent, to a high degree, on how the school saw him, is critically important because tracking according to achievement level (at this and most public schools), was both pervasive and racially stratified. The resulting social structure intensified divisions between high and low achieving students, racializing them in opposite normative directions. At CHS, Black and Latino students were disproportionately enrolled in low-level classes and excluded from higher-level classes, either because of lack of academic preparation, self-selection, or a lack of welcome from teachers, counselors, administrators and peers. Like Nick, students in low-level classes sometimes understood themselves to *be* low-level students.

As I wrote earlier, there were many types of Black students, and many ways of being Black. The most conspicuous ones were those who broke the stereotype and those who vigorously reinforced them by defying the rules. The latter students were widely labeled in ways that signified rebelliousness, rejection, and failure. Nick fell somewhere in between. When Ms. Meier recruited him into Leadership class, he was similarly surprised that she desired his participation in that high-status space. He said that when she asked him to join, "it was weird." When I asked why it was strange, he replied, "Because it was like, 'Oh man, she actually wants me in her class.'" He did not initially see himself as the type of student who belonged in Leadership. After he was scheduled for an AP English class, he began to see himself differently

and to act differently. By the time our conversation occurred, he reportedly raised his overall GPA by an entire letter grade to a 2.6. Yet, though his experience exemplified the powerful relationship of academic motivation to social categorization and labeling, he did not think about this relationship explicitly or use it to make sense of the behaviors and academic trajectories of his peers. Nick commented that he could not understand why Black students who congregated in the hallways did not attend class.

In response to the question, “What is CHS like?” students often discussed relationships with teachers. In the preceding example, decisions to include Nick in classes like AP and Leadership motivated his success. Alternately, when an unorganized teacher failed to credit him for completed work, the fragility of his academic confidence became evident. Nick was motivated by his new academic identity as an AP student, so he completed a batch of late assignments. He told me that he psyched himself up, thinking, “Oh yeah, I’m about to get me a ‘B.’” Instead, he was disappointed to receive a ‘C’ grade, “because Ms. Rand lost all my work”:

Nick: Some teachers make it easy for the kids, they stay organized, while some other teachers are unorganized so you have to be organized for them, and then you might pass in some work and they might lose it, say you never turned it in.

Yenhoa: Have you had that experience?

Nick: Yes. Yes, I have had that happen, I got discouraged for a while, too. I almost gave up. [laughs] ...I wanted to give up on graduating, for a second. It was like the whole thing, I really wanted to give up because, I wasn’t used to doing work, I was used to like sitting back, letting everyone do they work and me talking in class. That was me. So I wanted to go back to that, it was so much easier, so much easier just to sit there.

While it’s probable that students sometimes complained about missing work that they did not, in fact hand in, it was also clear that some of their complaints were valid. Ms. Rand (Demisha and Phoenix’s economics teacher) was particularly notorious for her disorganization, aggressive classroom management, and openly racist stereotyping of students. I witnessed firsthand her cavalier attitude towards certain students, so it was conceivable that Nick’s narrative was sincere. This passage illuminates how an internal shift in identification can tilt upward or downward, dependent simply on a teacher’s encouragement to join an upper level class, on the one hand, and a teacher’s failure to give due credit or the benefit of a doubt to a student, on the other.

Black students also described situations in which the racialized structural conditions of their educational environment limited their agency in defining themselves as students and as racial beings. Naomi and Destiny talked in depth about being discouraged by teachers and feeling alienated from school. For them, high school graduation was a goal cherished by their families, but it was not a guaranteed one. Each story of discouragement was accompanied by a complaint related to race. Naomi, the same student who said, “I am Black, but I’m not,” expressed profound dissatisfaction with her experience at CHS:

I’m just tired of being here at this school. I feel like I should have gone to a better school, the teachers make me like, quit trying. Just like no matter how hard you try, it’s like they are working against you... I noticed I get a better grade if I don’t try. Sometimes it makes me think, “Am I slow? Am I dumb?”

You're supposed to be graded based off the work. The teachers here base grades off of personal things, if they like a student.

When I asked Naomi for a supporting example of what she meant by her last statement, she told me about her senior project, which asked, "Does diabetes affect African Americans more than Caucasian Americans?" It was unclear to Naomi exactly why, but her teacher "failed her," she said, because her closing argument was "racist" and unsupported. "With the senior projects, it feels like they're purposely making us fail." This episode is an example of a missed opportunity for teachers and students with regard to racially imbued interactions. Naomi's project evinced an interest in race and health that should have been fostered and utilized, a potentially fruitful starting point for a dialogue about a pressing topic for which there was otherwise little room in the formal curriculum. Ultimately, Naomi revised her senior paper, which enabled her to pass the senior project requirement (requisite for graduation).

Another example of how Black students' views of their educative selves were influenced by a racializing school environment could be found in Destiny. A dark-skinned, tall, and pretty newcomer, she transferred to CHS from a high school in a smaller, neighboring city about seven months prior to our interview (midway through the academic year). She said her mother was "very sick" in the hospital, which caused her to miss class often. She spoke wistfully of her old school, where she felt more at home. When I recognized her and greeted her by name in the hallways, I could tell that those small gestures mattered to her. Like Nick, Destiny's view of her academic self depended to a degree upon how adults saw her.

In her very first week at the school, Destiny had a heated misunderstanding with Mr. Christianson, a young, White, male science teacher that led to a meeting in the principal's office (and ultimately, a limited apology from the teacher). According to Destiny's telling, she needed to leave class to deal with her mother's hospitalization, but the teacher, who assumed that she was acting defiantly, escalated the situation in front of the entire class. Like Nick, she talked about grades in a way that was self-defining. She contested the type of student Mr. Christianson and other teachers at CHS perceived her to be, saying, "Why do I have a 'D'? I'm not a 'D' student. I'm not a problem child." Also like Nick, Destiny was especially discouraged when her altered behavior nonetheless resulted in low grades:

So I started doing my homework all the time, turning in every assignment, started asking questions when I wasn't understanding, sometimes staying alone after the bell. That's what I did this time and I got a 'D,' I probably have a 'D' right now. But like, when you typing all the assignments, and [the teacher] is still like "I don't know, maybe [you have] a 'C'" -- I just left. Like, it's up to the school. I don't care.

Clearly, negative interactions with teachers reduced her sense of self-efficacy ("it's up to the school. I don't care") and her sense of belonging at the school. When I inquired if she considered explaining her increased efforts with the teacher, she replied, "I'd probably still get the same result, which would make me more upset, more angry, than what I was to begin with, so I was like, I'm just going to back off." I saw examples of teachers' harmfully low expectations for students, but as with this example, I also witnessed struggling students attenuate expectations that their educators would live up to the job.

Her previous school, Destiny said, had "more spirit." She did not feel that she was a part of CHS. Indeed, I never saw her with more than one or two friends, and she was not involved in any extracurricular activities. Destiny stated that teachers positively stereotyped and favored

Asian American students, but saw Black students as unworthy of their help. She took this as evidence that teachers “don’t care”:

They don't care, they really don't... Like, sometimes, the teacher is like, it may be a bunch of Asians and like some Black people, the teacher will pay attention and help out the Asians more and stuff like that, compared with maybe the Black person who is struggling, who needs a little motivation and won't give it to him... [The Asians are] probably going to get an A, probably going to listen, probably going to get it faster, something like that compared to Blacks, they're not going to do it anyways, or why bother even explaining, or something like that. Half of these kids, all they need is a little motivation from their teachers, that's all...

I found that the notion of caring at CHS was salient but confounding. Out of frustration that her improved efforts went unnoticed, Destiny stated in the preceding passage, “it’s up to the school. I don’t care.” Later, she said of teachers, “They don’t care, they really don’t.” From her perspective, teachers were more involved in disciplining students than in caring about them. In another telling example, Daisy, a Black student who transferred from another high school in the district, told me she “cut class” at both schools because teachers did not “act like” they “care.” I asked her to why she skipped school. She explained:

Do you want the real answer? It's a power thing. You're the teacher. You're supposed to be in command. If you act like you don't care, we're not gonna care either. We just need the support. If I see that you're serious about me, then it's different. The littlest things make a big difference.

In her ethnography of Mexican-American students in a high school, Valenzuela (1999) argues that teachers and students work from conflicting ideas of caring: “teachers expect students to *care about* school in a technical fashion before they care for them, while students expect teachers to *care for* them before they care about school” (p. 83). At CHS, the Asian-Black racial binary was suffused with competing notions of caring and misaligned assumptions about *who* cares, through what forms. As I argued in Ch. 3, Asian American students often received extra attention and the benefit of a doubt from adults, who tended to presume that Asian American students cared about their educational trajectories, although there were clear examples of Asian American students who were “falling through the cracks” academically. In contrast, adult staff members were quicker to state that certain Black students in particular did not “care about school” or their own educations. As I will show, some students also echoed these beliefs.

The racial dynamics of *this* school were organized along the fold of an Asian-Black binary. The experiences of students, more so than the adults who worked at the school, were contoured by the normative demands of the binary. However, as the previously quoted student voices demonstrate, the race work (King-O’Riain, 2006) that produced and sustained this binary was not only an institutional one. Right alongside teachers, administrators, and staff, young people engaged in everyday practices and discourses that gave shape to what race means. In the next section, I explore Black student agency with regard to racialization and stereotyping.

Black Students and the Production of Race: Meaning-Making, Racialization and Stereotyping

As with Asian American students, the hierarchal social structure of the school environment intersected with Black students' efforts to act as agents of their own and others' race-making, to make sense of what it could mean to be Black at CHS and innovate new forms of meaning. I found that Black students actively participated in co-constructing racial categories and were involved in policing and reinforcing the boundaries of Blackness. They were volitional in limited but remarkable efforts to resist, transgress, and otherwise disrupt racial categories. Perhaps the most significant form of Black students' agency included their capacity to make personally resonant and valuable meanings—some of which were helpful and others of which were harmful—out of the dominant oppositional minority trope.

Black students' views of race, stereotypes, and other students reveal the nuance and complexity of their experience of racialization. For the most part, students generally began our interview sessions by telling me that they did not observe much racism at the school, especially as it occurred among students. This was also true among Black students. However, as we moved deeper into conversation, they often contradicted and sometimes revised their positions. For example, Destiny stated that she “hasn't really experienced racism,” but when we talked about how her classes were going, she claimed that teachers were biased towards favoring Asian American students.

Students' underdeveloped formulations of racism factored into why conversations about racism unfolded in that way. Naomi, for example, said, “I'm not racist, so I never really thought about racial issues before.” Consider Tationa, a timid Black girl in Leadership class. When I asked her how she defined racism, she vaguely referred to “different foods” commonly associated with various groups as an index of “different cultures.” At the start of our interview, Tationa claimed that “everyone gets along” and “race doesn't matter to me at all.” Then, as she described her observations of violence, distrust, and fear among students, a more racialized understanding became apparent. She stated that Asian Americans may have been afraid of Blacks because “a lot of Asians get picked on.”

When I asked why she believed that happens, she explained that the students who target them “just don't like Asians at all.” When I probed why that may be, she said, “I guess because Asians take over everything, like stores, food...” Tationa alluded to resentment for a group that was perceived to be encroaching upon territory in positions (as local shop and grocery-owners) that were not visibly held by Blacks. She observed self-segregation in the lunchroom, and also explained it in relationship to Asian American students' fear of being targets of violence: “I wonder, I just feel like they really, I think they stay in their own groups because I think they are scared.”

As I demonstrated in chapters 2 and 3, a finding that was consonant across adults and students at CHS was the perception that racial groups lived a segregated existence. The status quo was not one of open racial conflict, but informal segregation. Like the administrators, teachers, and staff, and like Asian American and other students, Black students generally took this segregated dynamic to be naturally occurring. For instance, Destiny believed “that's just how it is”:

With students, it seem like they mostly keep to themselves and their own race... I think that's just the way the school is. Asians go with Asians, Blacks hang with Blacks, I think that's just how it is.

Similarly, Naomi observed, “A lot of races tend to stick together. They don’t try to talk to each other.” While Black students helped normalize segregation through shared assumptions of its naturalness as a method of making meaning, to confront and find their places within the given social reality, the apparently peaceful co-existence belied racial tensions.

Black students like Tationa perceived an undercurrent of Asian American fear of Black students, and others reported resentment of Asians among some Black and Latino students. Maya told me that once she and a friend guessed the ethnic breakdown at the school, writing it on the board: 10% Black, 75% Asian American, 15% Latino. While these numbers were inaccurate, they reveal that Maya and her friend felt overwhelmed by Asian American students and their control over student life. The following quote exemplifies this:

For the most part, it’s all Asian. When people running for prom king or queen, no Black or Latino kids are going to win, because Asians are going to vote for their friends. People just stick together. At lunch, it’s just separated. Yeah, this is a nickname for this school, they call it Asian High... In Leadership (she is not a member of the class), my Black friends say their ideas get overpowered by the Asians in that class... This school basically emphasizes Asian culture in general. Like I said, the Leadership class is mostly Asian. They do all the posters, all the announcements. They’re not going to really say anything about other cultures, they’re going to support their own thing.

Maya reiterated Destiny and Naomi’s views about self-segregation by contending, “people just stick together.” Unlike them, she pinpointed a cause: “This school basically emphasizes Asian culture in general.” She noted that CHS was referred to as “Asian High,” a nickname that indicated non-Asian students’ collective lack of institutional ownership. Yet, while Maya contended that Asian American students in Leadership class “overpowered” the ideas of Black students and “support their own thing,” she also described them as meek: “The Asians at this school are so timid and shy. They speak in a whisper. They probably feel uncomfortable. I don’t know why they’re so shy. I want to ask them.” Other Black students held a more multi-dimensional perception of their Asian American peers. For instance, Destiny named a few “kinds” of Asians:

Like with the Asians it's like there are different kind of Asians, like the ghetto Asians compared to like the real nerdy Asians, compared to the Asians who could barely speak English, like they got their own little [groups]-- I noticed that.

The preceding quote shows that (some) Black students (like some Asian American students) recognized that the boundaries between racial categories (as ideas) and the borders between racial groups (as they were lived in by individuals) were both fluid and durable. Black students demonstrated agency by developing their own views about the racialization that they were involved in and that went on around them. These views did not necessarily resist dominant narratives, and sometimes, they were contradictory. Nonetheless, Black students revealed perspectives that showed them to be active producers of individual and shared meanings regarding race and schooling. For instance, Maya (quoted above), a passionate girl who planned to minor in African American studies, who dressed up as a Black Panther for Halloween, and who said that students cut class because they lost hope, also said the following:

Black kids, I'm not going to lie, most of them are lazy. They don't feel like doing the work. They don't feel like it's necessary. They're not educated about college. Their parents just tell them, "I don't care if you go to college, just get out of my house." They don't want to do the work anyway. They don't want to do the regular work in regular classes, let alone do the work in AP classes. There's only 10 Black kids in AP English. Luckily none of them have an F.

To make sense of Maya's indictment of her peers, it helps to see her in the context of her educational self-making. Maya's schooling experience had the narrative arc of improvement and transformation over time. She told me that during her freshman year, she was arrested. She lived with her grandfather, who was doing drugs, and her uncle, who was drinking. She started selling marijuana at school and on the street because "I didn't have any money. I had to do it because I didn't have any money, even for food." She explained, "Nobody will hire Black kids, really. The people that are hiring, most of them are racist. They think we're not going to do our work, like we're lazy."

Her voice was unwavering as she continued her story. "There was a point in my life I really had to do that. Sell weed or starve, like, I wouldn't have dinner." After she was arrested, she moved in with her grandmother and switched schools. "People who look at me now, they would never imagine what happened." When she transferred to CHS, Maya found that she could spread her wings academically. At her previous school, she said, other Black students did not want to see her "do good." It was "depressing." She said they were "trying to oppress me." They resented her high grades. "They didn't like it, they felt threatened." CHS, she said, was better, though she encountered the same issue. Although she previously said, "people just stick together" (when she was describing Asian American students' tendency to support those of their own racial background), she said of Black people, "we're not sticking together":

It's like, because we're Black—we're not sticking together, we're supposed to be on each other's side, but we're trying to bring each other down. Whenever they see a Black person do something good, they always want to say something bad, like, "She thinks she's better than us." It's really sad.

For Maya, whose experience of rising above her personal circumstances involved embracing both a Black identity (of "Black is beautiful") and an academic identity (of being college-bound), the betrayal by Black friends and peers as she succeeded led her to deep frustration. Maya's suggestion that Black students "are lazy" reflected the widely held belief among teachers and staff that they were reluctant students, unwilling to "step up to the plate" (discussed in Ch. 2). Another Black senior girl, Naomi, expressed a similar but distinct view. She was the same student who claimed to be "Black, but I'm not" and who equated "ghetto" behavior with Black people. Like Maya, she invoked the term "lazy" in discussing Black students. Naomi believed that Asian American students, unlike Black students, went out of their way to make their "voice heard" and to move among racial groups to garner support for their activities:

Naomi: Most of the people who are in charge are the Asians, because they want to do it. African Americans and Mexicans don't want to do that job. They're too lazy.

Yenhoa: You really think that's it?

Naomi: I know for a fact, like I've talked to people. And they say, I was like how come you don't get involved, that's too much work. So how do you expect to have your voice heard and you're not doing anything? There's nothing like that about Asians [inaudible]. They win like things and stuff like that in school. You have to talk to everybody. People who are Black, they get mad if they don't win. They're not known around the school, they don't talk to anybody. They stick to like one crowd. Like you should talk to important people, you can't get anywhere if you don't. So I don't know about that, but it is like they make stereotypes that don't really exist.

Yenhoa: What do you mean?

Naomi: Like they create it in their head. It's not really like that. I don't know how to explain it but they create problems for themselves.

Naomi was convinced that Black students who complained that Asian American students were “in charge” engendered ideas about those students (“stereotypes that don’t really exist”) and summoned “problems for themselves” that were the result of refusing to branch out. In her view, these problems originated within Black students’ attitudes. Her perspective was not unique among the students I interviewed. Maya, Naomi, Nick, Tationa and other Black students expressed a conception of other Black people that was difficult to hear, because of their tendency to reinforce painful stereotypes. Yet behind these expressions, there were notions of what it meant to be Black that were not negative. For example, when I asked Nick if he was proud to be Black, he had this to say:

Nick: Well, not lately, my Black community is pretty messed up you know?

Yenhoa: Why? What do you mean?

Nick: My Black community, you know it may be, you know selling drugs, shooting and stuff, I'm not proud to be part of that, I am not a part of that.

Yenhoa: These are people you know?

Nick: Yeah. Yeah, I know these people. Yeah, in the neighborhood. It be so sad, if they got so much talent... they don't apply themselves.

Nick felt disappointed in the drugs and violence that lately pervaded his neighborhood (“my Black community”), because he had a more ideal vision of what it could and should be. He also saw himself removed from its negativity (“I am not a part of that”). As I noted earlier, he pointed out that “we not all the same.”

I previously asserted that Black students’ academically self-destructive behaviors could be interpreted *not only* as disengagement, but also as a limited form of agency in the face of marginalization and alienation. Black students were often the fiercest critics of their peers, because these behaviors reinforced disparaging meanings of Blackness and diverted teachers’ time and attention. Black students’ attempts to safeguard their already limited learning opportunities were often poignant. For example, a Black sophomore named LeAnn complained, “It’s real frustrating when someone comes in and is interrupting the teacher, being negative. I’m

over here trying to take care of my business. If you not trying, then there's no point in you coming to school."

One of the most troubling things I heard as I elicited Black students' opinions about racialization at the school was the expression that "Black people bring each other down." Maya and Naomi in particular were exponents of this position. Maya stated, "Black people hate on other Black people, always trying to fight each other, always trying to bring each other down." When I countered, "Aren't you perpetuating the stereotype?" she replied,

Most of them do. Ninety percent of the people I know do try to hate on each other. If it was another race, they would be happy for them. My friends don't like it. They think I think I'm better than them. I don't think that. I just think I have a different mindset than them.

In the following passage, Naomi states that other Black girls gave her trouble because she was also Black:

Naomi: A lot of times, I guess because I'm Black, other Black people look at me weird or crazy. Girls just don't like each other, I don't know what it is. African American girls, they like to not get along with people. They're always looking for a problem. They just look at me crazy I guess because I am Black. I don't really let them affect me. [pause] Black people are against each other.

Yenhua: Why? How?

Naomi: Every other race is for each other, trying to help each other. But not Black people. I don't know why. They won't help their race unless they know them.

As I wrote in Ch. 3, a current of competition and distrust of peers and even friends charged through the comments made by Asian American students. The distrust of people outside one's own social group, including classmates and peers of the same race, is echoed in Naomi's views. Naomi's explanation was that "Black people are against each other."

Researchers have sought to understand the thorny problem of Black students' co-participation in the reproduction of their own subordinated positions in school, a reproduction accomplished namely through misbehavior and academic failure. The theory that Black students' low school performance is the result of racialized peer pressure has particular traction in the education literature. Ogbu and Fordham (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu 1978, Fordham, 1996) posit that African American students see peers as "acting white" when they embrace academic knowledge rather than engage in an oppositional culture. For those to whom it applies, "acting white" is a "burden." They distinguished between voluntary minorities and subordinate, caste-like minorities and theorize that for the latter, oppositional youth cultures form as a reaction and adaptation to limited opportunities and to racism in the United States.

At CHS, which was a 99% non-White school, the voluntary minorities (Asian Americans) and involuntary minorities (Blacks) could both hold academic aspirations and identities perceived to be White. (They could also both be perceived as Black.) As I argue in Ch. 3, Asian Americans were seen by students and staff to have the closest cultural proximity to Whiteness, and to act as model minorities was to "act White." Thus for Black students at CHS, "acting White" was conflated with identifying with Asian-ness.

In a critique of this resistance model, Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, (2005) argued that the stigma of academic achievement (“nerdiness”) is generalizable across racial groups, and that it is school structures that racialize the stigma. In other words, structural features of the school, rather than student cultures, activate the “burden of acting White” for Black students. Tyson (2006) writes:

The notion of a relationship between race and achievement, including the idea that excelling in school constitutes acting white, is manufactured in schools, primarily through highly visible institutional patterns of tracking and achievement (p. 57).

Cultural influences alone cannot fully explain the differential achievement of minority students, but neither can socio-structural forces alone. It seems probable that Black students’ “burden of acting White” arises from domains of both structure and culture, in a reinforcing loop between the school and Black student peer groups. Maya and Naomi’s comments, for instance, speak to the interplay of school-based and beyond-school pressures that influenced the racialization of their academic identities by Black peers. In interpreting Maya and Naomi’s comments, it is important to reiterate that racial or ethnic cultural identities and practices do not exist in a racial or ethnic community as unchanging resources, but are socially constructed and are thus inherently fluid and unstable; and moreover, academic production of racial or ethnic ‘cultures’ need to account for the day-to-day reality of their material location.⁵¹

In another critique of the oppositional culture explanation of racial differences in school performance, Ainsworth and Downey (1998, 2002) challenge Ogbu’s claim that Black students have pessimistic educational and occupational expectations and, using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NELS) to compare the two groups, countered that “African American students have more pro-school attitudes to school than do whites” (1998, p. 547). Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga (2002) debated these findings, arguing that the challenge to the prevailing resistance model was premature. Whether or not there was empirical support to show that Black students value school, Ainsworth & Downey (1998) found that they “fail to put forth the necessary effort for school.” They offered three possible explanations: (1) abstract pro-education values versus concrete attitudes, (2) positivity bias towards the researchers, and (3) values versus material conditions, such as high unemployment and nontraditional family structures, that “are less likely to foster the kinds of skills, habits, and styles that lead to school success” (p. 550).

My findings on racialization at CHS reveal that in a multiracial, multi-ethnic context that challenges the Black-White binary, Black students were part of a social construction of racial categories that cast Blacks as negative and inferior to Asians. Although school administrators, teachers, and staff heralded the presence of Asian American students in the student body (“the saving grace,” as one teacher referred to them), for Black students, Asian American “success” did not encourage academic or occupational optimism on the part of Black students; instead, the hierarchical configuration of Asian Americans “at the top” contributed to feelings of resentment, both of Asian Americans and of other Blacks who were either academically oriented or not, depending on perspective and orientation.

For many of the Black students whom I talked with at CHS, one key way students contended with the essentialization of Blackness as negative and inferior was to distance themselves from popular assumptions about Black laziness (which they sometimes perpetuated) and violence, by distancing themselves from Black students who were seen to be “problem

students.” Thus, Black students defined themselves against both the model minority and the deficient minority stereotypes. In the following section, I detail other strategies through which Black students managed, navigated, and made meaning in the course of racialization at CHS.

Black Students’ Survival Strategies for Navigating Racialization

Black students developed strategies for contending with racialization in school, and just as they demonstrated multifarious ways of being Black, they employed varied strategies. Across and within racial groups, students expressed different feelings about their peers’ survival strategies. For example, some Black students complained that other Black students resented their academic success, while some other Black students resented Black peers for engaging in disruptive behavior. These strategies both disrupted and reinforced racial categories, alternately exemplifying fluidity and durability. Unfortunately, the most visible survival strategies tended to be those that reinforced dominant negative stereotypes, and thus Black students ultimately contributed to the reproduction of their subordinated position within the racial hierarchy at the school.

There were students like Nick whose strategy for successfully moving among groups was to avoid exclusive identification with any one group. When I spoke with Nick about moving among racial groups and between different contexts, such as the racially different contexts of Leadership class (a mostly Asian American academic setting) and Life Beats, a mostly Black after-school program, he said:

The only way you can do that is if you don’t have a group. Because I don’t have a group, because all the friends I have, like I said, they have graduated already, I don’t have a definite group, so I just talk to everybody.

Nick remained outside (of any group) because of circumstance (his friends graduated) and necessity (in order to be accepted across settings). This strategy speaks to the rigidity of racial groups. In spite of the efforts of many adults who attempted to shape students’ racial consciousness both in superficial and deep ways, the core subjective content of racial categories and their hierarchical configuration stubbornly proved their staying power.

Another strategy Black students (and other students) used for navigating school life was simply to keep to oneself. Like Maya, Destiny, and others, Naomi employed the strategy of being alone or in a small group, to avoid trouble and to stay safe:

Naomi: I don’t really be around people, so no one has a problem with me. I usually get along with everybody. People I wouldn’t get along with, I just don’t talk to them.”

Yenhua: So where do you go during lunch time?

Naomi: A lot of times, many times I’ll be by myself.

Yenhua: Really? Why?

Naomi: I don’t know, I’d just rather be by myself and, I don’t really like a lot of people, rowdy people, where there are big crowds, so I just stick alone. Anyway, once in a while I’ll be with two people... I don’t talk to the negative people. I tend to drown everybody out.

By steering clear of “negative people,” Black students could also avoid being associated with “the rowdy crowd.” By staying low key, they were less likely to attract disciplinary attention.

Alternately, Black students (as well as non-Black students) also used the strategy of creating a “play family” out of friendship bonds. In her study of poor Black women and the people in their extended networks, Stack (1974) illuminates how they created supportive, reciprocal, relationships with real and fictive kin as an adaptive strategy for managing minimal resources. Similarly, Black (as well as non-Black) students drew on relationships with imagined families. Students called one another “play mom,” “play son,” “play brother,” and “play sister.” As a girl named Dana put it, these “roles” were a “way to claim people.”

Claiming group membership over individuals had a purpose: “so other people are aware of your clique.” The play family had its own miniature economy, in which it was important to “grow your circle” by bringing people into the family chain. One of the functions of play family was protection. Different roles were associated with different levels of power; for example, a mother was more powerful than a daughter in at least one regard: Dana said, “I play the high role, so I can protect her,” referring to a girl who was her “play daughter.” Just as Stack found that fictive kin relied on numerous types of informal exchanges, students who were members of play families traded favors, for example, “help me with this assignment, and I’ll help you with that person you’re having trouble with.”

Finding a hook was another vital survival strategy. This was an interest or a relationship that sustained students’ connections to his or her academic goals and to the world of school. For some, the hook was athletics. For others, it was an art class run by the Visual Arts Academy (VAA). When I talked with Mr. Casey, a well-liked VAA art teacher, about the pride students felt when they received recognition for their work, he informed me that he had a former student (who was by then 30) who still expressed pride that he painted a mural on a short street-facing wall at the base of the campus, even though “he was just one of the students filling in the lines with color.”

Unfortunately, opportunities to hook students in were not always seized. Areon, the junior girl whose comment about motivation I explored earlier, was passionate about dance. However, she and her friend Delia (both Black) were both failing dance class. Their location at the cusp of being hooked in or falling off is evident in the following passage:

Areon: I love dancing and it really is a passion of mine. But it’s like, I’m in Ms. Donna’s dance class. Now to be eligible to do a show, your grades have to be at a certain level. If your grades are not, then you can’t do it. So it’s like, what’s the point of me going? I’m not going to get to participate anyway.

Delia: You can ask any person in the school, Ms. Donna, she is kind of a hot head. She gets very irritated and she gets upset really fast. She doesn’t allow us to ask questions, so its like, you just get frustrated trying to deal with that so you just try not to deal with her.

Areon: We were like ghosts in the room... I stopped going to class.

Areon made an incredible statement about academic marginalization and her sense of invisibility (“*We were like ghosts in the room*”) that echoed Fanon (1967), in *Black Skin, White Mask*: “A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of non-existence” (p. 139). Fanon wrote of the obliteration that occurs in a racial structure that denies the humanity of Black people by diminishing their existence in light of their Blackness (“the negro”), and in this quote, refers to

the reduction of Black existence to an idea. I posit that Black students like Areon are “ghosts in the room” of the education system, within which failing and struggling urban schools are matters of fact. An Asian American student (quoted at the start of Ch. 3), said about CHS, “It’s the students that make the school bad.” I heard this idea over and over again; the premise that students were ultimately and exclusively to blame for their own failures was the dominant theory of action when it came to the management of students like Areon. This is not to say that CHS did not attempt policies that were meant to help these students, nor that individual administrators, teachers, and staff did not make sincere efforts to reach them, but that all these people operated on the belief in an individual locus of change.

On the morning that I met her, a well-meaning Spanish teacher named Mr. Garcia asked Areon to join him at the computer to look at her grades (the grades from all her classes were displayed), which were a litany of D’s and F’s. He meant this as a sort of wake up call. I asked how she felt about that, and Areon replied, “Well, you always have a feeling of guilt you know, you have messed up and stuff like that. I pretended like I didn’t hear it but I heard anyway. So I mean it shows he cares, I guess.” In a limited way, Areon saw Mr. Garcia’s tough love as a form of caring.

Like others at the school, many Black students used the survival strategy of hooking onto the fabric of school life with the help of an advocate. I often found that students who had distant or hostile relationships with teachers, staff, and administrators nonetheless depended upon a reliable adult for support. This single person had the ability to transform feelings of alienation into a sense of belonging. The rapport between students and their advocates were sometimes intimate. For example, one young white teacher named Ms. Lewis was especially close with her students, young Black males in particular. At an end of the year celebration, I heard them refer to her as “mom.”⁵² Consistently, the same handful of teachers (with varied racial identities) played the role of advocate.⁵³

Finally, an important survival strategy for navigating racialization in school was to participate meaningfully in an academy (such as the VAA, discussed in Ch. 2), a student club, an afterschool program, or a mentoring organization that helped to mediate students’ academic and racial identities. Many students who felt marginalized during the school day felt at home after school, in the offices of the youth programs that were given space on campus. Teachers and staff often noted that CHS was unique among schools in the district because it featured a Wellness Center, a combination of a health clinic for students and the seat of several interrelated community agencies serving youth.

For the purpose of highlighting Black students’ perspectives of racialization, it is important to note again that extra-curricular programs and organizations were themselves racially stratified. For example, in introducing Nick, I wrote that he participated in Life Beats, a “rap-as-therapy” program. Run by a trained clinical social worker, Life Beats took place in an elaborate sound studio on campus. Nick was the captain of the team, which competed in local youth poetry slams, and his involvement was gratifying. “People would listen to me, so it was like, ‘Oh! I can get my voice heard.’”

Yet, at the time I interviewed Nick, almost all the participants were Black (and none were Asian American). When I attended Life Beats performances at lunchtime or afterschool (held either in the Wellness Center or the cafeteria), the audience was very different from the one that attended events organized by the Leadership group. (Nick was also a member of Leadership.) Thus, his voice was “heard” by a limited subset of students, faculty, and staff, because

involvement and attendance in both school-based and after-school activities were highly segregated.

Nick was one of a few non-Asian performers in a long list of vocalists in a student-run glee competition. When Nick decided to join the performance, his Black friends gave him slack: “[laughs] They called me a ‘bitch,’ yeah, they called me a ‘nerd;’ well, they always call me nerd because I wear glasses and they just assume.” Recounting the event, which I attended, I told him that I saw few Black students in an otherwise full auditorium. I estimated that the crowd was 98% or 99% Asian American. During the same night, I said, I walked over to the CHS gym where a basketball game was taking place. Looking at the home side of the stands, I spied a crowd that was perhaps 98% Black.

I pointed out that there must be plenty of talented Black singers at CHS. Why weren’t they there? “The judges for the audition [for the glee competition] was all Asian, so I am like, already expecting to do bad in their eyes because I’m not of the same race,” Nick offered. I brought up a few activities that were organized by the Leadership class that were open to everyone. They took place at lunch time or after school, on the football field. At one of these (a jump rope activity), I counted 17 students; at another (a student-teacher dodge ball game), I counted roughly 30 students. Aside from a few Black students (two of whom were of mixed Black-Asian heritage), every other student was Asian American.

Nick had helped organize the jump rope activity. “It wasn’t advertised enough,” he said somewhat defensively. Indeed, the activities of the Leadership group were poorly publicized. They were usually announced on the PA system, which was barely audible, and often at the start of class, when tardy students were absent. He also reasoned that Life Beats performances enjoyed a small audience because they “weren’t advertised enough.” While this may have been the case, better publicity would not have solved the problem of distinctly racialized spaces and activities. Instead, they were reflections of accepted cleavages within the student body, divisions rooted in race, social status, and expressions of entitlement and belonging.

Marginalization, Racialized Places, and Alternative Spaces of Belonging

In the segregated social world of the school, marginalized students existed in alternative racialized spaces. They were alternative spaces of belonging, because students staked them out as an alternative to domains characterized by adult-imposed structure and evaluation. One key way in which Black students conveyed agency in the face of institutional racism was to find spaces of belonging that were not officially recognize or sanctioned. These alternative spaces of belonging, like all spaces in the school, were markedly racialized places: as the following observations from my fieldwork will show, the meanings associated with them were racially coded and they were occupied by and conferred a sense of “home” to some racial groups more than others in particular contexts, at specific times.

One afternoon midyear, I stood outside the room of a notoriously poor math teacher. It was fifth period, but she was not there and her lights were off. There were math posters on the wall outside and a list of quotations from President Obama covered the door. One of the quotes read, “There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s a United States of America.” Next-door was the room of a new teacher, who quit at the end of her first year. She had been assigned to teach both math and science classes with hardly any time for preparation. A student kicked and punched her in the face on the same day as the teacher appreciation luncheon, organized by students from Leadership class. That was

the last straw, and she quit. On that afternoon, the assault had not yet happened and the new teacher was still in her room teaching.

A White female student with a dyed streak in her hair stood outside, knocking on the door. “Why do they always have to lock it?” she said to no one in particular. I noticed that not an insignificant percentage of the students who were in the halls were in the process of knocking on doors. Some teachers set their doors to lock automatically when they shut, so students needed to knock to get back in. She was the second White student I saw at the school in months. As I made another lap around the building, a Black boy poked his head out from around the corner, asking, “What’s up, best friend?” I smiled quizzically and asked him if that was a new greeting, but he did not understand my question.

A Black girl sat on the floor near him, eating food from a McDonald’s bag. I told them that I noticed many students coming in and out of that class and asked why that may be. Perhaps thinking I was questioning her right to be there, the girl curtly replied, “I’m eating. I’m nauseous.” There was a banner on the wall, and I recalled that some students in the Leadership class created it last year. The project was a “Wall of Historical Figures.” Along with prominent White figures, I saw illustrations of Booker T. Washington, Malcolm X, and the ice skater Kristi Yamaguchi. I remembered how Mrs. Meir instructed the Leadership class to choose individuals who “reflected their school.” Stopping to take notes against a locker, I noticed black dome cameras mounted on the ceiling, their shiny glass faces capturing a 360 degree view of the hallways. I suddenly felt the sensation of being watched. A Black female assistant principle and a tall black male security guard walked past me, their faces knitted into frowns.

They left, and the scene seemed to change. The authoritative, disciplinary air of the adults dissipated. A Black female student meandered around the corner, seemingly without hurry, before stooping down to pick up an orange soda can. She picked it up, seemed to inspect it, and seeing that it was empty, threw it back down again. Her lack of direction mirrored the aimlessness that characterized the hallway’s movements. On that day and in the ones that succeeded it, I was arrested by juxtapositions of tone, like the abruptly different tones set by adults and youth in the halls or like the one created by the multicultural Wall of Historical Figures and the racially stratified real-life action that unfolded in front of it.

The banner was student-created art, but it also represented a top-down attempt to guide students in multiculturalism. The Leadership students who created it, who were almost entirely high-performing Asian Americans, were usually the first to be accused by Black students of elitism, of sealing themselves off from the rest of the diverse school. The cheerful banner seemed at odds with the alternately chaotic and slow, sometimes banal, sometimes violent, often at once tense and comical atmosphere of the hallways, whose use was so obviously racially charged. The halls seemed to be spatial signifiers of different social worlds, occupied in different ways by different sets of students whose division was taken for granted. The cheerful banners, lockers, and squeaky floors were alive with the sounds and the silence of CHS’s occupants and the distances among them.

On the other hand, it was possible to see in the visual art that gave character to the material environment of CHS that the school’s discourses intermixed with students’ voices and messages. The banners, posters, and murals on the interior and exterior walls of the school were virtually all created by students in Leadership class or in the art classes. These two groups produced art representing two visual categories of belonging and ownership. Students in the mostly Asian American Leadership class created the large school calendar and a poster of

famous mathematicians and artists that hung at the anterior of the school, directly across from the main office.

Students from the VAA (the “diverse academy”) painted posters of famous Black figures like President Obama, Coretta Scott King, Stanley Tookie Williams, and the phrase, “Sit Down to Stand Up.” Mr. Casey, the visual arts academy art teacher, informed me that there had been a great deal of “tagging,” or graffiti, on the wall upon which the poster of Williams hung. Williams had been a prominent Los Angeles gang member and convicted murderer who turned his life around in prison, becoming a proponent of anti-violence. The art piece had a positive message that also recognized life’s struggles.

The poster of Williams covered a wall located at the top of a stair well in the rear of the building, in a zone where I noticed students hanging out, sometimes hiding when they were supposed to be in class. It was a place where marginal students were attempting to make themselves even more socially invisible. Mr. Casey pointed out that after the students created and put up the poster, “there was a lot less tagging.”⁵⁴ Mr. Casey, who made an impressive effort to feature “medium to weak students as well as the strong artists,” recognized claims to space: “Considering the kids who claim this space and who’s tagging it, they can relate with Tookie Williams and his message. A part of art is considering the target audience.”

More than Asian American students, I observed Black students living out much of their school lives in extra-academic settings. As I wrote in Ch. 2, spaces of marginalization included “dumping ground” classes that were recognized as sites of non-instruction and non-learning. They also included hallways, where fights among students were widely known, by students and staff alike, to transpire; stairwells, another site of possible violence, as well as graffiti and drug use, and therefore surveillance; the steps in front of the gates of the main building and the bus stop outside the school, liminal zones between school and beyond-school life; and the cafeteria, a social space associated with Black and Latino students during passing periods and before and after school, but not at lunchtime (I will return to this point shortly).

These informal spaces, which were obvious sites of non-instruction, non-learning, and marginalization (“problem students” were ejected from classrooms and relegated to the hallways, for example), constituted sites of belonging for Black students. Just as I described in Ch. 2 that the counselor’s wing was a spot where Asian American students felt comfortable and where groups of them sat on the floor, scrolling through their phones or working on the homework spread around them, these other spaces were sites where Black students, Latino students, and students of all racial backgrounds who were on the periphery of the cultural world that was stamped with teacher and administrator approval, could feel comfortable.

These sites constituted their own cultural worlds, and I was led on tours of them from time to time. Students like Nathan, an openly gay Black senior with aspirations of attending art school, were my guides. One day, he walked me through the hallways, up the main stairs that led up to a large balcony that was a central congregating space for Black students, and on past the vice principals’ offices and the truancy officer’s office. Those, he said, were where “a lot of Black kids go.” We stopped at the small health center, which would be moved the following year to a sparkling new Wellness building on campus.

Nathan took a tangerine from the front desk and ate it. That was the entirety of his lunch. We stood in a corridor at a window that looked out over the whole cafeteria, and he extended his arm like a meteorologist would, then began pointing out the various groups. The seniors sat closest to the wrestling mats. The juniors were near them. The cafeteria was crowded, and I saw Asian American, Black and Latino faces. Nathan pointed out that “Blacks pretty much go off

campus to get food. Otherwise they hang out in classrooms. Or float.” Inspecting more closely, I saw what he meant. Many of the student clusters were Asian American.

I asked Nathan why Black students choose not to eat here. He said, they either dislike cafeteria food or failed to turn in paperwork for free or subsidized lunch, and so they figured, “if they have to pay for it, they might as well pay for something they like.” Heading to the nearby gas station to pick up food was a popular activity. Another option was to take the city bus to a popular fast-food restaurant near the airport, but that was a sure way to become tardy for 5th period, or to miss it altogether. They did it anyway.

Another Black student, Dominique, offered another perspective on why different groups of students choose to stay on campus or leave school for lunch:

I think they think there is nothing here for [Blacks and Latinos] to stay for. The Asians, they're in let's say, student council stuff. Like, I've never heard anything about student council. I know there is student council, I know most of the student council is Asian, but I never hear any announcements. So it's like I'm not really let in to the stuff that is going on. I guess it's why we leave. Because we don't feel like we're needed, or are of use for certain things. The Asians are more in-tuned to that stuff.

This quote illuminates one of the many ways in which Blackness and Asian-ness, and perceptions of which racial categories of people were involved (or ought to be involved) in specific activities, worked in conjunction to mediate feelings of institutional belonging. Dominique's comments suggest that non-Asian students did not feel “needed;” on the other hand, because Asian American students were “of use for certain things,” their value was implied.

During lunch, the cafeteria tables were very racially self-segregated. The limitation of space was a serious issue that reinforced students' feelings of ownership over space. Students jostled one another in the crowded lunch lines. The area was set up in such a way that students were funneled toward the cash registers; they scrunched together and elbowed their way forward, or were pulled along by the current of the crowd. There was budging. In one-on-one interviews, Asian American students accused Black students in particular of “cutting in line.” On the other hand, a Black student suggested that Asian American students did not take the time to personalize interactions with cafeteria workers, people who he made a point to greet and thank for their service. Although contrasting, these perspectives show that students saw the experience of moving through the lunch line in racial terms.

I saw long rows of tables totally full of Asian American students. Asian American friendship groups quickly filled the tables, making it difficult for outsiders to squeeze in. For example, Angelica, a shy and timid Latina, once described her lunchtime routine to me: *get my lunch, eat by myself, head early to 5th period.* The next day, I saw her seated at the end of a long table of Asian American boys. Their voices were jovial and confident. None of them acknowledged her presence in any way. I imagined the bench was the ledge of a boulder, where she sat at the very edge. When she finished eating, she unceremoniously got up from the ledge and headed toward her 5th period classroom.

At other times of the day, however, most of the students who staked out the cafeteria as theirs were not Asian American. In the period before and after lunch, after school, during the intervals between classes, and while classes were in session, the cafeteria was the preferred hang out spot of Black and Latino students. Different racial groups dominated the cafeteria and hallways at different moments. Empty at lunchtime, the wrestling mats that lined one cafeteria

wall seated a full row of Black and Latino students during passing periods. They leaned against a colorful bulletin board featuring the photos of the ten senior student officers, all Asian American girls.

When the bell rang to mark the end of a class period, empty hallways suddenly came alive. Very rapidly, swelling streams of students wearing sports hats, headphones, backpacks, purses, and holding bags of junk food rushed into the arteries of the school, walking alone or forming into groups, moving or stationary. They were places where loud voices boomed and energy was released in oversized hi-fives and slamming locker doors. They were in-between spaces, corridors connecting one obligation to the next. They were interstitial spaces signaling both freedom and discipline.

Overwhelmingly associated with Black and Latino students and with issues of truancy, discipline, and violence, hallways held symbolically resonant meanings that shaped students' relationship to them. As I noted, being sent out to the halls was a primary classroom management strategy and hallways were informally designated fighting sites. Both uses gave them the mark of marginalization. The hallways also hosted daily struggles over visibility, as students alternately attempted to disappear into or draw attention to themselves by creating disruptions in them. In these instances, the halls symbolized youth autonomy rather than adult control.

Finally, in the official intervals called passing periods, hallways were the most integrated spaces on campus. Once, I exited a racially homogenous AP class at the same time as the students, our almost uniformly Asian American bodies stepping into a hallway that surged with variety. As our paths crisscrossed those of students who were coming and going from "AP," "honors," "regular," "Special Ed," and "ESL" classes as well as disciplinary spaces and other non-academic sites on and off campus, I was dumbstruck at the hallway's exceptional integration. After five minutes, the second bell rang, indicating the start of the next class period. The hallways again transformed into Black and Brown spaces of racialization.

When I wanted to get a broad view of student activity, I often headed to the main intersection of the school, a nexus of hallways and a balcony that overlooked the cafeteria. The sight of 43 different national flags hanging prominently along one wall was striking, communicating what seemed more like an aspiration for than an affirmation of multiculturalism. Students streamed through the space as I stood observing early one morning. A large banner read, "Si se puede! Felicitationes clase de 2011 Latinos Unidos." It remained from the Latino student appreciation night that took place days ago. Standing at the top of the stairwell, a Black boy next to me recited the words to a rap song, something along the lines of: "girl want to get near my dick, better throw cash."

A tall, large Black male student gave a loud hoot, not realizing that the redheaded Vice Principal, Ms. Kinkaid, was standing close by. She approached, two-way radio in hand and wearing an especially stern look on her face, and quietly reprimanded him. I recognized Anthony, a handsome, tall Black junior who, I was told, only successfully passed a single class in his entire high school career. A tattoo crawled up his neck toward one ear. I wondered what compelled him to come to school at all, since he was old enough not to be bound by the compulsory education law. What did the school represent to him? He looked at ease in the hallway, saddled against a locker.

It dawned on me that the school, for its deep failures, also represented a place of calm. A haven. If Black students' dignity and potency were vulnerable in school, the pressures of poverty and threats of violence at home and in the surrounding neighborhoods, communities, and criminal justice system also assailed them from all sides.⁵⁵ The students in the cafeteria below

stood around socializing, chasing one another, flirting, giving each other tough, daring, but ultimately friendly stares, and enjoying the freedom of being out of class. Max, the friendly, garrulous, tall multi-racial Black football player spotted me. “Are you about to get a free fight? This is the best spot to watch a fight.”

Like a fish slipping into water, he returned to the crowd of mostly Black students that milled around the balcony area. He was popular, and socialized with just about everybody. No fights broke out. The young people around me bantered and horsed around. Their profanity was creative. The informal rules of the school space seemed to make this space an area that belonged to the “rowdy crowd,” and while others passed through, they did not linger. Two Black students collided, drawing Black security guards to them as if through magnetic force. If a fight did break out, the offending students would be ushered by the security guards to the vice principals’ offices.

Along with the truancy office, the administrators’ offices were widely perceived as Black and Brown spaces, as Black and Latino students were most likely disciplined there. Although teachers complained that administrators acted inconsistently and took discipline too lightly, issues of violence, discipline, and punishment were on everyone’s minds. Sometimes multiple students “jumped” an individual student, outnumbering him or her in an assault. More routinely, fights broke out between individual students who had offended one another in some way. Teachers told me that girls were more likely to fight than boys because the boys could draw on the threat of guns and other weapons to stave off physical confrontations, though I heard about a roughly equal number of fights between boys as between girls. Students told me that the security guards were slow to break up the fights, because they purportedly enjoyed watching them.

During three separate hour-long interviews I conducted with assistant principals in their offices, I rarely saw Asian American students sent in for discipline. Additionally, the vast majority of students taking part in a Saturday morning detention that I attended was also Black and Latino.⁵⁶ If a newcomer spent a day in the disciplinary wing of the school, she would not guess that Asian American students comprised almost half the school’s population. Undeniably, Black students at CHS were more visibly involved in classroom disruptions and physical altercations than others.

My observations confirm research arguing that racial minority students, especially Black males, are disproportionately disciplined in school (Civil Rights Project, 2000; Taylor & Foster, 1986; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000), and on the “school to prison pipeline” that links schooling to broader domains of surveillance and punishment, both in the community and in students’ future adult lives (Rios, 2011). The reasons for disproportional punishment are complex, but individual students as well as “the system” of the school and its disciplinary apparatus play a role. In the case of Black males, Ferguson (2001) shed ethnographic light on their early criminalization, showing that educators “adultified” elementary school-aged Black boys as jail-bound “trouble-makers.”

Indeed, the negative and denigrating constructions of Blackness that I described above and in previous sections also shaped students’ and staffs’ interactions with Black and other students. More surprisingly, positive and valorizing constructions of Asian-ness did, too. The oppositional minority and model minority ideal types fed off one another, shaping how Black, Latino, and other youth were recognized and disciplined. The example of Ms. Rand, quoted in a previous section, stands out. She had said, “I like to be frank. [The class misbehaves] because there’s so many African American students.” / “Asian students and they act crazy? I can’t

believe it.” Her eyes and mouth were wide with disbelief. “I love my Asian students.” / “I love my Asian students. You know, honestly I think they’re the backbone of the school.”

A middle-aged White English teacher, Mrs. Conner, was equally blunt. She talked of a subset of students in her classes using the following phrases: “They perpetuate failure. Everything stops with them. I’m not interested in saving souls. They shouldn’t be here.” When she learned that my research focuses on Asian American students, she added, “They aren’t Asian anyway, so you wouldn’t be interested in them.” In fact, my focus on Asian American students entails a focus on the formation of racial categories across the field of social positions. During my time in the field, it became increasingly apparent that in the minds of educators and students at CHS alike, the model minority and the oppositional minority subject locations were strongly intertwined.

Black students were not oblivious of the stereotypes that surrounded and named them as Black. I often heard statements such as the following, communicated in tones intermixing humor, exasperation, and sincerity: “Just because I’m big and Black doesn’t mean I’m always going to be a senior!” (said by a Black male student to a Chinese female student). When I asked Nathan if there were cultural barriers at the school, he let out an emphatic “Yes!” He said that students thought people from other groups were “so different from them.” In fact, he pointed out, “We could be pretty similar. I could know what it’s like to be from a single home like you, and to be the oldest of your siblings.” He went on, “But it’s like, as soon as someone feels like they are facing something different from what they know, the walls come up.” He sighed before continuing, “People think, because someone else is from a different race, like you’re Asian and I’m Black, that they have different stories.”

Conclusion

This analysis of Black students’ perspectives clearly demonstrates that although race is commonly believed to be determined by phenotype and ancestry, the social construction of what race *is* (i.e. how it operates; the normative content of racial categories; the configuration of racial positions) is both undetermined and culturally produced. Theorists of culture and cultural production have been unhesitant in taking the minutiae of everyday life as their objects of analysis, to unearth the power of cultural production. As Turner (1996) writes,

they examine the everyday and the ordinary: those aspects of our lives that exert so powerful and unquestioned an influence on our existence that they take them for granted. The processes that make us—as individuals, as citizens, as members of a particular class, race, or gender—are cultural processes that work precisely because they seem so natural, so unexceptional, so irresistible... So the focus on popular culture has quickly become a focus on how our everyday lives are constructed, how culture forms its subjects [emphasis in original] (p. 2).

The proposition here is that small, ordinary, taken-for-granted processes, ideas, habits, and experiences, when they are conceived in a social setting, are cultural processes, and it is through them that “culture forms its subjects.”

The racialized subject is no less a work of cultural formation. On the one hand, race was assumed to be a biological given. The corollary was that cultural attributes that were attributed to distinct racial groups were also seen as natural, arising in individuals and their families. I was astonished to find that the steady process of accretion that gave subjective content to the category

of Blackness occurred virtually unquestioned. Racial categories and expectations were so taken-for-granted that it was as if their social, and therefore unnatural, character was unrecognized. For Naomi and others, Black was ghetto. There was no question about it. There was no controversy.

On the other hand, young people in particular seemed to simultaneously hold beliefs about “what Black people are like” and to take the fluidity of racial boundaries for granted. For Ms. Moore’s students, there was nothing exceptional about referring to their Asian American teacher as Black, “cause of how she act.” None of them blinked an eye at the transposition (though the teacher did). Forms of comportment had obvious racial codes, and using them to inscribe race upon bodies was a mundane maneuver. The racialized Black subject was a locally specific, value-laden and culturally constructed subject, indeterminate and flexible because culture itself is dynamic and fluid. Yet, Blackness seemed at once fixed and transferable to those who gave it value.

Among administrators, teachers, and staff, the social conditions and institutional contexts that constrained possible racial subject formations remained largely unchecked. The Central City school district and CHS took initiatives aimed specifically at improving educational outcomes for Black students.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, it was taken for granted that Black students struggled in school. That theirs were the faces at the bottom of the well was seen as the logical outcome of naturally functioning systems. In fact, I found that Blackness was an unfinished project at CHS. What it meant to be Black, and for whom, was never totally determined.

Social practice theorists (Lave & Wenger, 1991) propose that educative selves are made through interaction, in communities of practice. The hope and the promise of the unfinished project of racial formations is that racial hierarchies and identities need not be set in stone. In this chapter, I showed that the process of racialization is experienced as a set of complex, deeply personal, context-specific, and surprisingly malleable potentialities. Although the official metrics of achievement revealed a pattern of poor educational outcomes for Black students, the educational trajectories of students like Nick, Maya, and Demisha were somewhat unpredictable. Their formation as racial and educational subjects took shape in the context of a dynamic, not static, environment: they blossomed in strong communities of practice and withered in harsh ones.

Chapter 5, Conclusion

School has inspired me to do bigger and better things, like going to college and achieving all of my goals. My life is not easy. I carry the wounds of my past, but standing tall to this day, I'm a survivor, a street soldier. – A 15 year-old Black student, in an English class presentation about her identity

I don't know how schools became seen as the answer to everything. – A multiracial teacher

“STOP RACISM: It takes all of us.” – Written at the bottom of an image of Central City, projected in a history classroom during a student presentation

Conversations about race and urban education are emotionally charged in part because they point to what we imagine young people can become. This dissertation is concerned with learning as it is tied to the structured nature of cultural production, of the strong constraints and narrow opportunities for agency that actors and schools manage in the production of race. My study meditates on the effects of this type of learning, on what transpires as practical pathways of opportunity and potentialities for being and becoming are opened and closed off.

Tracking the overlapping racial, social, and academic configurations that ordered the cultural and educative worlds of a 99% non-White, high-poverty urban high school where Asian Americans comprised the largest racial group (almost half the student population), this dissertation elucidated the beliefs and practices through which students and staff identified certain students as ‘Asian’ and others as ‘Black.’ I located urban Asian American students in relationship with urban Black students in a field of racial positions, whose asymmetrical configuration had unequal social and educational consequences for students. My object of analysis was the dual construction of the Asian model minority as a deserving and engaged subject and of the stigmatizing tropes of Black (and to a lesser extent, Brown) educational deficiency, resistance, and failure. This dissertation examined how and why, even in a school context where *all* students suffered from severely limited educational opportunities and where diversity was explicitly celebrated, these ideal types were strongly reproduced.

What I uncovered were difficult subject-positions occupied by students and staff, where efforts to minimize race within a color-blind discourse or to champion minority struggles within an anti-racist discourse accommodated the co-existence of anti-Black practices. Ultimately, Asian American students’ access to privilege was conditional upon and limited by the relationship of Asian-ness to a contested racial order. Asian American students were seen as “like White” (in the eyes of adults) in a non-White context where assertions of Asian-ness created distance from Blackness, in particular, yet where Asian American students both embraced and rejected signifiers of ‘ghetto’ identity in different contexts. I argue that urban Asian American students, despite their ethnic and academic dissimilitude, benefitted in the short term from the relatively positive attention they received in school. However, all students and staff shared the costs of racial stratification and inequality when struggling and failing youth were marginalized, and when even “successful” students felt compelled to conform to racialized expectations in order to maximize what were, in fact, severely and structurally constrained educational opportunities.

Laying claim to identity involves a form of negotiation that bridges the personal, interior regulation of self and the social and public management of others. In *Jocks and Burnouts*, Eckert's (1989) ethnography of the social reproduction of class categories in a high school, the author writes about the "choices" involved in claims to jock and burnout identities:

The set of choices that represents affiliation... is recognized by the high school community as defining the individual as a social being... This book is not just about the differences between jocks and burnouts; it is also about how these differences tie them together in mutual definition and in competition and cooperation to define their community and their age group (pp. 5, 22).

Ultimately, I investigated the asymmetrical relationship of two categories in light of their mutually influencing co-construction. Like the jocks and burnouts, I found that the tropes of the good Asian model minority student and the oppositional and deviant Black subject were accepted as natural, but in fact they had the power to name, and by naming, to constitute people within the relations that bound them together in defining their world. As Eckert points out, it is important to recognize the capacity of students as co-participants in this normalizing work: "Adults do not impose their class system and ideologies on adolescents; they provide the means by which adolescents can do it themselves" (p. 6).

What is the nature of racial categories, and how are they lived? Through the voices of students and staff, I have shown that Asian American and Black students were not strictly defined as Asian or as Black. Instead, Asian and Black were racialized labels that racialized individuals affiliated with in not entirely predictable ways. In the process of affiliation, students made choices about how they viewed themselves, how they interpreted racial groups, and how they saw those who were associated with them. Thus within the school context as beyond it, race was relative, not absolute. Racial categories did not act like objectively defined, discrete containers of meaning, but were racialized systems of interpretation. Youth became Asian or Black immediately (based on appearance) as well as over time, through the accretion of experiences that were formative of both imposed and self-ascribed racial identities. They sorted through competing scripts made available in their schools (from administrators, teachers, staff, the formal curricula, and their peers), in community-based organizations, and in the media and other outlets in the wider society. The way they resolved these sometimes competing scripts was not necessarily neat or clean. In fact, they made room for contradictions in their views and in their practices, they conveyed ambivalence, indeterminacy, and open-mindedness.

Writing broadly of the contemporary American Left, Rorty (1998) argues that today, we are missing a vision for reform. In his essay entitled "American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey," Rorty contrasts the political detachment and spectatorship he sees in the academic and political Left of the late twentieth century with the vigorous feeling of political agency that ran through the philosophies of two leading earlier American public intellectuals, Walt Whitman and John Dewey. Both were prophets of a secular civic religion based on a common project of national pride, democracy, and growth. The Left of today is less hopeful about the capacity of the individual to shape society than were Dewey or Whitman. According to Rorty, a spectatorial Left—preferring knowledge over hope—has turned away from secularism and pragmatism towards theory and ineffability (p. 36). The essential characteristic of the Left, he reminds readers, has been to envision an unachieved nation. Democracy remains an unfinished project

that stretches into the future. This vision is intellectually and morally capacious enough to encompass reform efforts, social organizing, and real hope for an alternative and better society. Rorty asserts that in the past and now, the central argument animating the nation's political life is one about which hopes count.

Within the realm of education, we have not abandoned the unachieved project of building good schools, but we do not agree on how to reform our broken system. I began the ethnographic project described in this dissertation before I became a parent, and am ending it as the mother of a young child. I cannot help but think about the ideal kind of school I would want my own child to attend, and to reflect on if and how race-making institutions may be good schools. In my view, good schools recognize the diverse purposes of schooling. One role is to provide students with a level of education adequate to citizenship, passing what Gutmann (1987) calls the "democratic threshold principle": they are equipped by the broader society to educate children to "participate effectively in the democratic process" (p. 170). At a minimum, this requires that schools provide safe and healthy environments for students to learn, are appropriately staffed by skilled and humane teachers, and provide students with sufficient resources and equipment.

In my vision, good schools are also headed by effective leaders who promote team-building and a sense of collective investment among students, teachers, and administrators. They strive to empower each of these stake-holders and encourage humanizing relationships among them. Good schools take a long-term approach to improvement and innovation by being attentive to the social, political, and historical currents of the societies in which they are ensconced. Perhaps most crucially, good schools promote the deep learning of all students through effective teaching. Good schools awaken the passion and agency of young people, encourage students to critically engage with the world, be sensitive to others' perspectives, recognize social inequalities, and act with a sense of social responsibility. Good schools tend to students' individual needs and potentials in preparing them to play active roles in society. An ultimate purpose of good schools is to promote equity, rather than participate in the reproduction of social inequality.

Some children attend schools that match the vision I have described above, but access to these schools is limited and uneven, at best. How can a school such as Central High School, where the racialization of struggling Asian American students as model minorities was used to back up the assertion that it was in fact "a good school," actually *become* a good school like the kind I envision, for *all* students? My research is aligned with that of radical scholars (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Gillborn, 2008; Willis, 1977) who argue that the educational endeavor has been so tied to inequitable social and historical structures that they are foundationally unjust. The inequitable distribution of high quality education, tied as it is to an "American apartheid" (Massey & Denton, 1993) of racial and class-based segregation, reflects the fact that public schools are one of many social institutions that are currently structured to reproduce inequality. The goals of research in this vein, including my project, are to expose the operation and contexts of unequal power relations, to "problematize" educational institutions and the practices of schooling, and to understand students' roles within a matrix of structural constraints.

Using the case of Central High School, I focused on racialized power relations in a diverse setting, students' racial identities and the development of their agency, and the structural constraints associated with an 'urban' school in an area of concentrated poverty. Ultimately, I contend that school reform efforts that do not fundamentally alter social relations are destined to reproduce student failure and failing schools. The vision of good schools for all children is not yet achieved—but it is hoped for. Regarding education, the central question animating the

nation's public imagination is not, after all, a question of which hopes count: it is the question of how to achieve them.

Notes

¹ As Bonilla-Silva (2006) writes regarding classical liberalism as it informed the American Revolution, “modernity, liberalism, and racial exclusion were all part of the same historical movement” (p. 27).

² The historical binary understanding of American race-relations was complicated by the subjugation and unique racialization of Native Americans and other groups, but its focus was the Black-White color line.

³ The historically unique context of entry of Southeast Asian refugees in “the largest refugee resettlement program in U.S. history” set them fundamentally apart from pre-1975 waves of Asian immigrants (Rumbaut, 2000, p. 175; Hein, 1995; Um, 1999). Refugees from conflicts in Southeast Asia are among the most impoverished groups in the nation, and their socio-economic and educational profiles align with those of Blacks and Latinos. Thus, while Asian Americans are generally outscoring Whites in terms of income and educational attainment, this flat assessment obscures the disparities among and within Asian American subgroups. The socioeconomic profile of Southeast Asian Americans indicates serious difficulties and economic marginalization. (See discussion beginning on p. 59) The media portrays the model minority myth of Asian Americans (i.e. East Asians) as self-starters juxtaposed against Southeast Asian American families as welfare dependents and youth as “cultural perils” (Lee, 2005).

It is notable that Southeast Asia refers to a vast region comprised of ten independent nations and several islands and archipelagos. I should clarify, therefore, that when I describe Southeast Americans I am making a narrow reference to refugees and the children and relatives of refugees who fled the war-torn MeKong delta region of mainland Southeast Asia, namely from countries that comprised the former French colony of Indochina: Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Despite several difficulties, Southeast Asian seems to be the prevailing signifier for a complex group that is in some sense moving away from Southeast Asia with each passing year and new generation, but whose migration experience is nonetheless very often constituted as its unifying identity.

The terms Indochinese and Southeast Asian are used interchangeably to describe this selective population. Rumbaut (2000) points out that the term Southeast Asian is broad as well as geographically and historically imprecise; Hein (1995) also prefers Indochinese, noting that there are refugees from Southeast Asia who are not from former Indochina (e.g., Burma). Through my volunteer work as a literacy tutor with refugee families in Central City, I observed that ethnic Karenni refugees from Burma are the newest sizable Asian refugee group. They have moved into the same neighborhoods as the refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos who arrived decades earlier, and while Burmese English Language Learner adolescents generally attend a public high school meant for students with international backgrounds, Burmese refugees who are currently in elementary school or who are American-born will attend Central High School in the future, adding further complexity (through their own ethnic and migration contexts) to the dynamic racial field of the school.

Agreeing upon a unifying label for Southeast Asians is complicated because Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are comprised of a variety of ethnic groups, including the Vietnamese, Khmer (ethnic

Cambodians), Lao, Hmong (highlanders from Laos), Mien, and many smaller ethnic groups (Ngo, 2006, p. 52). There are also differences in social backgrounds, languages, cultures, and often adversarial national and ethnic histories that should not be carelessly elided (Rumbaut, 2000, p. 176). Finally, Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians do not identify ethnically either as Indochinese or Southeast Asian (p. 202).

Rumbaut states: “As refugees of the Indochina War, they share a common history and experiences that distinguish them from other Asian American groups” (p. 176). I am mindful of the consequences the label “Southeast Asian” has to negate the citizenship of Southeast Asian Americans and to simultaneously generalize every group member in connection with the “refugee experience” and de-emphasize or dilute the history of colonialism and Cold War conflict in Southeast Asia. While I wish to underscore the significance of the colonial legacy of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, I am reluctant to employ the outdated term Indochinese precisely because of its problematic usage during the colonial era. Perhaps as important, the term Indochinese does not capture the dynamic composition of a population that is comprised of second and third generation American-born children and sponsored family members.

Finally, while not all Southeast Asians in the U.S. are citizens, a majority of the refugees and their families have gained American citizenship. Moreover, a significant portion of this generally young population has experienced most of their lives in the United States.

⁴ Locally, students were described and described themselves as Asian rather than Asian American. Most students belonged to immigrant and refugee families; their parents or grandparents were foreign-born, but they were not themselves first generation immigrants or refugees. The word *Asian* communicated meanings related to both civic-political identification (as not fully American) and race (Asian was used as an identity in parallel with Black). Faculty and staff used Black and African American interchangeably, while students preferred the identifier *Black*. Faculty, staff, and students referred to students as Latino, Hispanic, and Mexican.

Miles (1989) argues that when the term ‘race’ is continuously employed, the concept becomes reified as a reality. I am wary of the danger of reifying the racial categories I describe in this dissertation, but ultimately, I employ them to avoid de-racializing the consequences that ensue from the “lived reality” of their daily use. I use the labels Asian American, Black, Latino, and White purposefully, as part of my racial analysis of the construction of these categories, choosing to highlight a racial paradigm rather than a culturally-based ethnicity paradigm (Omi & Winant, 1986/2015).

⁵ Foley (2010) writes that “Bourdieu is often mislabeled a ‘neo-Marxist,’ but I think of him as a ‘neo-Weberian”” (p. 217).

⁶ Debates within the social sciences have grappled with at least two different ways of making sense of the world: the social constructionist perspective and the essentialist lens. Since the 1960s, American social science experienced a reflexive turn that coincided with the Civil Rights movement and other ‘New Social Movements.’ Minority scholars questioned the ability of traditional analytic categories to account for their complex experiences; the question about how to categorize led to a deeper question of whether to categorize at all (McCall, 2005). Social constructionists sought to deconstruct normative assumptions about the nature of ‘truth,’ thereby invalidating categorization. However, social scientists have been

particularly attuned to the dangers of either perspective if taken to their extreme endpoints, towards endless construction or reductive essentialism.

In an effort to limit the conceptual conflation of ‘racism,’ Miles (1989) analytically distinguishes between the related ideas of ‘race,’ ‘racialization,’ and ‘racism;’ the underlying basis of this theoretical effort is the claim that each of these terms is a representational concept that signifies social meaning. In this articulation, ‘race’ is “the result of a process of signification whereby somatic characteristics are attributed with meaning... ‘races’ are socially imagined rather than biological realities” (p. 71). However, the function of signification is more than representational: it can result in ideologically transparent racist practices and exclusion. Racism draws power from its narrative promise; it is a “practically adequate” instrument for “‘making sense’ of the world” (p. 80). Individuals who thus rely on racism to rationalize inequities in corporate life ‘experience’ socially constructed ‘difference’ as ‘real.’ Miles underscores the socially constitutive nature of ideas by proposing that signification occurs dialectically through racialization: “The African’s ‘Blackness’ therefore reflected the European’s ‘Whiteness;’ these opposites were therefore bound together, each giving meaning to the other in a totality of signification” (p. 75).

Gossett (1963) traces the genealogy of racial theories in the U.S. to similarly show that race and racism are locally constituted and historically situated, and therefore discursive rather than natural. He argues that race theorizing only arrested European (and American) minds in modern times, and even then it challenged aspects of other influential ideologies, including the optimism of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth-century and the coherence of the Biblical origin story in the nineteenth-century (pp. 16, 34, 66). Gossett reveals that European and American white intellectuals continually (re)defined themselves dialectically in relation to non-white others. Thus, although the development of race as an idea progressed through twists and turns, sustaining arguments between polygenist and monogenicist schools of thought about the singularity or multiplicity of species within the human races, it ultimately materialized a conviction (shared by both sides of the debate) in the innate inferiority of Blacks.

Fields (1990) de-naturalizes notions of racism and race relations by pinpointing the development of race within a key historical moment in colonial America. She rejects outright the habit of attributing “virtually everything people of African American descent do, think, or say” to race and “any situation involving people of European descent and people of African descent” to race relations (p. 98). Thus breaking from the reliance on racial explanations for historical phenomena, Fields instead seeks to signify “the history of an ideology” that began in seventeenth-century Virginia (p. 101). During this period, shifts in emigration demographics, life expectancies, transactional costs, and the threat of armed revolt by European servants led to a change in labor composition from that of indentured White servants and Blacks who worked for a term to Blacks who were enslaved for life. Fields argues that the systemization of oppression that followed in the institutionalization of slavery led to racial perceptions of inferiority. New legal race codes “show[ed] society in the act of inventing race” (p. 107). Because “slavery [stood] as an exception to a radically defined liberty,” it required a racial rationale. In other words, race accrued meaning from the salient contradiction between American democratic idealism and persistent human bondage; race was effectually filled with the meaning that slaves resist being defined as ‘human’ (p. 135). Racial ideologies thus engendered do not automatically assume authority, but “must be constantly created and verified in social life” (p. 112). Therefore, a powerful moment of material oppression led to the social

construction of a racist ideology based upon essentialism, and this returned to the terrain of material life for re-inscription.

Like Fields, Wacquant (2002) historically delineates the contributions that shape race-making and crystallize the boundaries of Blackness in the U.S. He asserts that four “‘peculiar institutions’ have successfully operated to define, confine, and control African Americans;” these are chattel slavery, the Jim Crow system, the ghetto, and the “institutional complex formed by the remnants of the dark ghetto and the carceral apparatus” (p. 41). All four locate an “historical starting point” in slavery’s “unforeseen by-product” of the creation of a racial caste line and they also share a “functional analogue” of ‘labour extraction’ and ‘ethnoracial enclosure’ (p. 45). During slavery, this was accomplished *de facto*; under the Jim Crow ‘regime,’ it occurred through segregation and the subordination of Blacks to Whites; the urban ghetto faced structural economic marginality and policing; and the actual and metaphorical endpoint for many Blacks has been the prison. The result has been their pathologization and abjection. “Urban pathologies and antisocial behaviors” were ascribed to ghettoized Blacks, characteristics which continue to shape popular and academic theories about how to extricate Black people from their own ‘cultures of poverty’ (p. 50). Meanwhile, an exploded prison population fostered renewal of the “centuries-old association of Blackness within criminality and devious violence” (pp. 55-56). Wacquant writes of the ghetto as ‘an instrument of naked exclusion’ that exhibits a “deep kinship” with the prison system, which is itself a “machine for ‘race-making’” (pp. 49, 52, 55). In this context, the state has made race to be inescapably consequential for Black Americans.

For most people, commonsense racial classification is imposed, because it is based upon essentialist claims to physical difference. Fields states, “it was not [African Americans] who invented themselves as a race” (p. 114). Similarly, Marx (1998) argues that collective Black identity in South Africa arose out of resistance to White domination, and actually, the colonizers themselves imagined Africans to be Black before collective resistance began. Thus, the dominant group plays an active role in creating and sustaining racial subjects. However, Barth (1969) observes that ethnic identity-formation results from the dialectical interplay between internal ascription and external social labeling. Racial identity-formation, while more constricted than ethnicity, nonetheless allows room for interpretation, boundary-crossing, and racial pride.

Other groups also presented crises to the “official” record by embracing, reconfiguring, and politically mobilizing around their imagined shared identities, often in the in-between territory left open by ambiguous group boundaries. Davis (1991) explicates the national criteria for who is legally Black – based on the so-called one ‘drop rule’ – that includes stories of light skinned Blacks who chose to embrace Black identities as well as light skinned Blacks who chose to “pass” as White. Likewise, Foley (2002) sheds light on the ambiguity of racial boundaries for elite early twentieth-century Mexican Americans whose racial aspirations to Whiteness coincided with their civic engagement. Just as Roediger asserts that European immigrants’ pathways to citizenship were contingent upon their assimilation into Whiteness and their subsequent rejection of Blackness, Foley reveals that Mexican Americans with the same goal also chose to “reinforce the color line” of the dominant society (p. 56). Nagel (1994) notes that ethnic identity is socially “constructed,” often through a negotiation of boundaries affected by immigration, resource competition, and political access – themes in a “saga of structure and external forces” (p. 161). Ethnicity also draws meaning from the ‘materials’ of culture and history, which can be

remolded in a number of ‘cultural construction techniques.’ The fluctuating “‘imagined communities” that result reflect the choices of individuals and their continual (re)invention of symbolic social meaning (Anderson, 1982, as cited in Nagel, 1994, p. 168).

A number of scholars (Espiritu & Omi, 2000; Harris & Simm, 2002; Rodriguez, 2000) have recently shown the census to be a site of self and group meaning-making that simultaneously impels and repels a tendency toward racial essentialism. Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, South Asians, and Filipinos have been especially sensitive to the historical contingency and exclusivity of ‘Asian American’ identity. At stake is not only ‘accurate’ count, but the “political value of racial categorization,” which may be employed to “advance distinctive forms of identity claims.” In 1997, Native Hawaiians successfully lobbied to be separated out from the “Asian” category on the census and instead identify as “Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander” (Espiritu & Omi, p. 87). Latino racial classification has raised similar concerns. In 1993, the U.S. Census Bureau heard a (failed) proposal to reclassify what had been an “‘ethnic’ [group] – in which Hispanics could be of any race – to a ‘race’ group in which all Hispanics were one race” (p. 14). Harris and Sim show that the issue of multiracial identity further complicates the projects of government classification and self-identification. Finally, Telles (2004) considers the significance of skin color to perceptions of race in Brazil, particularly as reported to the census. An expansive register of ‘colors’ are used to describe race in much more flexible terms in Brazil than the U.S., a fact that underscores the social contingency of the American Black-White racial dichotomy. Regardless, Telles reveals that when possible, Brazillians tend to “whiten” their racial classification or that of their children (p. 94). In both countries, individuals choose to ascribe racial and ethnic characteristics based at least in part upon the real and perceived political, cultural, and material benefits and consequences of membership in an unequal racial hierarchy. Thus, Rodriguez writes of race, “It can be deconstructed, but it cannot be dismissed” (p. 25).

⁷ In *Who is White? Latinos, Asians, and the New Black/NonBlack Divide* (2003), Yancey utilizes the instruments of sociological assimilation theory and large-scale surveys to proffer a new way to conceptualize race relations in the contemporary and future U.S. society: as governed not by a White/Non-White dynamic but a Black/Non-Black paradigm that firmly anchors Blacks at what Bell (1992) refers to as ‘the bottom of the well.’ To perform this new conceptualization, Yancey engages with two bodies of theory: he mines straight-line assimilation theory of the past to compare the racial trajectory of today’s non-Black minorities—in his mind Latino and Asian Americans—with that of earlier Southern and Eastern Europeans, arguing that the former groups will eventually “become white” in the same fashion as the earlier groups. Second, he addresses who he terms social structural theorists of race (namely Bonilla-Silva) in order to defend his own survey-based work as a boon to the conversation. Ultimately, Yancey’s Black/Non-Black schematic depends upon his Black alienation thesis: that Blacks presently experience alienation based on their race qualitatively different and more powerful than any other racial group experiences, and furthermore, that this trend will continue to intensify rather than be mitigated in the future, even as non-Black minorities will achieve racial gains.

Who is White? is as provocative as it is direct. As Yancey himself points out, the sensational claim he is making is not that Blacks are alienated in American society, because that fact has been widely argued and documented, but that non-Black racial minorities, primarily Latino and Asian Americans (but

also Native Americans) will experience a “thinning out” of their racial identity as they assimilate into the majority group. They will “become White.” By this, Yancey means that Latino and Asian Americans will gain relative power, status, prestige, dominant group membership, and the “white privilege” that attends it. Here, Whiteness seems to be equated with status, and “thinking like Whites” seems to equal becoming White (p. 117). Furthermore, these groups will adopt the social views and racial attitudes of Whites as they concomitantly become more accepted by the White majority. Black Americans will have few racial allies.

The author’s formulation prompts several questions and concerns. He simultaneously treats race and racial groups as dynamic social constructions that are responsive to historical change and as essentialized reifications of their referents. *Who is White* can expand to include groups previously considered racially distinct. Yet, Yancey theoretically and practically assumes that there are a handful of well-known and static racial groups (Whites, Blacks, Latinos/Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans) some of whom will experience amalgamation. Latinos will be hindered by their proximity to their nations of origin and Asian Americans by their lack of “potential European genetic stock.” Post-structuralist and post-modern theorists who have traced the thematic of the subject can strongly criticize this assumption about static racial groups. The work in Chicana studies on borderlands and multi-situated identities provides one example.

Yancey superimposes the assimilation theories that were applied to White ethnics who arrived in the U.S. in the beginning of the 20th century (referring to Milton Gordon’s (1964) civic and identity-based assimilation and Cornell & Hartmann’s (1998) constructionist approach to racial identity) onto contemporary Latino and Asian Americans. However, he sometimes seems to refer to a loss of racial identity when he really means a loss of ethnic identity. This makes sense, since these earlier theories were built upon an ethnicity paradigm and not a racial one.

He finds evidence of Whitening and alienation in contemporary American society in terms of intermarriage, residential mixing, and shared racial attitudes (based on opinions about a handful of racially loaded topics). He finds that non-Black minorities are as close or closer to Whites than they are to Blacks in racial attitudes and that all non-Black groups have the greatest “social distance” among all groups to Blacks such that Blacks are the least desirable marriage partner and neighbor. Of course, these efforts to capture Whitening are limited because they chiefly concern attitude. Yancey also misses the point when it comes to Latino and Asian American engagements with racism and their role in American race-making. In *Pure Beauty* (2006) King-O’Riain demonstrates that intermarriage and mixed race heritage are not simply signs of acceptance; rather, race continues to “work” in dynamic and powerful ways for mixed-race Asian-White Americans and their communities. And I am skeptical that Whites will be less afraid and hateful of Latinos when they become a quarter of the population in 2050 than they are accepting of them as White. I also believe dark and light-skinned Latinos will be perceived differently (as are dark and light-skinned Blacks). Finally, I think class differentials will play a greater role in maintaining racial identity than Yancey forecasts. Continued immigration of both groups will likely prevent Latino and Asian Americans from “thinning out” sufficiently to abandon their racial politics. Although Yancey makes a good argument using the success of California Proposition 209, even socially established non-Black minority groups may yet rally around the cause of their immigrant and racialized relatives and peers.

Yancey does not address the possibility that non-Black immigrant minorities can experience “down-ward assimilation” (even though he brings up Portes and Zhou’s (1993) theory of segmented assimilation). Educators, for instance, have documented the trend of new Latino immigrant school success followed by lowered performance and school engagement in the American-born generation. In *Subtractive Schooling* (1999), Valenzuela has blamed this on the subtractive role of uncaring, overcrowded schools. How does downward assimilation or something like it challenge the whitening thesis?

Finally, the author asserts that when Asian and Latino Americans become White, they will no longer be racial allies to Blacks. To the extent that this will be true, it is a concerning and important point. This work also prompts the question of what other losses will be entailed in the “thinning” of Asian and Latino cultures and racial identities.

⁸ Administrators, teachers and educational activists in Central City have mobilized on multiple and different fronts in response to a bleak state of academic affairs. In 1999, the Central Unified School District (CUSD) had 42 schools scoring below 500 on the API and 5 above 800 (the highest indicator of performance). In 2009, it operated 6 schools scoring below 500 and 21 schools scoring above 800. These statistics were retrieved from the CUSD website.

⁹ In his racial contract theory, Mills (1997) contends that Whiteness does not describe a biologically or geographically contained category of people, but is in fact a power-inflected socio-political construction: “‘White’ people do not preexist but are brought into existence *as* ‘whites’ by the Racial Contract—hence the peculiar transformation of the human population that accompanies this contract. The white race is *invented*, and one becomes “white by law” (p. 63). He asserts that “*Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations*” (p. 127). Similarly, Ignatiev and Garvey (1996) argue, “The white race is a historically constructed social formation—historically constructed because (like royalty) it is a product of some people’s responses to historical circumstances; a social formation because it is a fact of society corresponding to no classification recognized by natural science” (p. 9).

¹⁰ The Central High School graduation rate was favorable compared with the overall district rate (70% versus 55%), as was the lower the dropout rate (24% compared to 32%), in the 2009-2010 school year. However, these numbers were unfavorable when compared with the state (74% graduation rate and 16% dropout rate). (2011-2012 School Accountability Report Card, provided by the Ed Data Partnership.)

¹¹ Two examples of alleged reverse discrimination were student-centered. One involved the perceived pre-eminence of the Chinese and Vietnamese-led Lunar New Year celebration over a Black History Month commemoration. While the Cantonese Club and faculty sponsors put on a Lunar New Year celebration event that included dinner and performances, there was no special event to honor Black students’ history and identity. The second incident occurred after a member of the Latino student club was quoted in the student newspaper saying that Latinos felt “invisible” and “don’t have a voice” on campus. A White teacher told me that he and several Asian American students took offense at the complaint, because they felt that reverse discrimination was implied.

¹² Life Beats is a pseudonym.

¹³ Executive Summary School Accountability Report Card, 2010–2011.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the shifting historical terrain upon which various immigrant groups have been considered as White, see footnote 16.

¹⁵ Blacks comprised the plurality in Central, at 35%.

¹⁶ Median home prices in this school district were above two million dollars in 2014. “MLS Listings” (2015).

¹⁷ Roediger (2006) shows that the socially embedded, dialectical development of race extends into the development of ethnicity. Specifically, the concept of ethnicity has been written into the history of the ‘new immigrants’ of the turn of the twentieth-century by contemporary historians. A key aspect of Roediger’s case for the social transformation of ‘white races’ into ‘white ethnics’ is the tension of the immigrants’ in-between status. If ‘self’ was defined to be white, and ‘other’ defined to be non-white, how were foreign, culturally distinctive European groups able to enter into such a dichotomous society and become ‘American’? Roediger asserts that the ‘biosocial’ notion of race was applied to subsume Southern and Eastern European immigrants into the dominant racial logic, with its attendant fear of ‘race suicide’ (pp. 52, 69). The immigrants experienced America’s racialization process; however, they also sought pathways to legal and cultural Whiteness. Eventual membership in white society was fostered at the expense of other minority groups and particularly entrenched blacks as the “real aliens” (Toni Morrison, cited in Roediger, p. 34). Thus, the racial hierarchy was not challenged, but actually solidified in the immigrants’ ascension from racial ‘others’ to white ethnics.

¹⁸ Activists and youth organizations in Central emphasized the narrative of personal struggle, community struggle, and racial identity.

¹⁹ For a spate of recent references to this stereotype in the popular media, Chua (2011, January 8) and Kolbert (2011, January 31).

²⁰ White suburban youth also borrow from Black youth culture, especially in the form of clothing and music consumption.

²¹ See Siegel (2012, October 27), “The Rise of Asian Americans” (“The Rise of Asian Americans,” 2013, April 4), Takagi (1992), and Chen (2012, December 19).

²² Central High School received a 5 out of 10 on the “greatschools.org” website which is popular with prospective homeowners.

²³ Data from Use Your Voice Survey (2009-2010 Annual School Scorecard, Central Unified School District).

²⁴ Lei (2003) examines the interplay of representations of “loud Black girls” and “quiet Southeast Asian boys” (who were first generation immigrants) in a high school. She found that “disciplinary technologies” of race and sex normalized these representations (Davidson, 1996, as cited in Lei, 2003, p. 167).

²⁵ When I observed in a ninth grade geometry class, about 90% of the students were Asian or Asian American. (Most were Chinese.) In an algebra class, there was a mix of Asian Americans, Latinos, and Blacks. Commenting on the racial demographics of the math track, Mr. McDermott said, “By the time they get to calculus, it’s almost 100% Asian because each year, the bottom few students leave.”

²⁶ When students described having positive learning experiences, they discussed specific teachers (whose names came up frequently). These teachers were not the majority, and unfortunately for students, they were overburdened by the demands of being a “good teacher” in a school in which superficial teaching was not only tolerated, but was the norm.

All three teachers mentioned were young and relatively new (hired within the previous six years). Although Mr. Roth’s history classes were “regular” and not A.P. classes and although he taught in the Visual Arts program, which was known by students as the “easy” academy and the “diverse” academy, they stood out as opportunities for deep learning. Speaking of his students, Mr. Roth told me, “I don’t want them to just get the content, but I want them to understand the narrative.” He also had the most sophisticated racial politics and trenchant critique of the school and education system’s failure of its students of any teacher I interviewed.

Though a brand new teacher at the time, Mr. McDermott was made chair of the math department. I attended departmental meetings and observed his classes, finding him to be thoughtful and intentional in his teaching. His planning, technology-use, and ability to keep things moving also made him an able leader in meetings with colleagues. He, too, was critical of the school and district. (I quoted him in the previous chapter saying, “They’re setting us up to fail.”)

Ms. Lewis taught English and helped spearhead the AVID program, which supported “average students” whom were neither failing nor excelling, to become college ready and to apply for college. She was a very popular teacher who seemed to give her full self to her students. In an AVID celebration dinner, I quoted students as calling her “mom.” Apparently burned out, she abruptly and unexpectedly left CHS at the end of the school year.

²⁷ The percentage of the Central High School student body that was White was 1% (2009-2010 Annual School Scorecard, Central Unified School District).

²⁸ 2009-2010 Annual School Scorecard, Central Unified School District.

²⁹ I will return to the idea of loss of hope in depth in Ch. 4, in my analysis of Black students’ experiences. It is important to note that Asian American students were discouraged and lost hope, too. I discuss this in the section on academically struggling Asian American students, in this chapter.

³⁰ Students had the opportunity to assist their teachers with administrative tasks, including copying papers and recording their classmates grades into the grade book, for course credit.

³¹ On the day that I observed Emmy's AP biology class, there were 19 students in class. All were Asian American. A young White woman named Ms. Robinson taught the class. She encouraged Emmy to apply for a summer science program for high school students at Stanford University, to which Emmy was admitted. She became very apprehensive about attending after participating in orientation. Unfortunately, Ms. Robinson left CHS at the end of the school year. Emmy's history class was taught by Mr. Roth, who I have already discussed in depth.

³² 2009-2010 Annual School Scorecard, Central Unified School District. See discussion of Advanced Placement classes in Ch. 2.

³³ I noted that Ms. Robinson, Emmy's AP biology teacher and Ms. Lewis, an English teacher, were both highly regarded, energetic novice teachers who left their jobs at the end of my time at the school. So did Mr. Kruger, the economics teacher.

³⁴ AYO and APIYO were both large umbrella non-profit organizations with several programs and agencies within each. AYO was a "lead agency" in official partnership with Central High School, which meant that it was in charge of the Wellness Center, a comprehensive, holistic resource for students that took the place of a traditional nurse's office and ran a tutoring program that served hundreds of CHS students everyday, including student athletes. (The tutoring program was funded in part by the state's Department of Education.) AYO also operated other programs, including a "rap as therapy" program that was led by a clinical social worker. It maintained program offices on the CHS campus, in addition to its offices at the AYO headquarters and at other schools in Central City.

³⁵ APIYO was driven by a different campaign each year; during my fieldwork, the campaign emphasized the importance of Ethnic Studies.

³⁶ These students often modified their response from Asian to Asian American if I followed up with a question about how they distinguished the terms Asian and Asian American in their minds.

³⁷ At the outset of my research, I was interested in the educational experiences of Southeast Asian Americans, whose group experiences have been studied as an exception to the model minority myth. My fieldwork observations prompted me to alter the focus of my research to look at the place of Asian American students in the racial landscape of the school, especially in relation to Black students. (See the section, Process of Analysis and Reflection on My Researcher Role, in Chapter 1.)

³⁸ The two exceptions were Mr. Roth and Ms. Meier. When comparing CHS with the high school in a neighboring, affluent school district, Mr. Roth said that Asian American students at the other school were likely "Chinese as opposed to Cambodian or Lao." Ms. Meier told me that the ethnic groups that had the most academic problems were, in order of most to least difficulty, Mien, Cambodian, then Vietnamese Americans. These groups contrasted with Chinese American students, which she believed provided different family pressure and support.

³⁹ 2010-2011 Executive Summary School Accountability Report Card.

⁴⁰ I once observed in Leadership class where, at the back of Ms. Meier's room, a big huddle of students surrounded a table. Upon it sat a massive stack of papers. Papers practically flew off the table as Link Crew club members stuffed envelopes with fliers for the upcoming science night. Astonishingly, they were also stuffing the envelopes with report cards; these students were given access to all their peers' grades. No one commented upon or seemed to notice the grades, but it is telling that this group of students had access to such private and sensitive information.

⁴¹ Asian American students spoke about lining their college resumes with titles accrued through involvement with student government or maximizing networks they formed in the Leadership program. Those who spent their time in AYO afterschool tutoring did not make the same claims.

⁴² Louie (2004) found that the idea that "Asian parents push hard" indeed was a "unifying theme" in her interviews with urban, working class and suburban Chinese American college students (p. 42).

⁴³ In Chapter 2, I wrote that Ms. Meier described a running joke that likened Asian American students to the "Republican voting bloc." This bloc intimidated non-Asian students in student elections and thus ensured that class officers continued to be uniformly Asian American. For a racial breakdown of class officers, see the table on page 40.

⁴⁴ Source: organization's website.

⁴⁵ I helped many students research information about transfer agreements between community colleges and universities, when they existed, and helped them contact admissions offices for more detailed information. Thus, I had many opportunities to discuss post-high school plans with CHS students, and found that their knowledge of the admissions, financial aid, and transfer processes was murky.

⁴⁶ APIYO members actively fought to include Pacific Islanders into Central City's Asian American activist community and organizational structure, negotiating and engaging in public discourses with members of the Chinese American community groups and with City Council members over the inclusion of Pacific Islanders in the name of a cultural center used by APIYO and other agencies.

⁴⁷ Adults at Central High School created multiple opportunities to recognize a variety of students, albeit through smaller, lower profile events. For example, in the Spring, ninth graders in one of the freshmen "families" (smaller cohorts of the freshmen class that took core classes together) were given certificates for the following: a single point jump in their grade point averages, for being "responsible individuals," for asking "great questions," for being "great readers and writers," for "community participation," and for "passing all math modules." The majority of students received some award or another, and the racial composition of those awarded was very mixed. This mid-day event was attended by a handful of teachers, a resource specialist, a vice principal, and a counselor, though families and friends were not invited. The counselor explained, "It seems corny, but a lot of times they don't get recognized."

⁴⁸ This English class was part of the same freshman "family;" freshmen students from the same cohort shared core classes. This class was unique in that it had a "block" schedule (two consecutive periods were spent in the same room). The students were consequently particularly close to one another.

⁴⁹ Racially acute educational inequality included unequal learning outcomes, measured in assessments I discuss on page 47 and page 129, and involvement in AP and other higher track classes. It also included less tangibly measured inequality of access to quality teaching as well as to teachers' and counselors' time and resources. Multiple vice principals told me that rates of discipline for Black and Latino students was also unequal to that of Asian American students. This in itself led to vastly more negative school experiences.

⁵⁰ Central High School Three-Year Term Progress Report to the Accrediting Commission for Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

⁵¹ Two approaches to the culture concept are of special interest to this project: The first classical anthropological sense of cultural coherence refers to shared meanings; it presumes a stable and transmissible group culture that has its own traits and qualities. Beginning during the 1960s, this approach extended theoretically into the cultural deprivation and cultural difference models used by scholars to account for trends of disproportionate minority student failure. The second socially constructed or culturally produced sense of culture arose as a critique of the first and presumes conceptual fluidity and instability. This approach extends into conversations of cultural contestation, negotiated subjectivity, and agency. The bases of cultural identity are seen as historical and contingent upon changing social practices and discursive processes.

McDermott and Varenne (1977) show that dissimilar visions of the term culture are “differently consequential” in their application and reiterate that human beings are “constrained and constraining agents” involved in the process of making the culture around them. They orient the labeling of learning disability and failure within a world of “cultural facts.” While socially engendered, these ‘facts’ are real in their connections to the political economy and materially consequential for those involved. In the sense that a group experiences an individuals’ problem (e.g. learning disability) and responds to it, the problem is cultural. Even this weak crystallization of culture locates the individual’s problem outside of his cognitive development. “Struggling toward a stronger sense of culture,” McDermott and Verenne emphasize the social nature of the cultural production of a problem: “The problem did not consist of *his* ‘being’ Learning Disabled as much as in his living *in a world* well organized to label and disable him” [emphasis in original] (p. 42).

As I noted earlier, the anthropological operation of culture has extended into a cultural difference approach to theorizing why students from minority cultures struggle in school. Accordingly,

It maintains that children from a minority cultural background mixed with teachers from a more dominant cultural background suffer enough miscommunication and alienation to give up on school, this despite the fact that they are, at least potentially, fully capable (p. 141).

This model emerged during the 1960s as a response to the dominant model of cultural deprivation, as exemplified by Oscar Lewis’s (1966) thesis that Puerto Ricans live among and reproduce a culture of poverty. For McDermott and Varenne, cultural difference represents a considerable, but temporary achievement over the deprivation model. Nonetheless, in both cases, “attention is placed on a

characteristic of the child rather than on the processes that make that characteristic consequential” (p. 142). This is noteworthy, as Asian immigrants and Southeast Asian refugees, in particular, were traditionally assessed both in the academic literature and in schools through the cultural difference framework.

⁵² At the year-end AVID celebration dinner, which took place in the library, Ms. Lewis handed out sashes to the 22 seniors in the program. “We’re going to make you cry, Ms. Lewis!” a Black male student told her. She had made a bet with her class that she would not cry. “We love you!” a few students called out. Speaking to the audience of students, their families, a few fellow teachers and an administrator, she said, “We’ve been through ups and downs, but at the end of the day, they know I love them all. We’ve survived each other.” Maya gave a short speech, saying, “Everyone in the class is like a son or daughter to her. She’s like our mother; she’s been here for us. She’s like a shoulder to cry on. I’ll never forget her. I love her.” In closing, a Black boy in the group said that he did not want to be in the program, but said that he likes Ms. Lewis. He was one of a group of Black male students who socialized at Ms. Lewis’s desk during free periods and after school. More than in any other academic space I observed, I saw that her desk was a home base for Black male students, an informal space that conferred belonging and was associated with feelings of ownership.

⁵³ Beyond anything else, students trusted adults who displayed commitment to them over the long-term. The extra effort this role required sometimes took its toll in terms of burn-out. Several committed teachers who were widely recognized as mentors and strong teachers left teaching. Ms. Lewis abruptly left her position a few months after the AVID dinner. Many other teachers contemplated quitting aloud to me.

⁵⁴ Eckert (1989) writes about two social groups in a high school, jocks and burnouts, that emerge in day-to-day interactions as class divisions play out in a high school. Observing graffiti, she writes that burnouts “express their counter-cultural position in the school by transforming the school facilities to suit their needs and identities” (p. 51). Central High School students were engaged in similar transformations of space, but they were also occasionally shepherded in certain directions by adults (for example, by Mr. Casey).

⁵⁵ The racialization of Black youth at CHS was not unique to the school; instead, it was an extension and reflection of racializing trends in the city (and beyond). Describing comparable phenomena in a similar site, Rios (2011) argues that “criminalization is embedded in” the city’s “social order, that it is a fabric of everyday life... young people are policed, punished, and harassed” (p. 27). He includes schools, families, community centers, and the criminal justice system in a “youth control complex,” a web of surveillance and punishment that criminalizes Black and Latino young people.

⁵⁶ Saturday morning detention took place in the library. By Fall 2012, the educative, book-lending function of the library ceased, as the school lost funding for a librarian. The library doors were regularly locked. In detention, students sat at tables in the center of the room. Bookshelves flanked the outer areas. After noting the Black and Latino composition of the students in one Saturday morning detention session, I looked at the sparse collection of titles on the shelves. Instantly, two stood out: *The Miseducation of the Negro* and nearby, *How Asian Working Parents Get Their Students to Succeed*. The exhortation of Asian

American students to “succeed,” which relied on parental action, contrasted sharply with the “miseducation” of Black students in the book and who were seated at the tables. (Besides housing detention, the library hosted the football team’s afterschool tutoring session, conducted by staff members of the Asian Youth Organization.)

⁵⁷ In Ch. 2, I described district-mandated efforts to recruit a “more diverse” set of students into Advanced Placement classes, which gave way to a retention problem. As I wrote in chapters 2 and 3, Ms. Meier, the Leadership teacher, was also purposeful in attempting to diversify the Leadership class. The Center City school district also funded and implemented an “African American Male Leadership Program.” It recruited a Black case manager at CHS to lead a class of ninth graders whose middle school GPAs ranged between 2.0-3.0 through a standardized curriculum that he said emphasized “manhood development, self-reflection and self motivation.”

Bibliography

- Ainsworth-Darnell, J. W., & Downey, D. B. (1998). Assessing the Oppositional Culture Explanation for Racial/Ethnic Differences in School Performance. *American Sociological Review*, 63(4), 536. doi:10.2307/2657266
- Alba, R. D., & Nee, V. (2003). *Remaking the American mainstream: Assimilation and contemporary immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Almaguer, T. (1994). *Racial fault lines: The historical origins of white supremacy in California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and philosophy, and other essays*. London: New Left Books.
- Ancheta, A. N. (1998). *Race, rights, and the Asian American experience*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Anderson, B. R. (1982). *Imagined communities*. London.
- Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto schooling: A political economy of urban educational reform*. New York: Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Asians: Too Smart for Their Own Good? (2012, December 19). *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/20/opinion/asians-too-smart-for-their-own-good.html?_r=0
- Barker, M. (1990). Biology and the New Racism. In D. T. Goldberg (Ed.), *Anatomy of Racism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barth, F. (1996). Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. In W. Sollors (Ed.), *Theories of ethnicity: A classical reader* (pp. 294-324). Washington Square, NY: New York University Press.
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York, NY: BasicBooks.
- Bertrand, M., & Mullainathan, S. (2003). Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination. doi:10.3386/w9873
- Bobo, L. D., & Charles, C. Z. (1996). United States. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 621(1), 243-259. doi:10.1177/0002716296543001034

-
- Bogardus, E. S. (1925). *Introduction to sociology*. Los Angeles: J.R. Miller.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2004). From bi-racial to tri-racial: Towards a new system of racial stratification in the USA. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27(6), 931-950. doi:10.1080/0141987042000268530
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2004). Race In The World System. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race DBR*, 1(01). doi:10.1017/s1742058x04000104
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brint, S. G., & Karabel, J. (1989). *The diverted dream: Community colleges and the promise of educational opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge.
- Cerwonka, A., & Malkki, L. H. (2007). *Improvising theory: Process and temporality in ethnographic fieldwork*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chang, G. H. (2001). *Asian Americans and politics: Perspectives, experiences, prospects*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
- Chang, L., & Yang, Q. P. (2000). The 'model minority' deconstructed. In M. Zhou & J. V. Gatewood (Eds.), *Contemporary Asian America: A multidisciplinary reader*. New York: New York University Press.
- Chhuon, V., Hudley, C., Brenner, M. E., & Macias, R. (2009). The Multiple Worlds of Successful Cambodian American Students. *Urban Education*, 45(1), 30-57.
doi:10.1177/0042085909352583

-
- Chua, A. (2011, January 8). Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior. *Wall Street Journal*.
- Civil Rights Project. (2000). *Opportunities suspended: The devastating consequences of zero tolerance and school discipline policies* (Publication). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Clifford, J., & Marcus, G. E. (1986). *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography: A School of American Research advanced seminar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Coleman, J. S. (1961). *The adolescent society; the social life of the teenager and its impact on education*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Coloma, R. S. (2006). Disorienting race and education: Changing paradigms on the schooling of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 9*(1), 1-15.
doi:10.1080/13613320500490606
- Cornell, S. E., & Hartmann, D. (1998). *Ethnicity and race: Making identities in a changing world*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Davidson, A. L. (1996). *Making and molding identity in schools: Student narratives on race, gender, and academic engagement*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Davis, F. J. (1991). The Nation's Rule. In *Who is black?: One nation's definition*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Deschenes, S., Cuban, L., & Tyack, D. (2001). Mismatch: Historical Perspectives on Schools and Students Who Don't Fit Them. *Teachers College Record Teachers College Rec, 103*(4), 525-547.
doi:10.1111/0161-4681.00126
- Di Leonardo, M. (2004, September 12-14). *Human Cultural Diversity*. Lecture presented at Race and Human Variation: Setting an Agenda for Future Research and Education, American Anthropological Association, Alexandria, VA.
- Downey, D. B., & Ainsworth-Darnell, J. W. (2002). The Search for Oppositional Culture among Black Students. *American Sociological Review, 67*(1), 156. doi:10.2307/3088939

-
- Durkheim, E. (1977). On Education and Society. In J. Karabel & A. H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Eckert, P. (1989). *Jocks and burnouts: Social categories and identity in the high school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Erickson, F. (1987). Transformation and School Success: The Politics and Culture of Educational Achievement. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 18(4), 335-356.
doi:10.1525/aeq.1987.18.4.04x0023w
- Espiritu, Y. L., & Omi, M. (2000). Who Are You Calling Asian? Shifting Identity Claims, Racial Classification and the Census. In P. M. Ong (Ed.), *The State of Asian Pacific America: Transforming Race Relations: A Public Policy Report* (Vol. IV, pp. 30-45). Los Angeles, CA: Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP) Asian Pacific American Policy Institute.
- Espiritu, Y. L. (1992). *Asian American panethnicity: Bridging institutions and identities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skin, white mask*. New York: Grove Press.
- Farkas, G., Lleras, C., & Maczuga, S. (2002). Does Oppositional Culture Exist in Minority and Poverty Peer Groups? *American Sociological Review*, 67(1), 148. doi:10.2307/3088938
- Ferguson, A. A. (2001). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Fields, B. (1990). Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America. *New Left Review*, 181(May-June), 95-118.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Foley, D. E. (1990). *Learning capitalist culture: Deep in the heart of Tejas*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the "burden of 'acting white'" *Urban Rev The Urban Review*, 18(3), 176-206.

-
- Fordham, S. (1988). Racelessness as a Factor in Black Students' School Success: Pragmatic Strategy or Pyrrhic Victory? *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(1), 54-85.
doi:10.17763/haer.58.1.c5r77323145r7831
- Fordham, S. (1996). *Blacked out: Dilemmas of race, identity, and success at Capital High*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M., & Gordon, C. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Frazier, J. W., & Margai, F. M. (2003). *Multicultural geographies: The changing racial/ethnic patterns of the United States*. Binghamton, NY: Global Academic Pub.
- Gamoran, A., & Berends, M. (1987). The Effects of Stratification in Secondary Schools: Synthesis of Survey and Ethnographic Research. *Review of Educational Research*, 57(4), 415-435.
doi:10.3102/00346543057004415
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gillborn, D. (2006). Citizenship education as placebo: 'standards', institutional racism and education policy. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 1(1), 83-104.
- Gilmore, R. W. (2007). *Golden gulag: Prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Giroux, H. A. (1983). *Theory and resistance in education: A pedagogy for the opposition*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Giroux, H. A. (1988). *Schooling and the struggle for public life: Critical pedagogy in the modern age*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gooding-Williams, R. (1993). Korean Americans vs. African Americans: Conflict and construction. In *Reading Rodney King/reading urban uprising*. New York: Routledge.
- Gordon, M. M. (1964). *Assimilation in American life: The role of race, religion, and national origins*. New York: Oxford University Press.

-
- Gossett, T. F. (1963). *Race; the history of an idea in America*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press.
- Gramsci, A., Hoare, Q., & Nowell-Smith, G. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Grubb, W. N., & McDonnell, L. (1991). *Local systems of vocational education and job training: Diversity, interdependence, and effectiveness*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.
- Gutmann, A. (1987). *Democratic education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hacking, I. (1999). *The social construction of what?* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Hall, S., & Gay, P. D. (1996). *Questions of cultural identity*. London: Sage.
- Hall, S., & Jefferson, T. (1993). *Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1992). Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies. *Rethinking Marxism*, 5(1), 10-18. doi:10.1080/08935699208657998
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575. doi:10.2307/3178066
- Harding, S. G. (1986). *The science question in feminism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Harris, D. R., & Sim, J. J. (2002). Who Is Multiracial? Assessing the Complexity of Lived Race. *American Sociological Review*, 67(4), 614. doi:10.2307/3088948
- Harvey, D. (1989). *The limits to capital*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hein, J. (1995). *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: A refugee experience in the United States*. London: Prentice-Hall International.
- Hing, B. O. (1993). *Making and remaking Asian America through immigration policy, 1850-1990*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hochschild, J. L., & Scovronick, N. B. (2003). *The American dream and the public schools*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Holland, D. C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

-
- Hune, S. (1995). Rethinking Race: Paradigms and Policy Formation. *Amerasia Journal*, 21(1-2), 29-40. doi:10.17953/amer.21.1-2.n23363k754186260
- Ignatiev, N., & Garvey, J. (1996). *Race traitor*. New York: Routledge.
- Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. (1998). The Black-White Test Score Gap: Why It Persists and What Can Be Done. *The Brookings Review*, 16(2), 24. doi:10.2307/20080778
- Johnson, E. P. (2003). *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the politics of authenticity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Karabel, J., & Halsey, A. H. (1977). *Power and ideology in education*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Keaton, T. D. (2001). *(Re)Articulating National Identity: France and its Muslim Children* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of California, Berkeley.
- Kibria, N. (2002). *Becoming Asian American: Second-generation Chinese and Korean American identities*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kim, C. J. (1999). The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans. *Politics & Society*, 27(1), 105-138. doi:10.1177/0032329299027001005
- Kim, C. J. (2000). *Bitter fruit: The politics of Black-Korean conflict in New York City*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- King, J. E. (1991). Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and the Miseducation of Teachers. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 60(2), 133. doi:10.2307/2295605
- King-O'Riain, R. C. (2006). *Pure beauty: Judging race in Japanese American beauty pageants*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kolbert, E. (2011, January 31). America's Top Parent What's behind the "Tiger Mother" craze? *The New Yorker*.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: Crown Pub.
- L. W. (2002). From slavery to mass incarceration, rethinking the 'race' question in the U.S. *New Left Review*, 13.

-
- Labelle, T. J., & Ogbu, J. (1978). Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective. *American Educational Research Journal*, 15(4), 570. doi:10.2307/1162650
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (1995). Towards a Critical Race Theory of Education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47-68.
- Lareau, A., & Weininger, E. B. (2003). Cultural capital in educational research: A critical assessment. *Theory and Society*, 32(5/6), 567-606.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Le, C. N. (n.d.). Socioeconomic Statistics and Demographics. Retrieved March 7, 2015, from <http://www.asian-nation.org/demographics.shtml>.
- Leander, K. M. (2002). Silencing in Classroom Interaction: Producing and Relating Social Spaces. *Discourse Processes*, 34(2), 193-235. doi:10.1207/s15326950dp3402_4
- Lee, S. J. (1994). Behind the Model-Minority Stereotype: Voices of High- and Low-Achieving Asian American Students. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 25(4), 413-429. doi:10.1525/aeq.1994.25.4.04x0530j
- Lee, S. J. (2005). *Up against whiteness: Race, school, and immigrant youth*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.
- Lee, S. J. (2006). Additional complexities: Social class, ethnicity, generation, and gender in Asian American student experiences. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 9(1), 17-28. doi:10.1080/13613320500490630
- Lee, S. J. (2009). *Unraveling the "model minority" stereotype: Listening to Asian American youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lei, J. L. (2003). (Un)Necessary Toughness?: Those "Loud Black Girls" and Those "Quiet Asian Boys" *Anthropology Education Quarterly*, 34(2), 158-181. doi:10.1525/aeq.2003.34.2.158
- Lei, J. L. (2006). Teaching and learning with Asian American and Pacific Islander students. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 9(1), 85-101. doi:10.1080/13613320500490788

-
- Leonardo, Z., & Hunter, M. (2007). Imagining the Urban: The Politics of Race, Class, and Schooling. *International Handbook of Urban Education*, 779-801. doi:10.1007/978-1-4020-5199-9_41
- Lew, J. (2004). The "Other" Story of Model Minorities: Korean American High School Dropouts in an Urban Context. *Anthropology Education Quarterly ANTHROPOLOGY & EDUCATION QUARTERLY*, 35(3), 303-323. doi:10.1525/aeq.2004.35.3.303
- Lewis, A. E. (2003). *Race in the schoolyard: Negotiating the color line in classrooms and communities*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Lewis, O. (1966). *La vida: A Puerto Rican family in the culture of poverty- San Juan and New York*. New York: Random House.
- Lopez, I. H. (2006). Colorblind to the reality of race in America. *The Chronicle Review*, 53(11), B6-B8.
- Louie, V. S. (2004). *Compelled to excel: Immigration, education, and opportunity among Chinese Americans*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lowe, L. (1996). *Immigrant acts: On Asian American cultural politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ma, S. (2000). *The deathly embrace: Orientalism and Asian American identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- MacLeod, J. (1987). *Ain't no makin' it: Leveled aspirations in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Marcus, G. E., & Fischer, M. M. (1986). *Anthropology as cultural critique: An experimental moment in the human sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marcus, G. E. (1998). *Ethnography through thick and thin*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Marx, A. W. (1998). *Making race and nation: A comparison of South Africa, the United States, and Brazil*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Massey, D. S., & Denton, N. A. (1993). *American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

-
- Mccall, L. (2005). The Complexity of Intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society Signs*, 30(3), 1771-1800. doi:10.1086/426800
- Miles, R. (1989). *Racism*. London: Routledge.
- Mills, C. W. (1997). *The racial contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mollenkopf, J. (2012, February 6). *Segmented Assimilation Reconsidered*. Lecture presented at Sociology Colloquium in University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA.
- Moody, J. (2001). Race, School Integration, and Friendship Segregation in America. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107(3), 679-716. doi:10.1086/338954
- Nagel, J. (1994). Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture. *Social Problems*, 41(1), 152-176. doi:10.2307/3096847
- Neubeck, K. J., & Cazenave, N. A. (2001). *Welfare racism: Playing the race card against America's poor*. New York: Routledge.
- Ngo, B. (2006). Learning from the margins: The education of Southeast and South Asian Americans in context. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 9(1), 51-65. doi:10.1080/13613320500490721
- Noguera, P. (2003). *City schools and the American dream: Reclaiming the promise of public education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Nygreen, K. (2005). *From Theory to Practice: Limits and Possibilities of Critical Pedagogy In a High Poverty Urban High School* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of California, Berkeley.
- Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ogbu, J. (1991). Cultural diversity and school experience. In C. E. Walsh (Ed.), *Literacy as praxis: Culture, language, and pedagogy*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Pub.
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1986). *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (2015). *Racial formation in the United States*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ong, A. (2003). *Buddha is hiding: Refugees, citizenship, the new America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

-
- Ong, P. M., Bonacich, E., & Cheng, L. (1994). *The New Asian immigration in Los Angeles and global restructuring*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Orfield, G., & Eaton, S. E. (1996). *Dismantling desegregation: The quiet reversal of Brown v. Board of Education*. New York: New Press.
- Osajima, K. (2000). Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s. In M. Zhou & J. V. Gatewood (Eds.), *Contemporary Asian America: A multidisciplinary reader*. New York: New York University Press.
- Palumbo-Liu, D. (1999). *Asian/American: Historical crossings of a racial frontier*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Pang, V. O., Pak, Y., & Kiang, P. (2004). Asian Pacific American Students: Challenging a Biased Educational System. In J. A. Banks & C. A. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Park, R. E., Burgess, E. W., McKenzie, R. D., & Wirth, L. (1925). *The city*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Perlstein, D. H. (2004). *Justice, justice: School politics and the eclipse of liberalism*. New York: P. Lang.
- Perry, P. (2001). White Means Never Having to Say You're Ethnic: White Youth and the Construction of "Cultureless" Identities. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 30(1), 56-91.
doi:10.1177/089124101030001002
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Portes, A., & Zhou, M. (1993). The new second generation: Segmented assimilation and its variants. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 530, 74-96.
- Prashad, V. (2000). *The karma of Brown folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rios, V. M. (2011). *Punished: Policing the lives of Black and Latino boys*. New York: New York University Press.

-
- The Rise of Asian Americans* (Rep.). (2013, April 4). Retrieved <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/>
- Rodriguez, C. E. (2000). *Changing race: Latinos, the census, and the history of ethnicity in the United States*. New York: New York University Press.
- Roediger, D. R. (2006). *Working toward whiteness: How America's immigrants became white: The strange journey from Ellis Island to the suburbs*. New York: Basic Books.
- Rorty, R. (1998). *Achieving our country: Leftist thought in twentieth-century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rumbaut, R. G. (2000). Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian Americans. In M. Zhou & J. V. Gatewood (Eds.), *Contemporary Asian America: A Multi-Disciplinary Reader* (pp. 175-206). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Knopf.
- Siegel, L. (2012, October 27). The Rise of Asian Americans. *The Wall Street Journal*.
- Simmel, G., & Wolff, K. H. (1950). *The Sociology of Georg Simmel. Translated, Edited, and With an Introd. by Kurt H. Wolff*. Glencoe, IL, Free Press.
- Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. (2000). *The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment* (Rep. No. SRS1). Bloomington, IN: Education Policy Center.
- Smith, D. E. (1974). Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology. *Sociological Inquiry*, 44(1), 7-13. doi:10.1111/j.1475-682x.1974.tb00718.x
- Soss, J., Schram, S. F., Vartanian, T. P., & O'brien, E. (2001). Setting the Terms of Relief: Explaining State Policy Choices in the Devolution Revolution. *American Journal of Political Science*, 45(2), 378. doi:10.2307/2669347
- Spring, J. H. (1978). *American education: An introduction to social and political aspects*. New York: Longman.

-
- Stack, C. B. (1974). *All our kin: Strategies for survival in a Black community*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Takagi, D. Y. (1992). *The retreat from race: Asian-American admissions and racial politics*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Taylor, M. C., & Foster, G. A. (1986). Bad Boys and School Suspensions: Public Policy Implications for Black Males. *Sociological Inquiry*, 56(4), 498-506. doi:10.1111/j.1475-682x.1986.tb01174.x
- Telles, E. E. (2004). *Race in another America: The significance of skin color in Brazil*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Thompson, E. P. (1964). *The making of the English working class*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Tuan, M. (1998). *Forever foreigners or honorary whites?: The Asian ethnic experience today*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Turner, G. (1996). *British cultural studies: An introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Tyson, K. (2006). The making of a burden: Tracing the development of a "burden of 'acting white' in schools. In E. M. Horvat & C. O'Connor (Eds.), *Beyond acting white: Reframing the debate on black student achievement*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Tyson, K., Darity, W., & Castellino, D. R. (2005). It's Not "a Black Thing": Understanding the Burden of Acting White and Other Dilemmas of High Achievement. *American Sociological Review*, 70(4), 582-605. doi:10.1177/000312240507000403
- Um, K. (1999). Scars of War: Educational Issues and Challenges for Cambodian American Students. In C. C. Park & M. M. Chi (Eds.), *Asian-American education: Prospects and challenges*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Valentine, C. A. (1968). *Culture and poverty: Critique and counter-proposals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Varenne, H., & McDermott, R. (1998). *Successful failure: The school America builds*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

-
- Varenne, H. (1998). Diversity as American Cultural Category. In C. J. Greenhouse & R. Kheshti (Authors), *Democracy and ethnography: Constructing identities in multicultural liberal states*. Albany N.Y: State University of New York Press.
- Wacqant, L. (2002). From slavery to mass incarceration. *New Left Review*, (13).
- Waters, M. C. (1990). *Ethnic options: Choosing identities in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Waters, M. C., Tran, V. C., Kasinitz, P., & Mollenkopf, J. H. (2010). Segmented assimilation revisited: Types of acculturation and socioeconomic mobility in young adulthood. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33(7), 1168-1193. doi:10.1080/01419871003624076
- Willie, C. V., & Willie, S. S. (2005). Black, White, and Brown: The Transformation of Public Education in America. *Teachers College Record Teachers College Rec*, 107(3), 475-495. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9620.2005.00484.x
- Willis, P. E. (1981). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Yancey, G. A. (2003). *Who is white?: Latinos, Asians, and the new black/nonblack divide*. Boulder, CO: L. Rienner.
- Yu, H. (2001). *Thinking Orientals: Migration, contact, and exoticism in modern America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zhou, M., & Bankston, C. L. (1998). *Growing up American: How Vietnamese children adapt to life in the United States*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Zhou, M., & Gatewood, J. V. (2000). U.S. immigration policies and Asian migration. In *Contemporary Asian America: A multidisciplinary reader* (pp. 155-174). New York: New York University Press.
- Zweigenhaft, R. L., & Domhoff, G. W. (1998). *Diversity in the power elite: Have women and minorities reached the top?* New Haven: Yale University Press.