UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

SURVIVING THROUGH THE CAPE OF INVISIBILITY

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

By ALLIE NGA PHAM
Norman, Oklahoma
2019

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SURVIVING THROUGH THE CAPE OF INVISIBILITY

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the following people. Scott, Natalia, Angie, and Adisha, thank you for being by my side and offering me your support and guidance throughout this process. I would also like to thank specifically my family for their sacrifices and love have allowed me this opportunity to pursue higher education. They were my motivation in sharing and finishing this paper. Also, thank you to Dr. Velazquez, Dr. Hextrum, and Dr. Houser for their knowledge, mentorship, and support in helping me achieve something that I never thought was possible!

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Abstract

In this paper, the author employs *testimonio* to highlight the historical event of the Vietnam War, its impact on Vietnamese refugees and immigrants, and her personal and educational experiences in the United States. As the population of Asians and Asian Americans is increasing in the United States, the misperceptions of this group still exist due to the model minority myth, a dangerous misconception that creates division between Asians and Asian Americans and communities of color. Further, she grounds her *testimonio* in Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) in order to emphasize the need to include Asian American narratives within the Black and white binary paradigm. Through her reconnection with her Vietnamese identity, she addresses *testimonio* as her methodology and empowerment tool to dismantle the model minority myth.

Keywords: Vietnamese Americans, model minority, *testimonio*, immigration

Introduction

I was born and raised in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, for the first seven years of my life until my family immigrated to the United States in 2002, settling in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Since my grandparents decided to leave the country, my journey to America was almost predestined after the Vietnam War (1955-1975), a police action, united the country but divided the people. Living very minimally, the economic status of my family was unstable during the first seven years of my life in Vietnam; my dad worked in a beer factory while my mom would look after my brother and me at home. It was even before I could learn about the complex and rich history of my country when I heard the news from my parents that we were moving to the new country on the other side of the world. Not having interacted much with my grandparents until then, the whole family took off to the land of better opportunities, the U.S.



Figure 1. Southeast Asia Map

Source: Obtained from the Nations Online Project. Southeast Asia is a subregion of Asia, roughly be described as geographically situated east of the Indian subcontinent, south of China and north of Australia, between the Indian Ocean (in west) and the Pacific Ocean (in east).

Besides the expectations on socio-economic betterment that my parents had, the advanced education system was definitely one of the reasons for us to move to the U.S. However, the U.S. education system did not meet the desired outcomes based on my educational experiences in Oklahoma City. There were missing parts in American history that was taught in the public education because it made little efforts to teach the "invisible narratives". Thus, it mainly focused on centering the U.S. as a powerful country and concealed facts that the U.S. has inflicted violence and oppression on people of color.

In the school district that I attended, Oklahoma City Public Schools, the majority of the student population were either Latino/a or Black. As one of the few Asian students, I experienced a lack of resources to refer to as an Asian American. Striving to achieve an education in OKPS showcased the inequity that exists among racial groups that has led students, like myself, to be unprepared for college. There were not enough teachers and staff in schools to support marginalized students (e.g. students of color, low-income households students) and their families adequately. Especially, the support for the newcomer families was insufficient, for instance, there was not one bilingual teacher who was fluent in both Vietnamese and English to help and guide my family through the college preparation process during high school.

It was within the process of getting into college that I started to face the pervasive "standards" of Asian Americans regarding their academic achievement throughout the secondary education and college. Typically, Asian Americans are assumed to be financially wealthy and naturally smart. It is almost mythical that Asian Americans has become the role model for other minority groups to benchmark the academic successes that Asian Americans accomplish with the aggregated data. However, Southeast Asians, such as Cambodians, Laotians, Hmongs, and Vietnamese are quite far from the ideal representations of the Asian Americans. They are likely

to perform a lower attainment of higher education based on the lower socioeconomic backgrounds.[1] It is not plausible to assume one individual to fall under a category that is socially constructed. Southeast Asians living in the U.S. or in general are not to be just considered as Asian Americans to be judged by the social norms of the racial group.

In fact, such existence of prejudices about a group of people only hinders the positive outgrowth of individual to feel destined to be one of them or even discouraged when they cannot keep up with the mythical standards, especially in education. Therefore, it is crucial to gather authentic narratives that arise within the group of interests to have as resources for young students to make use of to understand who they are to define themselves however they want. Southeast Asian American literature and voices should be studied in order to disrupt the false image of the *model minority.* In this paper, I will focus on Vietnamese experiences and share my *testimonio* to increase awareness of the historical event of the Vietnam War that had displaced Vietnamese people to be spread outside of the country, impacting Vietnamese refugees and immigrants. It is to share my own narratives portraying how I have strived and still striving to survive and resist in a place that makes me "invisible" under the category of "Asian American". [2]

[1] Nguyen, Bach Mai Dolly, Cynthia M. Alcantar, Edward R. Curammeng, Edwin Hernandez, Victoria Kim, Audrey D. Paredes, Rachel Freeman, et al. 2017. "The Racial Heterogeneity Project: Implications for Educational Research, Practice, and Policy." *ACT, Inc.* ACT, Inc. http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED583600&site=ehost-live.

[2] For the purpose of my thesis, it is important that I clarify some of the differences between refugees and immigrants. Refugees are forced to flee their country mainly due to human rights and safety concerns. They may leave family and friends and belongings behind without any warning. Further, the journey to safety can be dangerous and many refugees risk their lives as they search for protection. Immigrants, on the other hand, can consciously choose to have a better life somewhere else. They can say goodbye to family members and friends. Further, they are not fearing for their lives. However, I do want to acknowledge that these definitions and characteristics of refugees and immigrants are not static and can change based on the individual background. https://www.ssi.org.au/faqs/refugee-faqs/148-what-is-the-difference-between-a-refugee-and-a-migrant

An Asian Critical Theory

The public education that Oklahoma offers does not include much information or resources on Vietnamese immigration in regard to the history and narratives of my community. When Dolores Delgado Bernal emphasized the importance of recognizing how students of color are the "holders and creators of knowledge," it did not go along with my experience as a Vietnamese American immigrant in the United States.[3] It did not take long for me to see that the history of a nation can be hidden, misrepresented, and devalued in a society. Observing only the partial narratives of history being taught has inevitably led myself to perceive it as affected by a social hierarchy or power dynamics between nations and races.

An Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit), which stems from tCritical Race Theory (CRT), is applied in this paper to interpret this social phenomenon of missing narratives of a certain racial group. Established by legal scholars in the mid-1900s, CRT focuses on centering the experiences of diverse races mainly to challenge the dominant discourse and make sense of how racism and white supremacy affect the daily lives of people of color.[4] Stemming from the field of law, CRT can be implemented in sociology, ethnic studies, women's studies, and history.[5] It consists of five basic tenets that involve commitment to social justice, the importance of transdisciplinary approaches, an emphasis on experiential knowledge, a challenge to dominant ideologies, and the

[3] Bernal, Dolores Delgado. "Critical Race Theory, Latino Critical Theory, and Critical Raced-Gendered Epistemologies: Recognizing Students of Color as Holders and Creators of Knowledge." *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (02 2002): 105-26. doi:10.1177/107780040200800107.

[4] Hartlep, Nicholas Daniel. 2009. "Critical Race Theory An Examination of Its Past, Present, and Future Implications." *Online Submission*, October. http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED506735&site=ehost-live.

[5] Solorzano, Daniel, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso. "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students." *The Journal of Negro Education* 69, no. 1/2 (2000): 60-73. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2696265.

centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination.[6] These five tenets examine how white supremacy functions on the notion of white racial domination over subordinated bodies of color through the promotion of violent racial structures and social exclusion.[7] As white supremacists created discriminatory practices, policies, and laws, they perpetuate the systematic inequality and racial hierarchy in order to protect white privilege and interests.[8] It has caused indigenous genocide, slavery, residential covenants, school segregation, and racial restrictions of citizenship that continuously disempower communities of color and spearheaded the work of CRT. Education scholars eventually began to critique CRT in their research to demonstrate how the U.S. education system attributes to the inequitable educational outcomes for the students of color.[9] Thus, CRT was expanded to different fields such as LatCrit, TribalCrit, and AsianCrit in order to serve the needs of each different communities.

Since I am focusing on my own lived realities, AsianCrit aids me in the process of leaving the safety of my silence in order to emphasize the unique history and experience as a Vietnamese immigrant. Similar to my own beliefs on Asian American issues, Robert Chang called on the need of Asian American Legal Scholarship or AsianCrit to address Asian American issues and how the community was historically and differently positioned "with respect to other disempowered groups."[10] It examines the legal and societal implications of white supremacy on

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[6] Yosso, Tara, William Smith, Miguel Ceja, and Daniel Solórzano. "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates." *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 4 (12 2009): 659-91. doi:10.17763/haer.79.4.m6867014157m707l.

[7] Bonds, Anne, and Joshua Inwood. "Beyond White Privilege: Geographies of White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism." Progress in Human Geography 40, no. 6 (December 2016): 715–33. doi:10.1177/0309132515613166.

[8] Liu, William Ming. "White Male Power and Privilege: The Relationship between White Supremacy and Social Class." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 64, no. 4 (07, 2017): 349-358, https://search.proquest.com/docview/1915377181?accountid=12964 (accessed April 15, 2019).

[9] Ladson-Billings, Gloria, and Ladson-Billings, Gloria;Tate, William F., IV. "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education." Teachers College Record 97, no. 1 (1995): 47.

[10] Chang, Robert S. *Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-structuralism, and Narrative Space*. University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, 1993. 1249

Asian Americans and allows me to speak about the oppression I have felt in terms of three phases: (a) denial of difference, (b) affirmation of difference, and (c) liberation from difference.[11]

Denial of Difference

In the first stage, denial of difference, there are two methods that individuals may employ as they begin to challenge the underlying principles of their oppression to achieve formal equality. The first method includes adopting a race-neutral approach where an individual may believe in the practice of meritocracy.[12] The second one involves race-conscious approach where an individual embraces policy such as affirmative action.[13] While both of these approaches aim to acquire equality, the race neutral approach is dangerous as it can neglect the ethnic diversity and struggles within the Asian American community. For instance, many Southeast Asians and Asian Americans still have low college attendance based on the 2010 U.S. Census: 68.5% of Cambodian, 66.5% of Lao, 63.2% of Hmong, and 51.1% of Vietnamese.[14] This data has influenced me to support race-conscious approach as a mean to achieve equality. The race-conscious method has helped me reconnect with my roots once I realized the contradiction of assimilation and eventually accept my differences.[15]

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[11] Ibid., pp.1317
[12] Ibid., pp.1317
[13] Ibid.
[14] "Statement: SEARAC Remains Committed to Affirmative Action and Race-Conscious College Admissions Policies." *SEARAC*, 5 Oct. 2018, www.searac.org/our-voices/press-room/statement-searac-remains-committed-to-affirmative-action-and-race-conscious-college-admissions-policies/.
[15] Chang, Robert S. *Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-structuralism, and Narrative Space*.

Acceptance of Differences to Liberation of Differences

The acceptance of differences leads to the second phase of affirmation of differences, because formal equality cannot be fulfilled without increasing equity. This part also recognizes that everyone experiences discrimination differently which may also result in different treatments under the law. Thus, the differences within Asian American communities in this phase are celebrated instead of being seen as a negative thing that needs to be overcome. In this stage, my awareness on the rich history on Asian Americans made me recognize the importance of voicing my experiences and struggles as a Vietnamese American immigrant. Speaking about my experiences allows me to use "Asian American" as a way to empower myself as I have realized that formal equality cannot exist without equity.

In the final stage, AsianCrit calls for liberation from the limitations that stem from the term "Asian Americans." This conveys a meaning that while I understand my context has constructed myself under this category, I can still choose to reject it so that I can freely embrace my Vietnamese identity. Further, this liberation from differences calls for the use of multiple consciousness to comprehend the diversity that exists not only within Asian American community but also among the disempowered population as a step towards freedom to demonstrate our diversity.

AsianCrit addresses the need to include not just majority-minority relations but also minority-minority relations to convey how white supremacy positions Asian Americans to create tension among minority groups. In particular, Asian Americans are racially positioned between the white and black interaction. As demonstrated in Figure 2, the positionality of Asian

Americans indicates how Asian Americans are racially valorized but also civically ostracized.[16] To dissect this complex relationship, I claim that this figure can be translated to how white supremacy utilizes its power to dominate communities of color. This means that white supremacy is able to thrive because it dictates how privileges and goods are distributed throughout time based on the positionality of an individual's race in society.[17] This means that by stereotyping Asian Americans as the model minority, it falsely justifies that other communities of color can overcome the racial discrimination if they "just work hard enough." Yet at the same time, Asian Americans are also placed in a position of being perpetual foreigners which denies them the rights to participate in politics and have civic memberships.

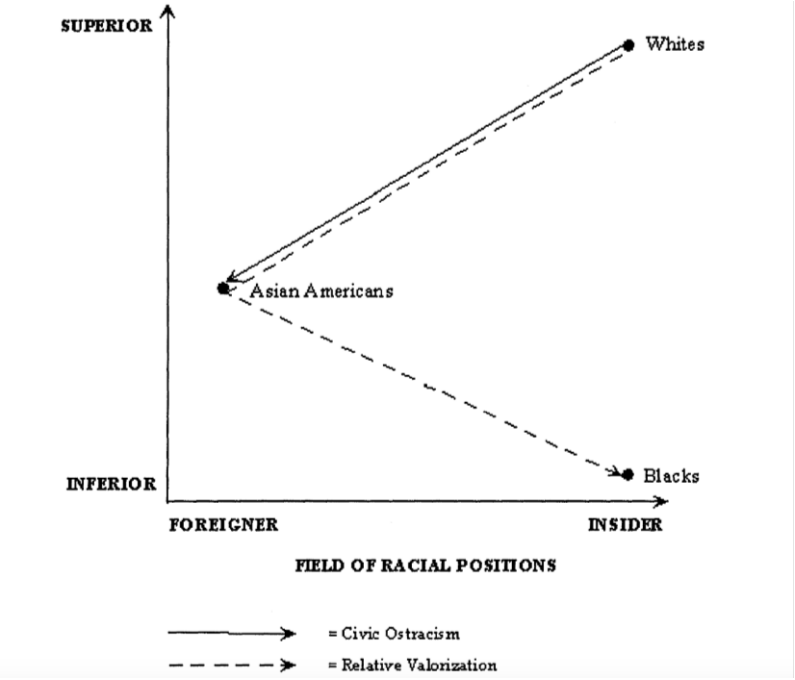


Figure 2. Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans.

Source: Obtained from " The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans, " by C. J. Kim, 1999, Politics & Society, 27, p. 108. Copyright 1999 by SAGE Publications.

[16]Xu, J., and J. C. Lee. "The Marginalized "Model" Minority: An Empirical Examination of the Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Social Forces* 91, no. 4 (05, 2013): 1363-397. doi:10.1093/sf/sot049.

[17] Kim, Claire Jean. "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (03 1999): 105-38. doi:10.1177/0032329299027001005.

Through AsianCrit, Chang also called on a radical plural democracy where he employed some CRT criteria, such as antisubordination and openness to our histories, to uplift those who are marginalized as perpetual foreigners through organizing politically.[18] Within Oklahoma City, there is a huge population of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants due to the Vietnam War. Even though a small community had been established before my family and I came here, there is still inadequate resources where accessibility is an issue due to language barriers and lack of education. Thus, Chang's radical plural democracy calls for more Asian American voices to share stories, so that better policies and programs can be created to support those living in Oklahoma City.

[18] Wing, Adrien Katherine, and Robert S. Chang. "USA 2050: Identity, Critical Race Theory, and the Asian Century." *Michigan Law Review* 99, no. 6 (05 2001): 1390. doi:10.2307/1290389.

Methodology

Reflecting on my own education, the chances that I encountered Southeast Asians and Asian Americans in the media and textbooks were limited. As a result, in this paper, I am employing *testimonio* as a way to increase the narratives and experiences of Southeast Asians and Asian Americans. The term *testimonio* is rooted in Latin America and is a tool of affirmation and empowerment.[19] The process of uncovering my silenced truth through *testimonio* is a journey of affirming the realities that I lived in order to disrupt the false assumptions of Asian Americans. Because the history and narratives of Asian Americans are intentionally made invisible, white supremacists racially clump Southeast Asians and Asian Americans under the *model minority* to erase their unique narrative, identity, heritage, struggle to maintain their racial dominance. For instance, when white teachers and peers assumed that I was smart simply because I was Asian, their misleading perspective did not allow them to see the challenges that I had to confront and the resources that I did not have. They possessed high standards for me to do well, even though I was struggling in school due to the lack of resources. Their expectations often led me to feel disappointed and upset because I could not understand what I was doing wrong. These high expectations not only led to the disempowerment over my own body, but also disaffirmed my history, struggles, and experiences.

Similar to Judith Flores Carmona's *Pedagogial Border Crossings: Testimonio y Reflexiones de una Mexicana Académica*, I use *testimonio* to share the hardships of learning English, always being reminded that I am a foreigner, and wanting to belong and unable to do so

[19] Blackmer Reyes, Kathryn & Curry Rodríguez, Julia E. "*T*estimonio:Origins, Terms, and Resources, Equity & Excellence in Education*"*. 45:3, 525-538, DOI:10.1080/10665684.2012.6985. 2012

during my educational experiences in the United States.[20] Additionally, Carmona also used *testimonio* as a way to demonstrate Chicana/Latina struggle in balancing the contradicting cultures and how her epistemologies and "conocimiento" were formed through her experiences in the U.S. educational system.[21] As a teacher, the lessons that she learned in understanding identities and how to negotiate them between borderlands informed her teaching pedagogies in life and in her classroom.[22]

Influenced by feminist epistemology, many Latinas, like Carmona, have used *testimonios* to help them redeem their experiences and empower themselves as "agents of knowledge."[23] *Testimonio* has also allowed them to record these silenced experiences and histories as a source of truth and knowledge. In particular, Alicia Partnoy, is a respected poet and human rights activist who used *testimonio* to illustrate the political strife in her native country. In her book, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival,* she spoke about her own experience as a political prisoner due to her association to revolutionary movements against the strict military regime during the 1970s.[24] She was one of the few to be released unharmed and to survive the deplorable conditions, such as murder and torture, that were happening inside the concentration camp. After being released, she wrote this book in order to tell her story as a way to empower herself and affirm the lived realities of the political prisoners during that time. Her survival story became evidence in the trials against those who performed the genocide in Argentina.[25] From these examples, testimonio serves to be a very powerful tool to help the narrator portray an

[20] Carmona, Judith Flores. "Pedagogical Border Crossings: Testimonio Y Reflexiones De Una Mexicana Académica." *Journal of Latinos and Education* 17, no. 1 (02, 2017): 92-97. doi:10.1080/15348431.2017.1282364.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 1991. 221.
[24] Partnoy, Alicia. The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival. San Francisco: Midnight Editions, 1986
[25] Loyola Marymount University. "Alicia Partnoy." Undergraduate Admission. https://admission.lmu.edu/about/facultyprofiles/aliciapartnoy/.

experience that is not only empowering, but also liberating as it gives the survivor a voice and humanizes the individual. Similar to Carmona and Partnoy, my own *testimonio* would serve as a source of knowledge/*hiểu biết* as I write about the history of the Vietnam War, the survival strategies of the Vietnamese American community, and my educational experiences in the United States.

Asian Americans in the U.S. History

As I started learning about the historical discrimination and oppression against Asian Americans, my trust that education in the U.S. was trying to help me be successful became a distrust. I have realized how little textbooks and schools teach about the accurate history of the United States. The history textbooks throughout middle school and high school only highlight and valorize the U.S. in the best light while silencing the experiences of people of color. While there were mentions of slavery, Trail of Tears, and the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848, these did not do justice to the suffering that blacks, Native Americans, and Latino/as had to endure. Additionally, when it comes to Asian Americans, there were only brief mentions of different wars, such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor. When I learned about white supremacy and the oppression of people of color, I started to question the invisibility of Asian Americans as there is not much mentioning about their experiences. This led me to assert that before I can fully depict my experiences as a Vietnamese immigrant, it is crucial for me to historicize and briefly share Asian American experiences here in America.

During the 1800s, Asian Chinese male migrants temporarily came to the United States as cheap laborers in order to help their families back at home.[26] Because of their different physical complexities and that they wore "racial uniform," termed by sociologist Robert E. Park, they were seen as "strangers from another shore."[27] When compared to other immigrants who came from European countries, Chinese Americans could not obtain citizenship and voting rights because of their physical features and background. As more Chinese immigrants came to America they were exploited for cheap labors, like gold mining and railroad construction. With

[26] Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore*. Little, Brown, 1989.
[27] Ibid.

the influx of Asian Chinese immigrants, irrational fear that Asians would dominate white power became more prominent despite the fact that they were being exploited. This xenophobia was also known as the "yellow peril" invasion, which portrays Asian immigrants as demonic, unfit, and incompatible to be treated equally as their European counterparts.[28] This unequal treatment is illustrated in the split labor market where employers preferred to hire Asian immigrants due to the fact that they lack the resources to strike back for being exploited.[29] As tough economic times drove job competition between Chinese and white workers, this led to "ethnic antagonism" where white laborers began to push back and restrict these immigrant workers to only service jobs, such as cooks, laundrymen, and waiters in order to push them out of competition for employment.[30] Because these jobs were devalued by white men for being seen as women's jobs, Chinese immigrant workers were forced to take these jobs resulting hyperfeminized stereotypes. Later, the feminized image shifted to lunatics and criminals to drive the yellow peril propaganda and many anti-Asian American discrimination policies in order to reinforce white supremacy and preserve racial purity.[31]

The role of language also played a significant part in these discrimination policies because it further oppressed Asian Americans by increasing apprehensions and irrational fear in America. First, using terms like "Oriental," alien, and non-alien in policies, dehumanized Asian Americans in order to differentiate who is acceptable and who is not. Historically, "Orientalism" was termed by Edward Said to convey the sociopolitical fascination and curiosity of the Far East

[28] Hsu, Madeline Y. "Befriending the "Yellow Peril": Chinese Students and Intellectuals and the Liberalization of U.S. Immigration Laws, 1950—1965." *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 16, no. 3 (2009): 139-62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23613052.
[29] Bonacich, Edna. "A Theory of Ethnic Antagonism: The Split Labor Market." *American Sociological Review*37, no. 5 (October 1972): 547-59. doi:10.2307/2093450.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Chen, Chiung Hwang. "Feminization of Asian (American) Men in the U.S. Mass Media: An Analysis of The Ballad of Little Jo." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*20, no. 2 (10 1996): 57-71. doi:10.1177/019685999602000204.

as well as the fear of threat to white civilization.[32] Along with this, the media and press described Asian features as something undesirable "in the American body" with words like "protruding teeth" and "short leg" to instill fear of that the "yellow peril" would take over.[33] Such images had driven anti-immigrant policies like the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act to stop all Chinese immigrants from coming to the U.S. until 1943, and the Cable Act of 1922 that banned white women from marrying Asian males to reinforce white male supremacy. In addition, the 1921 Alien Land Law prohibited land sale and leasing to 'aliens ineligible for citizenships' and the Naturalization Act of 1790, which was reinterpreted by the Supreme Court in 1922 to ban naturalization of all those considered "Oriental."[34]

To help immigrants adjust to the new life in America, the forces of Americanization, such as the English-only policy, were inflicted upon Asian Americans. These Americanization projects were occurring in church, politics, jobs, and school to assimilate and transform immigrants into Americans by helping them adopt American customs, values, and ideas.[35] For instance, the fear of losing political and economic power as well as xenophobia against Japanese Americans led the U.S. to enforce anti-foreign language laws, especially in Hawaii. For many Issei, first generation Japanese immigrants, having information in their own language helped them to adapt to the new ways of life in America and allowed them to better understand current events while preserving their culture. Further, Japanese language schools were established by the

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[32] Ngai, Mae M. "American Orientalism." *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 3 (2000): 408-15. doi:10.1353/rah.2000.0059.

[33] Tamura, Eileen H. "The English-Only Effort, the Anti-Japanese Campaign, and Language Acquisition in the Education of Japanese Americans in Hawaii, 1915-40." *History of Education Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1993): 37. doi:10.2307/368519, pg. 39

[34] Pak, Yoon. *Wherever I Go, I Will Always Be a Loyal American Seattle's Japanese American Schoolchildren During World War II*. Taylor and Francis, 2013.

[35] Huebner, Grover G. "The Americanization of the Immigrant." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*27 (1906): 191-213. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1010522.

community to help Nisei, or second-generation Japanese Americans with birthright U.S. citizenship become better U.S. citizens while instilling Japanese culture and language. Because they also had automatic Japanese citizenship if their father was Japanese, the dual citizenship and Japanese language schools were interpreted by the U.S. government as promoting Japanese nationalism and preventing the learning of English--thus, anti-American. Federal statute was created to stop non-English language publications without English translation as a form of surveilling bodies of color. Moreover, these events set up the stage that led many Japanese Americans to start questioning if they would ever be true U.S. citizens.

In 1941, the bombing of Pearl Harbor not only contributed to the beginning of U.S. involvement in World War II, but also changed the lives of many Japanese Americans living in the United States. While many Nisei, second generation Japanese Americans with U.S. citizenship considered themselves as loyal Americans, they were still questioned for their allegiance and loyalty toward the United States. Under *Executive Order NO. 9066*, President Roosevelt authorized the extraction of West Coast Japanese Americans in order to "[protect] against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material, national -defense premises and national- defense utilities."[36] Moreover, as they became victims of the hysteria that was unleashed by the war between the U.S. and Japan, they were extracted from their normal lives and were forced into internment camps without cause. These camps were usually located in remote, desert areas and served to monitor all the activities of Japanese Americans to protect white America. The camps were enclosed by barbed wire fences and made up small communities comprised of churches, crude hospitals, and low-quality schools.[37] Such conditions had been

[36] Exec. Order No. 9066, 3 C.F.R. 1-3 (1942). Retrieved from https://catalog.archives.gov/id/5730250

[37] Saavedra, Martin. 2015. "School Quality and Educational Attainment: Japanese American Internment as a Natural Experiment." *Explorations in Economic History* 57 (July): 59–78. doi:10.1016/j.eeh.2015.02.001.

found to negatively affect Japanese American lives and educational attainments, making them less likely to acquire post-secondary education.[38] Even with this, many Japanese Americans still tried to prove their loyalty by signing up to be in the military to help out with the war. Some even believed and agreed that the government was providing "safety for their own good" and would take care of them as they trusted the benevolence of the United States. Unfortunately, "safety for their own good" meant being relocated and held captive behind wire fences even though they were U.S. citizens and should have been protected under the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments. The reality was that they only held provisional citizenship status and would always be second to white citizens. One Japanese American was confused and questioned why Japanese Americans were the only ones being imprisoned when the U.S. was also at war with Germany and Italy during World War II.[39] The false need of military and internment camps to handle Japanese Americans hid the fact that white America was protecting its own interests and supremacy. The promoted hate against the Japanese community caused violent attacks and discrimination in the United states. The first reported violent attack was against a Japanese American male in New York where three men violently fractured his skull and left lacerations and contusions all over his head and face.[40] Further, hate groups like the Asiatic Exclusion League, were starting to form in order to discriminate against Japanese--which soon spread to other Asian groups--as unwanted aliens and pushed for the Chinese Exclusion Act to be applied to them. There were several purposes for the establishment of the league as stated by the national organization during its first annual convention held in Seattle on February 4, 1908:

[38] Ibid.
[39] Pak, Yoon. *Wherever I Go, I Will Always Be a Loyal American Seattle's Japanese American Schoolchildren During World War II*., 25.
[40] Ibid., 118.

- PROTEST, Against the continuance of Asiatic Immigration upon the exalted grounds of American patriotism, for the reasons—
- FIRST, That these Asiatics come to the United States entirely ignorant of our sentiments of nativity and patriotism, and utterly unfit and incapable of discharging the duties of American citizenship.
- SECOND, The introduction of this incongruous and non-assimilable element into our national life will inevitably impair and degrade, if not effectively destroy, our cherished institutions and our American life.
- THIRD, These Asiatics are alien to our ideas of patriotism, morality, loyalty and the highest conception of Christian civilization.
- FOURTH, Their presence here is a degrading and contaminating influence to the best phases of American life.
- FIFTH, With their low standard of living, immoral surroundings and cheap labor, they constitute a formidable and fierce competition against our American system, the pride and glory of our civilization, and unless prohibited by effective legislation, will result in the irreparable deterioration of American labor.[41]

Learning about hate groups such as the Asiatic Exclusion League during my research led me to recognize how the U.S. education system failed me by silencing Asian American histories. This further motivated me to bring awareness to the documented oppression against Koreans, Asian Indians, and Filipinos in America.

Korean Americans in the United States also experienced discrimination as they were reminded that they did not belong in America, which resulted in a loss of identity and tradition.

[41] The Pluralism Project. http://pluralism.org/document/the-asiatic-exclusion-league/.

In one instance, they were attacked by white farm workers who held "ethnic antagonism" belief and wanted to drive Korean workers away by threatening that "they would be killed."[42] However, when Koreans were able to become farmers themselves, their economic success created ethnic solidarity which helped Korean entrepreneurial activities to thrive. In order to be economically successful, they did give up their "Koreaness" and heritage to become westernized so that they would not provoke white anti-Asian sentiments.[43]

Asian Indians were considered westernized due to their physical features like "intelligent faces, keen eyes, compressed lips and determined chins."[44] Yet, they would never achieve the same social status as white Americans because those who were not white were deemed as inferior. To further show maintenance of racial purity for white Americans, in the case of the 1923 *U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, the Supreme Court ruled that Asian Indians were not eligible for citizenship because even though they were seen as Caucasians, they were not white Caucasians. Additionally, the original purpose from the Founding Fathers according to this ruling was only to bestow the privilege of citizenship to people that were white.[45] This ruling and statement were significant because they illustrate and reinforce that the foundation of the United States has always been built around white supremacy through the oppression of people of color. Further, it portrayed the power dynamics that still exists among whites and communities of color where whiteness means having power to make decisions on who is acceptable and not acceptable.

As white supremacy dictated who was racially acceptable, Filipinos, while not foreigners due to their history in the Spanish-American War, were still strangers in America. They filled

[42] Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore*. Little, Brown, 1989.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Saint Nihal Singh, "the Picturesque Immigrant from India's Coral Strand," in Out West, vol. 30 (1909), pp.44-45.
[45] Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore*., p .299

many service and agriculture jobs as the exclusion of Koreans, Japanese, and Asian Indians generated the labor shortage. Further, they were viewed as better fitting than white men to do farming jobs because they were "suited for 'stoop labor'" due to being short. Another way that white supremacy dehumanized people of color was by treating them like animals. Filipinos were associated with names like "monkeys" and "savages"[46] as well as being racially deemed as criminals and trouble makers. Additionally, the camps that they stayed in were unlivable because of the horrible and dirty conditions mirroring 'chicken houses.'[47]

Therefore, I assert that the racial discrimination that Asian groups confronted during this time period eventually generated divisiveness within the Asian American community. When anti-Japanese sentiments were high, other Asian groups did not want to be associated with the Japanese community in the U.S., since they were being confronted with violence and discrimination. To differentiate Chinese and Filipino students from the Japanese student, kids were instructed by parents to wear identifiable badges during World War II.[48] Moreover, being seen as a good American at that time meant hating the Japanese. In general, some Asian migrants like Koreans also believed that racial discrimination could be overcome by discarding one's culture and shifted the blame onto the Chinese and Japanese communities for not abandoning their "filthy habits and customs" in order to be accepted. [49]

However, the anti-Japanese sentiment and strong nationalism that Koreans shared during this time were shaped by the fact that their country was under the control of Japanese imperialism and what was happening in the United States. Even with Japanese Americans, many tried to

[46] As quoted in Ibid., p. 325.
[47] As quoted in Ibid., p. 320.
[48] Pak, Yoon. *Wherever I Go, I Will Always Be a Loyal American Seattle's Japanese American Schoolchildren During World War II*., pp. 118.
[49] Moon, "Korean Immigrants in America," p. 157 quoted in Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore.*, pp. 277.

differentiate themselves from their own homeland to demonstrate their allegiance to America. A public photograph capturing 1,300 Seattle Japanese pledging allegiance to the American flag was to deliberately show that they were ready to fight against Japan to help the U.S. win.[50] Yet, no matter how hard they tried to assimilate, to the point of working against each other

> …[they] cannot become Americans. [They] may go to the farthest extreme in [their] effort to identify [themselves] with the ways of the Americans, straightening [their] noses, dressing like the American in the latest fashion, pasting [their] faces with bleaching cream…but nevertheless [they] are not able to shake off the tenacious psychology…[that they] do not 'belong.'[51]

This leads me to assert that Asian Americans, and even other communities of color, should reflect on our own internalized racism in order to work together toward dismantling white supremacy. Internalized racism is dangerous because it divides communities and distracts us from being empowered to freely express our diversity. With this knowledge, I now turn to historicize my own experiences as a Vietnamese American immigrant in order to further illustrate the diversity within "Asian American."

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[50] Pak, Yoon. *Wherever I Go, I Will Always Be a Loyal American Seattle's Japanese American Schoolchildren During World War II,*. pp. 107.

[51] Julian Ilar, "Who Is the Filipino?" *Filipino Nation*, November 1930, p.13 quoted in Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore*. Little, Brown, 1989.
A statement by Julian Ilar, a student at the University of Chicago, describing the exclusion of Filipinos which was cited by Takaki on pg. 331.

Vietnam War

In many ways, my life was framed by the Vietnam War which ended approximately 20 years before I was born. When I was in Vietnam, the United States was painted in images of hope and positivity. As I have mentioned, my parents were not very financially wealthy in Vietnam. When my grandparents sent presents, such as M&M's chocolates or Skittles, it was almost like Christmas time because these items were extremely rare in Vietnam that I considered them to be luxurious. I remember meeting my grandparents for the first time in 1998 when they came to visit my family. I stood outside of their room anxiously waiting and seeing how different they looked compared to other native Vietnamese. "Việt Kiều," or overseas Vietnamese like my grandparents, were very distinguishable due to their fresh attire and new name brand sneakers. At that time, the title of "Việt Kiều" represented high status and had a prestigious meaning not only to me but also to many native Vietnamese people. Unfortunately, little did I know that it is the complete opposite because many of these "Việt Kiều" were known as refugees in America who left their country out of necessity due to the Vietnam War.

As a child, I was always confused the geographical location of *Sài Gòn* because while my family would mention it from time to time, I could not find it on the map until I had learned that it was renamed to Ho Chi Minh City. After ten years of living in Oklahoma, I returned to Vietnam for the second time, and that experience sparked both interest and fear in learning and reconnecting with my roots. As I was going through "Hải Quan," or Vietnamese airport customs, these were guarded by those who work for the Communist government. An airport customs guard looked at my U.S. passport and asked a question about my birthplace. At this point, I did not know what to say because I had feelings of anxiousness and fear due to the stories and news media relevant to the corruption of the Vietnamese Communist government. Moreover, I did not

know the different connotations behind *Sài Gòn* and *Hồ Chí Minh*. Unaware of my own history at that time, I answered *Sài Gòn* which led him to question how I came to know of that term and how long I had been in the United States. This life event stood out to me because I was scared for my family and disappointed of how little I knew about my identity and the history of my family's arrival to the United States. Thus, this prompted my curiosity to reconnect to my own roots.

As I strive to explore my own history, I discovered that the Vietnam War was a part of a larger regional conflict of the Indochina War (1945-1979).[52] Similar to how Europeans conquered and colonized the Western Hemisphere, Western European nations, like France, began to conquer lands in Southeast Asia. However, as the French struggled to maintain Vietnam due to the lack of manpower, the United States stepped in to provide assistance. Afterwards, Vietnam became a divided country as many South Vietnamese, such as my grandfather, opposed communism ideology. As the "Việt Minh" became the "Việt Cộng" communist group due to the support from the Communist Party in China, the expansion of the party across the East became a tremendous threat, especially to the United States. To the U.S., communism is like a contagious disease that is against democracy and human rights[53] Fearing that it would spread, the U.S. to became involved with the Vietnam War. As the commitment to help stop communism was passed from president to president, if the U.S. would have abandoned the the South Vietnamese, it would have painted the U.S. as unreliable and negatively impact its credibility. Additionally,

[52]Hoa, Nguyen, and Kim Turner. "The Fourth Indo-China War." Society 47, no. 3 (2010): 246-53.

[53] "The First Indochina War." Land Reform in China and North Vietnam. http://edmoise.sites.clemson.edu/viet3.html.

winning the Vietnam War would have also benefited the U.S. in its complicated involvement with the Cold War. So at this point, it could be conveyed that the U.S. was more worried about protecting its own interests and image rather than the Vietnamese people. However, people in the U.S. began to question more about the U.S. involvement in the war after 1966 due to several factors, including the country's unstable sociopolitical climate. As the tension started to divide the people in America, the U.S. decision to withdraw its troops led to the fall of *Sài Gòn* in 1975. The fall of Sài Gòn in 1975 forced many South Vietnamese to flee from their home country to the United States. Stories such as a Vietnamese girl remembering the screams, fired guns, and bombings as people competed to board onto boats, are ones that portray how unprepared they were, both physically and psychologically.[54] The refugees who were on these boats waited for U.S. navy ships to pick them up in order to transport them to the Philippines and Guam not knowing their final destination.

As the Communist government began to reconstruct Vietnam, reeducation camps, or "học tập cải tạo," were created for those who stayed behind and were affiliated with the U.S. and the South Vietnamese army. This included my grandfather who chose not to flee as he knew that he could not leave his wife and children alone in a place of havoc. While I have heard about my grandfather being in reeducation camps, I did not understand what "reeducation" meant until now. In a segment from the *Iowa Experience: Vietnam*, Hien Van Le, a Lieutenant Colonel and Head of Military Intelligence of the South Vietnamese Marine Corp from 1970-1975, described these camps as prisons as he was captured after the U.S. army withdrew its troops and support. [55] These reeducation camps were mainly in North Vietnam and were more of political prisoner camps and labor camps to force those like my grandfather into seminars of indoctrination,

[54] Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore*., pp. 450
[55] "Iowa Experience: Vietnam." Iowa Public Television. October 2, 2017.

confessions, hard physical labor, and even physical and psychological torture.[56] Despite the fact the Communist government claimed these camps were humane and for rehabilitation, it was far from the truth. These prisoners were forced to engage in laborious physical work such as making irrigation canals. Additionally, the amount of years of being in these camps were based on the individual's status in relation to the South Vietnamese government--from civil servants to high ranking officials. For my grandfather, who held a captain rank in the military, it meant imprisonment for a least a decade.

Further, during this reconstruction time period, many other Vietnamese refugees were still trying to leave Vietnam by boats. At this point, many attempted to leave during night time to avoid the danger of being caught by the Communist forces. However, another obstacle was waiting for those who were able to reach the boats because of pirates who were waiting to take advantage of the people at sea. Many of these boats were attacked several times as pirates robbed them, raped the women and girls, and threatened to kill them.[57] Subsequently, those who safely arrived at refugee camps in Thailand waited for their uncertain future. Their survival strategy during this event in history can be illustrated perfectly through the poem by the Vietnamese poet and refugee Du Tử Lê:

Can you imagine human hair
Flowing all over the sea,
Children's bodies ready to dissolve
As human meat dinners of fish?

But they keep on leaving
As humanity turn their heads away
And still they serenely

[56] Vong, Sam. ""Compassion Gave Us a Special Superpower": Vietnamese Women Leaders, Reeducation Camps, and the Politics of Family Reunification, 1977–1991." *Journal of Women's History* 30, no. 3 (2018): 107-37. doi:10.1353/jowh.2018.0032.
[57] Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore*., pp. 452.

Throw themselves into death.[58]

As I contemplate on this poem, I could not help but think how my family and I were fortunate enough to safely cross the shore to America by airplanes. This privilege, that I recognized later in my life, is all due to the sacrifices and political activism in America from those who came before me.

To prevent more Vietnamese from escaping dangerously by boats and to reunite families, community organizations and programs in the United States were established to help them safely immigrate the United States. Organizations like Families for Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA) contributed in the creation of the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 1979.[59] It is important to recognize that the ODP was not a rescue mission but a solution to resolve the exodus of boat people and the asylum crisis that was happening in Southeast Asia. The program aimed at three groups of people: former employees of the U.S., family members of people in the U.S. who were not eligible for immigrant visas, and children of American citizens in Vietnam and immediate family members.[60] Because the Vietnamese government was still controlling the amount of people that

[58] Du Tu Le, " Binh Minh Nhan Loai Moi," "Dawn of a New Humanity," *Dat Moi*. April 1979., p.9 quoted in Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore*. Little, Brown, 1989.

[59] FVPPA or Family for Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association was formed and led by a group of Vietnamese women in Virginia who aimed to provide support for women who had male family members in reeducation camps. The organization grew nationally and propelled a campaign to make visible the political issue of reeducation camp prisoners. They lobbied officials and humanitarian organizations as well as politicizing family separation. They were one of the main driving forces for the release of political prisoners in Vietnam in 1980s. Further, this also illustrates the active role that Vietnamese women activists played in shaping U.S. policy and lives back at home and in America.
Vong, Sam. ""Compassion Gave Us a Special Superpower": Vietnamese Women Leaders, Reeducation Camps, and the Politics of Family Reunification, 1977–1991." *Journal of Women's History* 30, no. 3 (2018): 107-37. doi:10.1353/jowh.2018.0032.

[60] Statement obtained from the United States General Accounting Office 1990 "Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law, Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives" about the Orderly Departure Program from Vietnam. http://archive.gao.gov/t2pbat10/141353.pdf

can emigrate, the U.S. and Vietnam negotiated an agreement that would allow more reeducation camp prisoners to emigrate in 1989. Because of this negotiation, my grandfather soon applied to leave Vietnam after he was released from the reeducation camp. The admission of 26,500 refugees in 1989 included my grandfather as well as the rest of his immediate family which included my mother.[61] However, since my mother was married, the policy did not allow her to bring my father with her. This resulted in her decision to stay back and wait for the opportunity to apply for green cards once my grandparents became U.S. citizens. Subsequently, my grandparents and two family members reluctantly left, along with many other Vietnamese, to the United States in 1990 in order to begin a new life.

Resettlement in the U.S.

Financial Security

In the study *Acculturation and Psychological Adjustment of Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States* by Corrina D. Salo and Dina Birman, they found that Vietnamese acculturation had no impact on psychological adjustment for older Vietnameses refugees and immigrants.[62] Their strong social networks within the community was found to be significant in increasing access to resources, emotional support, and financial support for new immigrants.[63] Vietnamese are able to support each other financially by helping one another gain access to resources such as jobs. Finding jobs is equated to basic survival strategy because it allows them to provide basic

[61] Ibid.
[62]Salo, Corrina D., and Dina Birman. *Acculturation and Psychological Adjustment of Vietnamese Refugees: An Ecological Acculturation Framework*. American Journal of Community Psychology 56, no. 3-4 (10, 2015): 395-407. doi:10.1007/s10464-015-9760-9.; Liebkind, K. *Acculturation and stress Vietnamese refugees in Finland. Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 27(2), 161–180.doi:10.1177/0022022196272002. 1996.
[63]Salo, Corrina D., and Dina Birman. *Acculturation and Psychological Adjustment of Vietnamese Refugees: An Ecological Acculturation Framework*.

needs such as security, food, and shelter for their family. Despite that these jobs are service and low-skilled positions, providing for their family while also sending money back to family members in Vietnam leads to high job satisfaction.[64] Their own cultural values consisting of humility and gratitude have helped them accommodate to low status jobs leading them to be monetarily satisfied because these jobs are improvements from what they had in Vietnam.[65] As a result, job improvements and satisfaction decreased their psychological distress in America indicating high levels of American acculturation.[66]

Throughout the years living in Oklahoma, I have witnessed my mom struggling to work six to seven days a week and my dad balancing life with graveyard shifts in low-wage jobs that may be unsafe for their health. Even when they were busy working, passing down of Vietnamese language and culture within our family was very important to them since it is about survival of our Vietnamese identity. They would send me to Vietnamese classes at our church every weekend to make sure that I was not only maintaining my roots and heritage but also be able to communicate with them. Being able to speak Vietnamese is crucial to my family because in Oklahoma, 57.4% Vietnamese individuals still do not have proficiency in English, which means Vietnamese is the dominant language in the home in order to communicate with one another.[67]

In my perspective, working persistently has allowed many older refugees and immigrants like my parents to better acculturate in the American society as they started to earn a steady

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[64]Gold, S. R*ecently arrived Vietnamese. In Refugee communities: A comparative field study* . New York, NY: Sage.1992. 102-128.

[65] Henderson, S. J., & Chan, A. Career happiness among Asian Americans: The interplay between individualism and interdependence.*Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 33(3), 180–192. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2005.tb00015.x. 2005.

[66] Salo, Corrina D., and Dina Birman. *Acculturation and Psychological Adjustment of Vietnamese Refugees: An Ecological Acculturation Framework*.

[67] *Language Spoken At Home For The Population 5 Years And Over*. U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

income. However, my analysis for the high American acculturation level is because they were aware that they have no choice but to adapt since they believe there is no future in Vietnam if they do decide to return.[68] This statement that "many refugees [and immigrants] find that they face another tyranny in [the U.S.] in the form of insistence on political conformity…" indicates that they were forced to assimilate on another land despite the preaching and celebration of a democratic nation.[69]

These efforts of older Vietnamese refugees and immigrants trying to acculturate to the host culture must be historicized in order to disclose the driving forces of Vietnamese community-building and place-making in America. When the wave of Vietnamese refugees came to America after the Fall of Saigon, the U.S. government agencies and private sponsorships would try to determine where they would be residing. These destinations were assigned with intentions of helping them integrate in the new society through the 'scatter policy.' [70] The goals of this policy can be interpreted in different ways, such as conducting assimilation and eradicating one's culture. Some scholars believe that the relentless effort to disperse this group stemmed from "white fears of Asian inassimilability combined with a desire to hasten their assimilation by preventing them from sticking together."[71] Moreover, ethnic antagonism against Asian Americans during tough economic times had not gone away because resettlement policy also served to lessen the nativism and racism that Vietnamese refugees would confront during the time that the U.S. had high national unemployment and limited social services. Further, this almost acted as a buffer to limit the quick integration of many Vietnamese all at once in the

[68] Salo, Corrina D., and Dina Birman. *Acculturation and Psychological Adjustment of Vietnamese Refugees: An Ecological Acculturation Framework*.
[69] T.T. Nhu, "Old Feuds Still Disrupt Peace among Vietnamese," San Jose Mercury News, March, 1988 quoted in Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore*. Little, Brown, 1989.
[70] Juan, Karin Aguilar-San. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
[71] Ibid., p. 22.

United States while trying to illustrate the "calculated kindness" of this country.[72] It also spoke of how the U.S. wanted to depict a positive light on how Vietnamese refugees were thriving since they had been rescued from communism and were now successful in this democratic nation.

However, I argue that the reality is the opposite because individuals in the Vietnamese community will never be able to completely exercise the privileges of being white because we are still affected by racial lumping and prejudice. In all the literature that I have read on Asian American history, the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 by two white autoworkers was the epitome of the blatant racial violence against Asian Americans that was predominantly illustrated. However, there was also a second racial violence incident that involved a 24-year-old Thien Minh Ly, a Vietnamese American young man who was brutally murdered in an affluent white city of Tustin. Later on, it was found that the white assailant, Gunner Lindberg, possessed white supremacist paraphernalia which motivated his action and resulted in Thien's death. Learning about these two events made me realize on the need to be more cognizant and to increase dialogue on the covert and overt racism and discrimination against Asian Americans.[73]

Little Saigons in the U.S.

The displacement from the Vietnam War and racial hatred set the stage for community-building to create a place for Vietnamese Americans in the United States. Due to the strong presence of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants across the United States, community-building and place making, like Little Saigons, emphasize the connections among racialization, memory, history, culture, and economy. Further, Little Saigons have value in itself as it reserves culture,

[72] Ibid., p. 44.
[73] Ibid., p. 45.

portrays cultural symbol, and even spatializ[es] memories to influence community and its people.[74] Branding places as Little Saigons allows Vietnamese and Vietnamese American leaders to have their own regulation and to choose what kinds of memories the community should be commemorating or should be dismissed. For example, the South Vietnam flag shown in Figure 3 is heavily used in America to represent a painful loss of a country while commemorating the sacrifices resulted from the Vietnam War.



*Figure 3***.** South Vietnam Yellow with Red Stripes flag

Source: Obtained from Wikimedia Commons

[74] Ibid., p. 68; The author used the term "spatial memory" to connect memory to geographical places as a means to demonstrate how memory impacts territory, regulation, and symbol of a place. It provides more meaning to how people can impact place as well as how place impacts the people who live there.

Thus, these pockets of Little Saigons can be seen from coast to coast which include cities like Boston, Houston, Oklahoma City, and Westminster to ensure the sustainability of Vietnamese culture. I concur with Karin Aguilar-San Juan that places that were built by Vietnamese Americans can also serve to "extract an identity out of a territory, to impose rules that govern the territory and the people who are attached to it, and to put forth symbols that give meaning to the territory" and the people in the community.[75] However, Little Saigons across the U.S. are not the same and may vary in capacity in the economic growth and regulation of Vietnamese American community based on the population size and wealth. Moreover, the top two states where the majority of Vietnamese Americans reside are California and Texas with population sizes of 581,946 and 210,913 respectively according to the 2010 U.S. Census.[76] When I visited Orange County, California, the place was completely transformed into a place where Vietnamese Americans could live and thrive, and perhaps even without the need to speak English. Going down Bolsa Street created nostalgia for me and my parents because it was home away from home. It was incredible to see how some street signs indicate Vietnamese American presence because it takes effort in advocating and creating partnerships between local and state partnerships to make visible and strengthen the Vietnamese American community. Further, in places like Orange County, Vietnamese Americans are able to achieve economic pull on local government and have the power to impact government elections because of its large Vietnamese American population size of 183,667.[77] This conveys how there is power in number as places like Westminster and Houston portray the collective power of the Vietnamese American community to make cultural landmarks and influence place with Little Saigons.

[75] Ibid., p.137.
[76] U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Demographic Profile.
[77] U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census. This number might change change in the 2020 U.S. Census.



Figure 4. Little Saigon freeway street exit sign

Source: Image taken from *Freeway signs unveiled for San Diego's Little Saigon* Article for Fox 5 San Diego.



Figure 5. Houston Vietnamese Street Signs

Source: Photo taken by Scott Dalton for NPR in *Decades After Clashing With The Klan, A Thriving Vietnamese Community In Texas*

Asian District in OKC

On the other hand, there are roughly 20,000 Vietnamese American residents living in Oklahoma according to the 2010 U.S. Census, and the number is expected to change.[78] Despite the fact that there is a small population of Vietnamese Americans in Oklahoma compared to California or Texas, I was still able to feel the presence of a Vietnamese American community in uptown OKC when I first arrived to America. Traveling down to NW 23rd street in Oklahoma City (OKC), the first Vietnamese store that I visited in the area was Super Cao Nguyen supermarket. It was one of the few places that brought me feelings of comfort because I was able to identify with people who look like me and spoke my language. As I dug deeper into the history of Vietnamese Americans who made Oklahoma City their home, it was actually difficult for me to gather literature except from local news media and magazine interviews with members from the community. Further, their interviews were the only source that provided basic knowledge and history on the development of the Asian District.

In an interview with KGOU, Bob Blackburn, the executive director of the Oklahoma Historical Society, stated that part of OKC was dying because many affluent whites left the inner city due school desegregation in the mids 1900s.[79] The phenomenon "white flight" led to urban decay where the cost of living and housing values declined and became more affordable to low-income residents who were the minorities, such as Vietnamese refugees and immigrants.[80]

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[78] *ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates*. U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

[79] Source taken from an interview with McCleland, Jacob. "How Vietnamese Refugees Spent 40 Years Rejuvenating An Oklahoma City Neighborhood." KGOU. https://www.kgou.org/post/how-vietnamese-refugees-spent-40-years-rejuvenating-oklahoma-city-neighborhood.

[80] Gersti-Pepin, Cynthia. "Magnet Schools: A Retrospective Case Study of Segregation." *The High School Journal* 85, no. 3 (2002): 47-52. doi:10.1353/hsj.2002.0001.

Additionally, when Vietnamese newcomers arrived to OKC, they saved it from being abandoned by reviving it with local restaurants and businesses.

Before the Asian District actually became a district, one of the very first restaurants and businesses that spearheaded the growth of this cultural capital was the Lido restaurant, which later became the anchor for the Asian District.[81] What was interesting for me to learn was that the center that this restaurant is located in used to be known as Little Saigon Center. As more Vietnamese immigrants, such as my family, arrived to OKC in the 2000's, this district soon expanded and thrived to meet the increasing population. The first expansion started in 2003 when Super Cao Nguyen transitioned from their small building to the current bigger one as shown in Figure 6. As local businesses increased, community organizers decided on how to brand the district. Little Saigon was one of the names that was considered due to the fact that the majority population was Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans. Yet, the name did not win since a few community leaders wanted a name that would be more of an inclusive district, which led to the official branding of "Asian District" in 2005. Shortly after, street signs were put up around this area from NW 23rd to NW 30th, which distinguished and entirely transformed the current Asian District.

As a young adult, I still have memories of accompanying my mom to Asian District every week. It became our own customs to visit Super Cao Nguyen and other local Vietnamese businesses because she wanted to ensure that I would not forget my own culture. Seeing authentic Vietnamese foods and celebrating Vietnamese New Year, were some of the ways that my parents tried to maintain my Vietnamese identity in America. Even though the Asian District

[81] "Inside OKC's Asian District." 405 Magazine. https://www.405magazine.com/September-2018/Inside-OKCs-Asian-District/.

may not be specifically for Vietnamese and Vietnamese American community, it still does provide a place for my older family members to ensure the survival of the Vietnamese culture, language, and identity in our family.



Figure 6. Super Cao Nguyen Supermarket

Source: Image obtained from Kenward Thai at https://su2016.thedude.oucreate.com/uncategorized/super-cao-nguyen/



Figure 7. OKC Asian District Signage

Source: Photo by Shannon Cornman in *Inside OKC's Asian District*

History of OKC

As previously mentioned, the significance of the Asian District in reviving OKC, it is vital that I further expand on OKC history as it has shaped my educational experiences and identity. Like everywhere else in the U.S. after Blacks were freed from slavery, they were still subjected to racism, discrimination, and violence in Oklahoma. With many white mobs unable to force them out of Oklahoma during the late 1800s, whites resorted to segregating the Black community as much as possible.[82] Once Oklahoma became an official state in 1907, many racially discriminatory laws were passed in order to ensure segregation between blacks and whites. These laws banned interracial marriage and interracial schools as well as segregating all public domains.[83] When Jim Crow laws were enacted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, dozens of black lives were lynched and killed by white supremacists who wanted to preserve these laws.[84]

Going into the early Civil Rights movement, school desegregation and access became a significant human rights issue as lawsuits against school boards and states became prominent. Two significant lawsuits that impacted this movement involved *Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* (1948) and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education* (1950). In the first case, the Court ruled that Ada Lois Sipeul, a Black student, cannot be denied access to legal education at the University of Oklahoma. Her case was significant because it paved the way for other Blacks, such as George McLaurin, to attend Oklahoma state colleges and universities that were predominately white.[85] Additionally, the second case ruled that the

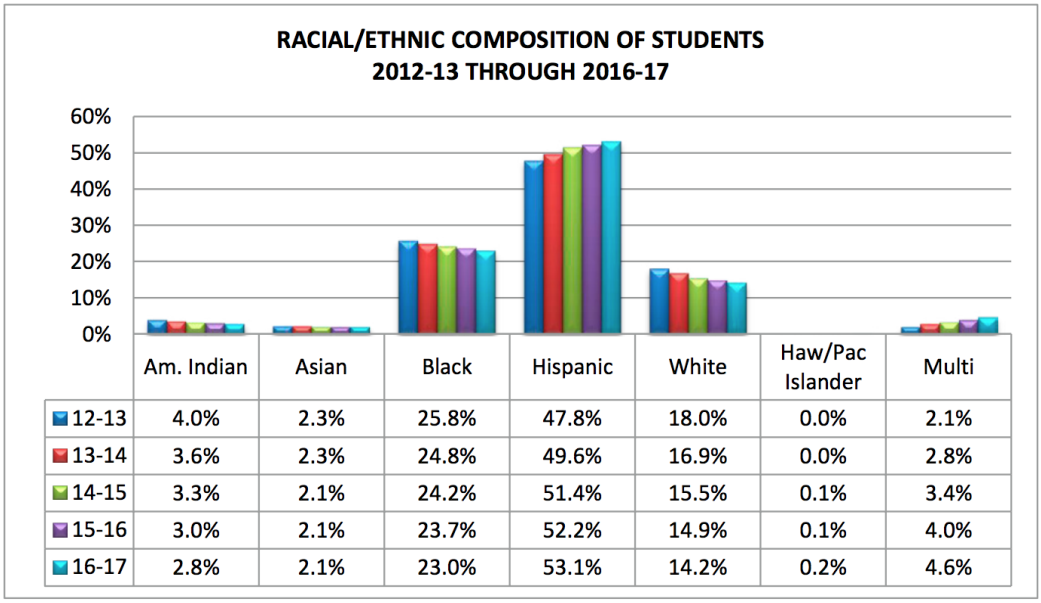
[82] Franklin, Jimmie Lewis. Journey toward Hope : A History of Blacks in Oklahoma / by Jimmie Lewis Franklin. 1st ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982.
[83] Ibid., p. 46.
[84] Ibid., p. 129.
[85] Teall, Kaye. Black History in Oklahoma; a Resource Book [by] Kaye M. Teall. Oklahoma City: Oklahoma City Public Schools, 1971.

institution violated the Fourteenth Amendment when it segregated George McLaurin on campus.[86] Around the same time, the Latino community was also growing as more Puerto Ricans and Mexicans immigrated and sought refuge within Oklahoma. They worked in coal mines, picked cotton, and held all the laborious jobs to support their families throughout Oklahoma. After World War II, the Mexican population exponentially increased as many poor Mexicans, which included both documented and undocumented, looked for new opportunities. As they spread across the state, the majority reside in Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Since the majority were Spanish speakers, it was difficult to meet the educational needs of this population as more than half required bilingual education.[87]

In efforts to desegregate schools across America, a few methods were employed: busing and creating magnet schools. In *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971), the Supreme Court ruled for the integration of public schools through cross district busing in order to desegregate. Specifically, in Oklahoma, OKCPS was forced to adopt school busing after a series of federal court cases, such as 1991 *Dowell v. Oklahoma City*, because the district was functioning on a dual school system. The ruling of this decision also forced OKCPS to create a desegregation plan. This plan was to ensure that schools student population would reflect that of the overall district's minority student population while under the supervision of the federal court.[88] In opposition to busing, many white families decided to leave the district which created the phenomenon, white flight.[89] This white flight contradicted the efforts to desegregate schools

[86] Franklin, Jimmie Lewis. Journey toward Hope : A History of Blacks in Oklahoma., p.127-128.
[87] Smith, Michael M., and Oklahoma Image Project. The Mexicans in Oklahoma / by Michael M. Smith. Newcomers to a New Land. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980.
[88]Franks, Kenny A., and Lambert, Paul F. The Legacy of Dean Julien C. Monnet : Judge Luther Bohanon and the Desegregation of Oklahoma City's Public Schools / by Kenny A. Franks and Paul F. Lambert ; Foreword by James Paul Linn. Muskogee, Okla.: Western Heritage Books, 1984.
[89] Armor, David J. "Response to Carr and Zeigler's "White Flight and White Return in Norfolk"." *Sociology of Education* 64, no. 2 (04 1991): 134. doi:10.2307/2112884.

as it eventually resegregated OKCPS, especially even more after the district was released from federal supervision.[90] However, OKCPS is still largely segregated in modern day as the majority of the student populations are Latino/as and Blacks as shown in Figure 8.



	Am. Indian	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	Haw/Pac Islander	Multi
12-13	4.0%	2.3%	25.8%	47.8%	18.0%	0.0%	2.1%
13-14	3.6%	2.3%	24.8%	49.6%	16.9%	0.0%	2.8%
14-15	3.3%	2.1%	24.2%	51.4%	15.5%	0.1%	3.4%
15-16	3.0%	2.1%	23.7%	52.2%	14.9%	0.1%	4.0%
16-17	2.8%	2.1%	23.0%	53.1%	14.2%	0.2%	4.6%

Figure 8. OKCPS Racial/Ethnic Composition of Students 2012-13 through 2016-2017

Source: "Oklahoma City Public Schools Statistical Profile 2016-2017." Digital image. Accessed April 2, 2019. https://www.okcps.org/cms/lib/OK01913268/Centricity/Domain/96/2016-17 OKCPS Statistical Profile.pdf.

To combat white flight and increase racial diversity, magnet schools like Northeast High School (NHS) in OKC, were created to attract white parents with lucrative programs and rich classes, such as International Baccalaureate, foreign languages, and science and technology. However, this did not mean that magnet schools were not bifurcated as in the example of NHS where internal segregation existed according to a case study by Gersti-Pepin, Cynthia.[91] During

[90] Orfield, Gary, Mark D. Bachmeier, David R. James, and Tamela Eitle. 1997. "Deepening Segregation in American Public Schools: A Special Report from the Harvard Project on School Desegregation." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 30 (2): 5–24. http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ556380&site=ehost-live.
[91] Gersti-Pepin, Cynthia. "Magnet Schools: A Retrospective Case Study of Segregation."

the time of study, there were about 32% white and 68% black; yet the college preparatory class that she observed consisted of predominantly white students.[92] Moreover, black students faced segregation in social activities as she noted how there were bathrooms that only black students would go and white students would avoid. This dual system where the school prepare white, middle class students for college and Black students for failure leads to the argument that there must be equity for marginalized students in order to achieve equality.

The effects from white flight and institutional racism in OKC history can still be experienced in present day. As the majority of the OKC populations is still comprised of racially and economically disadvantaged families, there is not adequate community funds and tax money to properly fund OKCPS. Further, in the 2016-17 academic year, 84% of OKCPS students were considered socioeconomically disadvantaged. Even in a detailed 2018 map by The New York Times, it illustrated how children from poor families who grow up in OKC were expected to earn less than $30,000.[93] Moreover, the education system in the U.S. only serves to

> …reinforce the class structure ... middle-class **schools** prepare future managers ... working class **schools** prepare industrial employees and service workers, and that lower-class **schools** perform basically custodial functions and seem unable to prepare their students for any stable role in the work force.[94]

Thus, districts like OKCPS cannot provide quality education to properly prepare its students, like myself, for college and success as I will demonstrate through my educational experiences.

[92] Ibid.
[93] Badger, Emily, and Quoctrung Bui. "Detailed Maps Show How Neighborhoods Shape Children for Life." The New York Times. October 01, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/01/upshot/maps-neighborhoods-shape-child-poverty.html?platform=hootsuite.
[94] As cited in Gersti-Pepin, Cynthia. "Magnet Schools: A Retrospective Case Study of Segregation."

My Educational Experiences

Institution and Social Barriers

After examining the history of Asian Americans in the U.S. and history of OKC, I assert that institutional barriers, such as discriminatory school practices and policy, and social spaces still alienate Vietnamese students while forcing them to assimilate. As a language minority student, the first obstacle that I had to overcome was learning English because it affected my ability to do well in elementary school, especially in Reading and Science classes. At eight years old, I had three different teachers who only spoke English in classes, which increased my anxiety of not being able to communicate my needs and thoughts. Because of this, I was required to attend English Second Learner (ESL) or English Language Learner (ELL) sessions every morning in order to help me integrate quicker in school. However, the structure of this bilingual program actually decreased my learning opportunities within the classroom and led me to be extremely behind in my coursework. The separation from my classmates and the constant pressure to speak proper English led me to believe that my Vietnamese language was an impediment to my success in America. Thus, my experience suggests that bilingual programs may be a part of the Americanization process in order to hasten the assimilation of language minority students. Before bilingual programs existed, the U.S. government and school officials perceived bilingualism as a "disease" and that English was the only useful language in schools.[95] Instead of taking into account that the school's treatment of minoritized students might cause them to fail, school officials put the blame on the students' bilingualism and wanted to eradicate it.

[95] Guitart, Jordi. *Bilingual Education: Basic Principles For The Education of Language Minority Immigrant Students.*, pp. 99.

By putting blame on the students, I argue that this contributed to the power dynamic between marginalized communities and whites where language minority students feel inferior. For instance, when Mexican American students spoke Spanish in school, they were often punished and would be reminded that they can and should only use English. These punishment acts in school, such as "drawing a circle in the dirt, and stand in the middle...until the bell rang," humiliated these students and made them feel less so that they will choose to forget their native language.[96] Such treatments had spearheaded the enforcement of English-only policy across the nation to racially discriminate against non-English speakers.

In 1953, however, *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* conveyed that the best way to teach children was through the incorporation of their native language, which became the theoretical foundation for bilingual education programs.[97] In my argument, the conversation about the usefulness of bilingual education was the first step to leveling the power dynamic in terms of language and to bringing equity in schools. Further, many people are not aware of the significant 1974 landmark that pushed for bilingual education in the U.S., *Lau v. Nichols* set the stage for language minority students to have equal access in education. In San Francisco, a group of Chinese American students who were limited in English proficiency were expected to swim or sink in classrooms that were only taught in English. Despite the school's intention that they were treating these students equally, equal treatment can harm students when there is no equity or resources for those who need it. The support from Justice William Douglass suggested that "the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curricula do not constitute equal education," led to the Amendment of the Bilingual Education Act and established Lau Remedies to better support

[96] García, David G. *Strategies of Segregation Race, Residence, and the Struggle for Educational Equality*. University of California Press, 2018., pp. 35

[97] Guitart, Jordi. *Bilingual Education: Basic Principles For The Education of Language Minority Immigrant Students.*, pp. 100.

language minority students.[98] This led lawmakers to create structured immersion programs like ESL to help language minority students slowly learn English; however, this method of teaching the student in two separate settings only decreased exposure to English. In general, the bilingual programs like ESL, unfortunately, continue to place more value in English while devaluing other languages.

In addition to institutional barriers, I also encountered social exclusion with peers in different spaces. There were many instances inside and outside of schools where I was being stereotyped as "fresh off the boat" or "fob" which served as a reminder that my status, as a new Vietnamese immigrant, proved that I am not Americanized enough. In school, walking out of my homeroom class to ESL class everyday often made me feel embarrassed, ashamed, and lonely because my classmates would stare at me as if I was different and strange to them. I had always felt that my appearance and speaking caused my peers to look at me differently. In general, I never had a problem fitting in with Vietnamese peers in Vietnam, so it was confusing that I struggled to be accepted with the Vietnamese American friends because I was seen as too "fob" for being culturally oriented and not Americanized enough due to my foreign accent and recent immigration. This microaggression is still salient in the society where it assumes that all Asians came to the United States through boats, despite the fact that this is not true for everyone. Being perceived as "fob" also emphasizes an individual's physical appearance because it could be associated to social class status.[99] When it comes to women, they tend to feel more judged on how their hairstyle, attire, and make-up may look and would be compelled to engage in efforts to

[98] Gloria Stewner-Manzanares.*The Bilingual Act: Twenty Years Later.*

[99] Poolokasingham, Gauthamie, Lisa B. Spanierman, Sela Kleiman, and Sara Houshmand. ""Fresh off the Boat?" Racial Microaggressions That Target South Asian Canadian Students." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 7, no. 3 (2014): 194-210. doi:10.1037/a0037285.

fit in to prevent discrimination.[100] Thus, my foreign accent and physical appearance definitely did differentiate me from the rest of Vietnamese Americans where people could easily identify that I recently immigrated. Moreover, this differentiation led to me being socially unaccepted by Vietnamese people who were more Americanized where some refused to help me in school while others outcasted me from my religious youth group. This exclusionary behavior within my community indicates how manipulative white supremacy can be in working to divide our community. Thus, the constant struggle to be socially accepted within and outside of my Vietnamese community had decreased my self-confidence and increased my anxiety where high anxiety produces a filter that prevents the acquisition of another language.[101]

My Assimilation Process and Struggles in Education

Given what I have discovered about the history of the systematic oppression in Oklahoma City, I now turn to my educational experiences as a first generation, low-income Vietnamese American student who graduated from Oklahoma City Public Schools. As a former student, I had never heard discussions about racial issues or barriers to college access in the classroom. Similar to how some Korean migrants called for the abandonment of the "filthy habits and customs" to be successful and accepted, I believed that my status as a new immigrant with no English competency and without an English name made it difficult for my American friends to accept me.[102] Around Vietnamese New Year, I had entered a poetry contest in my community with the encouragement from my ESL teacher. Yet, winning this contest did not help me be any more

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[100] Ibid., p. 205.

[101] Labelle, Jeffrey. "Vietnamese American Experiences of English Language Learning: Ethnic Acceptance and Prejudice." *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement* 2, no. 1 (05, 2015). doi:10.7771/2153-8999.1125.

[102] *Sinhan Minbo*, editorial, in Moon, "Korean Immigrants in America," p. 157 quoted in Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore.*, p. 277.

accepted in school especially when I was singled out to present this poem in front of my whole class. In my perspective, this was not on a show and tell day so having to showcase my culture made me feel as if I was a fascinating cultural exhibition to feed people's curiosity, even if the intention might have been to celebrate my culture and to educate my classmates. Further, I was teased in school for having a Vietnamese name that no one could properly pronounce, which impacted my confidence and identity to the extent that I decided to adopt an American name. From being called "fresh off the boat" to Americanizing my name, I wanted to cast away my Vietnamese identity and culture in order to become an Americanized Vietnamese so that I can be socially accepted.

This desire can be translated to being in favor of English which is an "identifying characteristic of Americanized young people" in order to culturally assimilate.[103] In my perspective, trying to be completely Americanized is based on the illusion of social mobility that would enable all Asian Americans to achieve the same power and privileges as white people. For example, Koreans denying their own language and culture only to be more like Americans demonstrate how people can be manipulated to discard their own identities.[104] I have observed as a newcomer to the community, that my Vietnamese peers who claimed themselves to be 'Americanized' wanted to keep a distance from me. I was considered as Vietnamese cultural heritage for them that they resist for their better assimilation to America. This experience has structured my own process of Americanization that I tried to discard my Vietnamese identity.

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[103] Bankston III, Carl L., and Min Zhou. 1997. "The Social Adjustment of Vietnamese American Adolescents: Evidence for a Segmented-Assimilation Approach." *Social Science Quarterly (University of Texas Press)* 78 (2):508–23.http://libraries.ou.edu/access.aspx?url=http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=afh&AN=9708316981&site=ehost-live.

[104] Moon, "Korean Immigrants in America," p. 157 quoted in Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore.*, pp. 277.

Since my parents worried about working and supporting my family for survival, it was difficult for me to navigate my education on my own. I became more distant from my own community and became more connected with Black and Latino/a peers who are seen as "the chief source of cultural assimilation."[105] Associating with these communities had been found to negatively affect the adaptation of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans in contrast to the positive effect on social adjustment with white peers .[106] This is due to the fact that historically underprivileged and minoritized neighborhoods, like in OKC, had been recognized to be the ones that receive Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants. This automatically disadvantages Vietnamese and Vietnamese American students because racial discrimination and segregation have led to the unequal distribution of resources.

The middle school and high school that I attended had shortages of teachers, lack of resources, and inadequate funding necessary to support student success. In some classes, teachers would not teach at all but let us sit there. In other classes, some white teachers overtly portrayed racism in their classroom disciplinary policy. One of my most memorable and dreadful classrooms was the art class that was taught by a white teacher during middle school. This art class was my last time block and was extremely overcrowded with students, where I was the only Vietnamese student and my classmates were either white, Latino/a or Black students. We consistently received unnecessary punishments for small misbehaviors, such as copying and writing classroom rules instead of assignments related to art or blow a deafening whistle in our ears to prevent any conversations. Sometimes this teacher would withhold us after it was time to go home, and unfortunately, students would miss the bus or be late to their sports practice. On the

[105] Bankston III, Carl L., and Min Zhou. 1997. "The Social Adjustment of Vietnamese American Adolescents: Evidence for a Segmented-Assimilation Approach."
[106] Ibid., p. 520.

other hand I noticed in another classroom that was not crowded and had more white students, they received more positive treatment and were taught the art curriculum.

These are some of the prime examples where schools are exclusionary for students of color. Since my schools focused more on the exclusion and disciplinary actions, students were ill-prepared to pursue higher education. Within the traditional school curriculum, I did not have access to foundational classes and resources which led me to be extremely behind in college coursework. Fortunately, I did find a support system through other special programs like TRIO during middle school and high school. As a first-generation,Vietnamese American student, TRIO programs exposed me to college, helped me navigate through college applications, and provided me the resources toward college completion. I, therefore, strongly believe that if it was not for federal programs like TRIO, are necessarily for marginalized students like myself to overcome educational barriers.

Thus, the fact that I am currently in graduate school indicates how impactful TRIO programs are at changing the lives of marginalized students. Beginning in 1964, the Special Programs for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds or TRIO programs were created as a product of the Economic Opportunity Act during President Johnson administration's the "War on Poverty."[107] Later on, initiatives like Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services soon came into existence. These programs were created to provide pre-college assistance to first generation and low-income students in order to increase access to higher education. Moreover, they are committed to "providing academic enrichment, tutoring, counseling, mentoring, financial

[107] McElroy, E. J., & Armesto, M. TRIO and Upward Bound: History, programs, and issues--past, present, and future. The Journal of Negro Education, 67(4), 373- 380. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/2668137. 1998.

training, cultural experiences, and other supports" to better these students' lives.[108] During middle school and high school, I was fortunate enough to find out about an opportunity through a friend to join Talent Search (TS). Talent Search was historically created to help middle school and high school students with disadvantaged backgrounds be prepared for college by providing academic, career, and financial counseling. Through the program, I was able to go on my first college tour, find out about scholarship opportunities, and receive guidance on college applications. Most importantly, my TS counselor constantly motivated and advocated for me throughout secondary school. This unconditional support that I received made a tremendous difference because someone believed in me and my potential to be successful, especially as Vietnamese immigrant and language minority student.

As I successfully got accepted into college, I remember once again feeling anxious and lost as I tried to navigate through the day of college class enrollment by myself. However, those feelings soon wore off as I was welcomed into Student Support Services (SSS) specifically created to support college students like myself. The program was there to assist me in academic advising and development and to help me meet college requirements while motivating me to complete my degree.[109] Aside from increasing college retention and graduation rates, SSS became a second family to me and many of the participants. One particular way was helping me find scholarships and financial aid in order to offset the cost of attending college. Further, the people who work there not only care about the students' academics but also their personal welfare as life outside of school can have a tremendous impact on their academic performance. Therefore, my

[108] Arendale, D. R. (Ed.). 2016 EOA National Best Practices Directory (2nd ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Educational Opportunity Association and University of Minnesota, College of Education and Human Development, Curriculum & Instruction Department. Available from http://z.umn.edu/eoabestpractices. 2016. As cited by David R. Arendale.
[109] McElroy, E. J., & Armesto, M. TRIO and Upward Bound: History, programs, and issues--past, present, and future.

experiences with TRIO programs serve as an antithesis to the model minority because disadvantaged Vietnamese Americans like myself still need more resources to support us.

Model Minority

This positive image of Asian Americans as the model minority started in the mid-1960s when the U.S. needed to protect its global position by illustrating that American democracy advantaged all its people including Asians and Asian Americans after the internment and resettlement of Japanese Americans.[110] The term *model minority* was introduced in 1966 by sociologist William in his magazine article, "Success story: Japanese American style" to describe Japanese American's resilience in overcoming racial oppression and discrimination.[111] Such stories were considered as "recovery narratives" because they demonstrated how Japanese Americans rebounded through hard work and quiet accommodation as they successfully achieved full citizenship in America.[112] Many media outlets praised their remarkable self-determination towards social mobility by highlighting their acceptance into white middle class, attainment of college degrees, and unwavering loyalty to the United States.[113]

Petersen suggested that Japanese Americans, and Asian Americans in general, were able to uplift themselves because of their exemplary work ethic which derived from their traditional values in respect for authority, hard work, and fear of shame.[114] However, this noticeable change from being portrayed as *yellow peril* to *model minority* occurred not only to solve the Japanese problem, and in general Oriental problem, but also the rising urban riots and protests among blacks and other minoritized groups.[115] Hence, I agree with Wu that this image created a new racial order because deeming Asian Americans as not-black reconstructs power relations among

[110]Wu, Ellen D. The Color of Success : Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority / Ellen D. Wu. Politics and Society in Twentieth-century America. 2014.
[111] Pettersen, William. "Success Story: Japanese American Style." *New York Times*, January 9, 1966, 180.
[112] Wu, Ellen D. The Color of Success : Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Pettersen, William. "Success Story: Japanese American Style."
[115] Suzuki, Bob H. "Asian Americans as The: "Model Minority": Outdoing Whites? Or Media Hype?" *Change* 21, no. 6 (1989): 12-19. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40164756.

communities. Being positioned as a model minority discredits civil rights movement and demands for social justice by shifting the blame for racism and discrimination onto the black community and other oppressed groups. Moreover, some scholars had employed Asian American success stories to criticize that crime, delinquency, and destitution in the black community can be solved if blacks cooperate with the government and discard black matriarchy as these are key factors in overcoming racial barriers.[116] Thus, by racially triangulating Asian Americans relative to blacks and whites, Asian Americans have been historically used as scapegoats to rectify the United States racial problems and inequality.

Affirmative Action

The *model minority,* in general, is a myth that hurts all communities of color by shifting the blame onto the oppressed and supporting meritocracy and colorblindness to spearhead race-neutral practices and policies, such as affirmative action. In retrospect, I remember my senior high school government teacher briefly explaining how colleges practice race-conscious admissions policy. At the time, I was both interested and skeptical whether my teacher was telling the truth because considering race for college admissions did not seem quite fair to me. However, once I was more exposed to racial issues and recognized the importance of bringing equity to those who were historically oppressed, I became an adamant supporter for affirmative action. Historically, affirmative action was established through an Executive Order under President John F. Kennedy in 1961 to increase racial diversity and decrease discrimination by overtly encouraging institutions to consider "applicant's race as an admission factor."[117] Since

[116] Wu, Ellen D. The Color of Success : Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority.
[117] Davenport, Elizabeth K., Betty Howard, and Sonja Harrington Weston. 2018. "An Examination of the Effect of the University of Michigan Cases on the Complexion of Higher Education." *Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership*5 (August): 29–38.

then, race-conscious admissions policies have been under scrutiny of the public questioning its fairness from time to time. In the past, lawsuits against affirmative action had been filed by white individuals. One example is the well-known case *Fisher v. University of Texas (2016)* when a white applicant, Abigail Fisher, was rejected from the University of Texas and filed a lawsuit for racial discrimination against her. Around that time, the admissions policy at the University of Texas consisted of admitting all high school seniors who are in the top ten percent of their class. However, when they found that such race-neutral policy produced racial and ethnic makeup differences between the university's student population and the state population, they decided to use affirmative action on the remainder of applicants who did not get in because of this top ten percent policy.[118] Fortunately, the result of the this case was ruled in favor of the University of Texas to employ affirmative action to consider race in their admissions process.

However, affirmative action is currently being attacked again, but this time it is by Asian Americans. In 2018, a group of Asian Americans filed a lawsuit against Harvard University for using Affirmative Action to discriminate against them.[119] Additionally, they are guided and backed by the Students for Fair Admissions organization who brought in Edward Blum, a known anti-affirmative action legal strategist, to spearhead the case. The argument against affirmative action supports meritocracy by claiming that Asian Americans are being denied college admissions due to low personal ratings in spite of their hard work and outstanding test scores. Meritocracy is problematic and dangerous if colleges solely rely on it for college admission purposes because it indicates that only affluent families can afford college preparation courses

http://libraries.ou.edu/access.aspx?url=http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1194727&site=ehost-live.

[118] "Fisher v. University of Texas." Oyez. Accessed March 30, 2019. https://www.oyez.org/cases/2012/11-345

[119] Guan, Sylvia. "Gaps in the Debate About Asian Americans and Affirmative Action at Harvard." Center for American Progress. August 30, 2018. https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/news/2018/08/29/455316/gaps-debate-asian-americans-affirmative-action-harvard/.

and workshops for their students. Additionally, access to qualified teachers and rigorous college preparatory courses are key indicators for high school students' pursuits toward higher education. [120] What this means for marginalized students is that they would be at a disadvantage as meritocracy, reinforced by the *model minority myth*, perpetuates the system of oppression.[121] Thus, the outcome of this high-profile federal court case is waiting on the judge's decision and will most likely impact higher education institutions across the nation.

While my thesis is not intended to give a deep analysis on this controversial topic, I do want to argue that this is how white supremacy divides communities. It uses Asian American bodies to pit people of color against each other, which is an antithesis to race conscious admissions policy as it strives to create an equitable society. Before I applied to college in 2013, Oklahoma was already one out of the eight states that banned affirmative action. In spite of that, I firmly support affirmative action because

> Race matters. Race matters in part because of the long history of racial minorities being denied access to the political process. ... Race also matters because of persistent racial inequality in society — inequality that cannot be ignored and that has produced stark socioeconomic disparities…."And race matters for reasons that really are only skin deep, that cannot be discussed any other way, and that cannot be wished away. Race matters to a young man's view of society when he spends his teenage years watching others tense up as he passes, no matter the neighborhood where he grew up. Race matters to a young woman's sense of self when she states her hometown, and then is pressed, 'No, where are you really from?', regardless of how many generations her family has been in the country. Race matters to a young person addressed by a stranger in a foreign language, which he does not understand because

[120] Teranishi, Robert T., and Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo M. Asians in the Ivory Tower : Dilemmas of Racial Inequality in American Higher Education / Robert T. Teranishi ; Foreword by Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco. Multicultural Education Series (New York, N.Y.). New York: Teachers College Press, 2010. pp.78.

[121] Zhou, M., & Kim, S. (2006, 04). Community Forces, Social Capital, and Educational Achievement: The Case of Supplementary Education in the Chinese and Korean Immigrant Communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, *76*(1), 1-29. doi:10.17763/haer.76.1.u08t548554882477

> only English was spoken at home. Race matters because of the slights, the snickers, the silent judgments that reinforce that most crippling of thoughts: 'I do not belong here.[122]

If the Court rules in the favor of the plaintiff, it will be a devastating moment in history where minoritized groups will further be denied access to higher education. This means that Black and Latino/a students will still be underrepresented at higher education institutions as structural barriers and historical oppression are further reinforced.[123] In addition, the success of the lawsuit will de-minoritize Asian Americans by re-affirming the idea that they have reached parity with whites and are no longer marginalized.[124] In 1970, the U.S. Census further fixated the model minority into people's minds by illustrating Asian Americans outperforming the U.S. population as a whole in median years of schooling completed and family income.[125] Historically, this implied that Asian Americans surpass minority groups by "outwhiting" whites, reifying the message that Asian Americans as non-minorities who are disadvantaged by minority programs and practices.[126] Two factors that dismantle this inaccurate belief of Asians earning more than whites included Asian families tending to be larger which means more income earners, and Asian children remaining with their family longer and contributing to family income.[127] Because the model minority only valorizes the successes of a few, those who do not fit into the stereotype

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[122] Lithwick, D. (2014). What we talk about when we talk about talking about race. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2014/04/race_and_the_supreme_court_what_the_schuette_decision_reveals_about_how.html quoted in Davenport, Elizabeth K., Betty Howard, and Sonja Harrington Weston. 2018. "An Examination of the Effect of the University of Michigan Cases on the Complexion of Higher Education." Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership 5 (August): 29–38. http://libraries.ou.edu/access.aspx?url=http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1194727&site=ehost-live.

[123] Guan, Sylvia. "Gaps in the Debate About Asian Americans and Affirmative Action at Harvard."

[124] Sharon S. Lee, The De-Minoritization of Asian Americans: A Historical Examination of the Representations of Asian Americans in Affirmative Action Admissions Policies at the University of California, 15 Asian Am. L.J. 129 (2008).

[125] Suzuki, Bob H. "Asian Americans as The: "Model Minority": Outdoing Whites? Or Media Hype?"

[126] Ibid.

[127] Ibid.

are invisible as their identity and struggles are erased. As a result, I reject the narrative of model minority; I reject it because it is a myth that masks my experiences and struggles as a Vietnamese American immigrant; I reject it because it divides communities of color to advance white supremacy; and I reject it in support of data disaggregation.

Data disaggregation matters because it makes visible the challenges that I confront throughout my life in America. In a study by the Center for American Progress and AAPI Data, only 25.8% of Vietnamese Americans and 14.7% of Hmong and Cambodians have a bachelor's degree or higher Figure 9.[128] Further, it also shows that Southeast Asians and Asian Americans are more likely to dropout of high school. Currently, Oklahoma does not have disaggregated data on Southeast Asian and Asian Americans that conveys educational attainment, poverty rates, or even K-12 student demographics. This lack of data has made it difficult to create and address policy and programs to help generate more resources for Vietnamese Americans and immigrants who live here, especially when many Vietnamese families are not proficient in English. Throughout my education in Oklahoma, I have observed that there is not a distinct presence of Vietnamese who work in K-12 education or higher education. This means that many Vietnamese students and families who lack English proficiency struggle to navigate the education system. This personally impacted me, and still does, throughout my educational experiences because I frequently looked for a Vietnamese American teacher or staff who could help my family and me. As a result, I have often felt unsupported as a student because I am unable to seek guidance from those who share similar backgrounds as me. Further, the lack of representation is congruent to the lack of programs and ethnic studies that would tremendously help support students like myself while educating people to understand the important role of Asian Americans in the social

[128] Guan, Sylvia. "Gaps in the Debate About Asian Americans and Affirmative Action at Harvard."

justice realm. Overall, data disaggregation on Asian Americans is invaluable because it dismantles the model minority stereotype to disclose the invisible struggles and diverse history of those who are categorized under "Asian Americans."

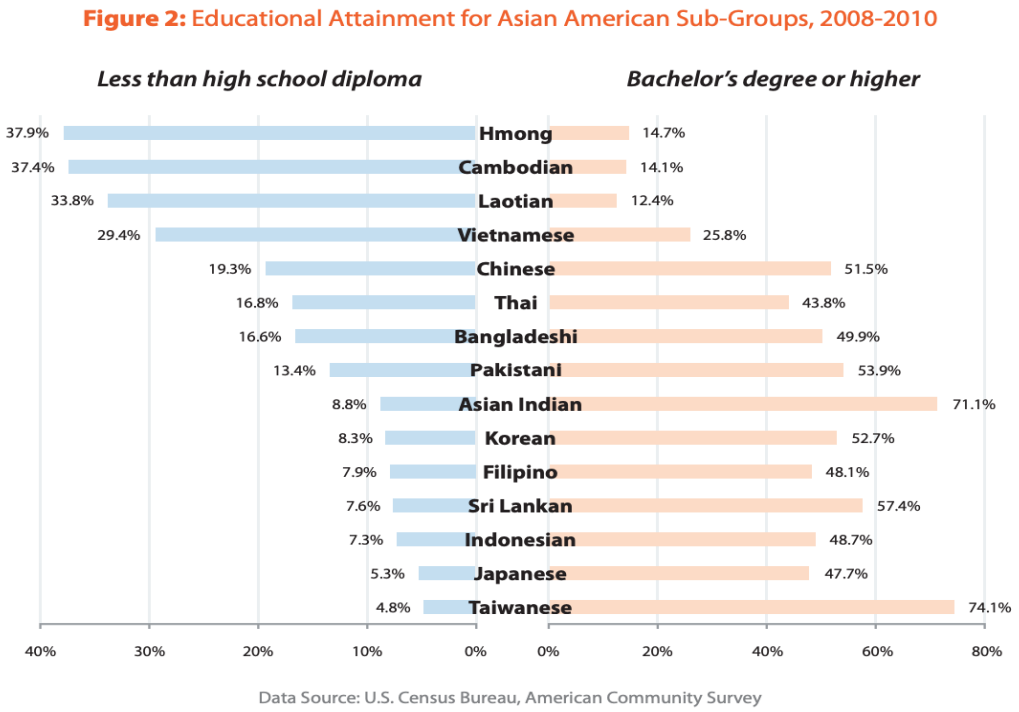


Figure 9. Educational Attainment for Asian American Sub-Groups, 2008-2010.

Source: *iCount: A Data Quality Movement for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Higher Education* by National Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Research on Education (CARE).

Conclusion

Overall, my *testimonio* has provided me, as a Vietnamese American immigrant, a space to talk about my personal experiences and struggles living in Oklahoma City. Before this journey of reconnecting to my roots, I was extremely disconnected to my Vietnamese identity and heritage. Similar to many Asian Americans, I wanted to "achieve" the social status of being a white American. I did everything to Americanize myself: distancing myself from the Vietnamese community and changing my Vietnamese name to an American one. As I started learning about the history of the U.S. education system, most of the conversations about racism and discrimination in my graduate courses focused mainly on the oppression and experiences of Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities. This made me become more cognizant of the missing narratives and lack of representation of Asian Americans in the education system. My point here, however, is not to undermine the experiences and history of other communities of color, but to accentuate on the importance of including Asian Americans. In efforts to fill the missing narratives, the journey of reconnecting to my Vietnamese culture and heritage offers several implications.

First, the displacement of many Vietnamese people, including my family, has taught me the hardships that they had to endure in order for me to have a better life in America. One part of this better life is my freedom of speech to document and freely speak of the different struggles and survival strategies of the Vietnamese Americans community. At the same time, I am also able to voice my own oppression as a first-generation Vietnamese American student who experienced lack of resources due to the model minority myth. In addition to this stereotype, I have learned that K-12 education system was not created for me or for any students of color to be successful. My own survival strategy in this system was to Americanize myself as much as

possible in my 10 years of attending OKCPS. I believe that I would have had a different educational journey if there were more Vietnamese American representation in education. This would have allowed me to foster positive mentorship and help me psychologically adjust better in America. While my overall educational experiences at OKCPS did leave me unprepared for college, TRIO programs had positively influenced my life. Both my struggle in education and support from TRIO programs inspired me to become an educator and an advocate for marginalized communities. Therefore, it is my goal that I would one day be able to offer resources and support by not only increasing Vietnamese representation in education but also creating programs to meet the needs of the Vietnamese community.

Second, reconnecting with my roots through my *testimonio* has allowed me to see that I can be in the system of oppression and challenge it by voicing my oppression to disrupt white supremacy, colonialism, and racism. As a "creator and holder of knowledge," I use *testimonio* to make visible the OKC Vietnamese American community and its history in order to demystify the model minority.[129] This methodology has also helped me better understand myself and my experiences with the Americanization process. As I recognized that my assimilation in America was inevitable, this recognition conveys my first step toward affirming my lived realities. Because my *testimonio* is based on AsianCrit framework, I am able to demonstrate how my failure to assimilate guided me to accept my differences in the United States. My affirmation of these differences has empowered me to use my knowledge to promote insurgent work and spaces in my daily life. This can range from educating my family members on race issues to helping Vietnamese American students and colleagues explore their identity. Because racism is deeply

[129] Bernal, Dolores Delgado. "Critical Race Theory, Latino Critical Theory, and Critical Raced-Gendered Epistemologies: Recognizing Students of Color as Holders and Creators of Knowledge." Qualitative Inquiry 8, no. 1 (February 2002): 105–26. doi:10.1177/107780040200800107. p. 106.

embedded in the U.S., I understand that formal equality cannot be achieved without increasing equity for marginalized communities. Therefore, it is only through work of resistance that I believe can create hope for a better society.

Lastly, I learned that America must recognize and affirm the ethnic diversity of each Asian American for the country to be liberated in order to celebrate its diversity. Part of this requires a space for Asian Americans, especially Southeast Asians Americans, to share their stories and experiences. However, I also want to call on other Vietnamese students to share their stories so that we can maintain our culture and the existence of our community. I believe that their unique voices will further expand the needed research on Vietnamese experiences in OKC. Thus, when the communities do come together, there must be a collective effort to learn, listen, and understand one another without succumbing into the "dangers...in ranking the oppressions."[130] It is only then can we go beyond the white and black binary system to foster deeper conversations on social justice and racial issues.

My hope is that more Asians and Asian Americans, specifically in Oklahoma, will share their personal experiences and struggles for the betterment of our community. While the system of oppression may never change, there is hope in resistance as more silenced narratives continue to be revealed. As I strive to survive under the cape of invisibility, I realize that everyday can be my "Asian American Moment" to break barriers and stereotypes in order to create a more inclusive America.[131]

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[130] Moraga, Cherrie."La Guera". In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,* 29. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981.

[131] Chang, Robert S. "Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-structuralism, and Narrative Space."

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