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# A guest in someone else's house : the construction of Asian Americans as foreigners

Deepa Ranganathan

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Deepa Ranganathan  
A Guest in Someone Else's House:  
The Construction of Asian  
Americans as Foreigners

### **ABSTRACT**

Social workers, like many people, wrongly tend to think of Asian Americans as beings exempt from the problems of racism. The social work profession considers “race” to be a property inhering almost solely in African Americans. Meanwhile, the profession assigns the property of foreign “culture” primarily to Asian Americans. This thesis uses the work of Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars to show that social workers, in presuming that Asian Americans are a class of people who are essentially foreign, are actually reproducing a form of exclusionist racism that Asian Americans have faced for generations. A partial solution to this problem might involve social workers’ educating themselves about way racism manifests in the lives of Asian Americans. However, this thesis relies on the work of several poststructuralist scholars to show that, to fulfill their ethical obligation to combat oppression, social workers must also know something of the way identity is constructed—how the power relations between those designated “normal” and those designated “other” mutually maintain a system of conflict and opposition that holds everyone in artificially fixed and limiting positions. The purpose of this thesis is to expand the ability of social workers to attend to the needs of Asian American clients and trainees.

**A GUEST IN SOMEONE ELSE'S HOUSE:  
THE CONSTRUCTION OF ASIAN AMERICANS AS FOREIGNERS**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Deepa Ranganathan

Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, MA 01063

2013

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Thanks to my dad, whose excitement about learning has long been a model for me. And thanks to my mom, my first and best interlocutor. She helped me calm down and think through every single chapter of this thesis. I am not sure how I could have done this project without her.

“As long as our identity is defined oppositionally or in contradistinction to others, we are still enslaved to a degree” (Chang, 1993, p. 1321).

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

In my first-year social work placement in a medical clinic, I was assigned to work for six weeks with a white patient who frankly resented many nondominant groups: black people, people who preferred to speak in languages other than English, homeless people, people who used food stamps. A working-class man in his fifties with a past felony conviction, the patient often discussed his difficulty finding work, adding, “If I were black, I could get a job easily.” On a day when he was feeling especially anxious and agitated, he arrived at his session complaining about a man in the waiting room who was talking on his cell phone. “It was in some foreign language. He was jabbering so loud, and none of it made sense!” My patient imitated the sound with disgust. “I was seriously about to go over and take his phone away and throw it across the room. Then I was going to tell him to shut his [expletive] face.”

I had many ideas, based on this patient’s particular history and social location, about what was driving his resentment. I theorized that his racial privilege was interlocking with his lack of class privilege to create a sense of furious, thwarted entitlement. He was disavowing his own sense of having been left behind by society by heaping scorn on those he perceived as even worse off.

I was less certain about what he was trying to communicate by sharing these comments with me. I identify variously as Indian American, South Asian American, Asian American, and a person of color. At first, I thought my patient’s comments were small acts of aggression that

pointed to his discomfort with working with a clinician of color. However, as time went on, I became more confused on this point. Asian Americans of all ethnicities can occupy a “liminal” space “in the boundaries and frontiers of racial typologies” (Miller & Garran, 2008, p. 51), are often thought of as foreign, and are quite well represented in the field of health care. So I knew it was possible that he did not consider me a “real” person of color and was perhaps expecting me to collude with him in his comments about black people. Furthermore, maybe his complaints about people speaking “foreign languages” were the true vectors of his transference aggression. These ambiguities made it hard for me to understand the meaning of his statements and determine an appropriate response.

I went looking through the social work literature to learn about Asian American therapists’ experiences of racial transference, but I found little help. The vast majority of the articles on interracial therapist-client dyads presumed that the therapist was white and the client black. A few explored dyads in which the therapist was black and the client white. It appeared that there was a reason I was so confused about how my patient might see me. He and I were both subject to a discourse—reflected in the social work literature—in which race became a relevant concept primarily in the interactions between black and white people.

The purpose of this paper is to show that social workers, like many people in America, wrongly think of Asian Americans as beings exempt from the problems of racism. I will show that our profession considers “race” to be a property inhering almost solely in African Americans, and racism a problem that specifically affects African Americans in their struggles with white dominance. I will also show that social workers assign the property of foreign “culture” primarily to Asian Americans. I will use the work of several Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars, particularly Juan Perea, Richard Delgado, and Cheryl Harris, to undermine these



assumptions. In particular, I will show that social workers, in presuming that Asian Americans are a class of people who are essentially foreign, are actually propagating a rarely-acknowledged form of racism that Asian Americans have faced for generations. This is an issue that affects not only Asian American social work trainees, but also Asian American patients.

If this premise is accepted, what are social workers to do about it? CRT scholars might support the idea of social workers' educating themselves about the racial oppression of Asian Americans. However, I will use the work of the poststructuralist scholars Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to show that this approach alone would not do enough. I will argue that in addition to learning something about how racial oppression affects the lives of their Asian American clients, social workers must also know something of the way identity is created—how the power relations between those designated “normal” and those designated “other” mutually maintain a system of conflict and opposition that holds everyone in artificially fixed and limiting positions.

The word “discourse,” as used by Foucault, denotes a system of thought “composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (Lessa, 2006, p. 285). Whether the site of engagement is a scholarly paper, a community meeting, or a therapy session, social workers are constantly producing and reproducing discourses about the meaning of different identities, and these discourses have real consequences for their clients. Social workers who can reflect not just on the features of a particular category of identity, but on how they and their clients co-construct the meaning and boundaries of their identities together, can do much to help clients imagine new and freeing possibilities for themselves.

A word about the term “Asian American.” According to the Pew Research Center (2012), “the ‘Asian American’ label has not been embraced by any group of U.S. Asians, be they

native born or foreign born” (p. 67), and about two-thirds describe themselves by their country of origin (i.e., Chinese American or Indian American). Further, a survey of nearly 1,700 children of Asian immigrants in Florida found that only 11 chose the “panethnic labels Asian or Asian American; at least among these Asian-origin adolescents, Asian panethnicity is a moot issue” (Rumbaut, 1994, p. 765). There are good reasons why the “Asian American” label may fit uneasily when applied to at least 23 national and ethnic groups that share no common religion or language (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Shahid, 2012). Indeed, in the words of one *Wall Street Journal* blogger, “Asianness [is] a quintessentially American invention, superimposed on a set of peoples that have historically given one another the side-eye” (Yang, 2012, para. 11). However, my use of the term “Asian American” acknowledges that Asian Americans of all ethnicities have been subject to a particular and unique narrative of foreignness that binds them together politically in a common experience of racial oppression.

Further, while the concepts of race and culture have consequences for all racial groups, in this paper, I am focusing tightly on the experience of Asian Americans. This focus is warranted because the pervasive model minority stereotype has generated a powerful and hard-to-dislodge perception that Asian Americans, uniquely among all non-dominant racial groups, do not face oppression of any kind. In her essay “Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman,” Mitsuye Yamada (1983) recalls offering the undergraduate students in her Ethnic American Literature class an anthology compiled by Asian American writers. The students said they were “offended” by the anthology, but they admitted they were not offended by the black, Chicano, or Native American writers they had read. Indeed, they “understood” and “empathized” with the anger, frustration, and sorrow of those groups. One student finally spoke up to explain, “It made me angry. *Their* anger made *me* angry, because I didn’t even know the

Asian Americans felt oppressed. I didn't expect their anger'" (p. 35). The Asian American experience of oppression is so thoroughly erased from most realms of discourse—and, I will argue, sometimes from Asian Americans' conscious subjective experiences as well—that the phenomenon as it affects this racial group calls for its own, focused examination.

## CHAPTER II

### The Racialized Exclusion of Asian Americans

Asian immigrants have been migrating to the US for about 160 years, but they and their native-born descendants have always been, and continue to be, constructed as foreigners—inassimilable and essentially different from “real” Americans. This construction was at first based explicitly on the premise of Asians’ racial unfitness. In 1790, the nation’s first law regulating naturalization prohibited all but “free white persons” from becoming naturalized U.S. citizens (Act to Establish an Uniform Rule of Naturalization, 1790, para. 1). The Supreme Court repeatedly interpreted this law to mean that Asian immigrants were ineligible for naturalization—a right granted to immigrants from all other regions of the world (Lee, 1998). In 1922, Takao Ozawa, a Japanese immigrant who had lived in the U.S for 20 years, petitioned the Supreme Court for the right to naturalize on the basis of his light skin color. The Court denied his petition, stating that “the words ‘white person’ [in the 1790 law] were meant to indicate only a person of what is popularly known as the Caucasian race” (*Takao Ozawa v. United States*, 2003, p. 39). The next year, an Indian immigrant named Bhagat Singh Thind petitioned the court for naturalization rights on the basis of his Caucasian or Aryan ancestry—but the Court ruled against him, too, clarifying that the words “free white person” meant whatever the “common man” thought them to mean. The Court concluded that Thind belonged to a racial group “readily distinguishable from the various groups of persons in this country commonly recognized as white,” and that this “racial difference” was “of such a character and extent that the great body of

our people instinctively recognize it and reject the thought of assimilation” (*United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 1923, pp. 577-578). While “aliens of African nativity” were granted naturalization rights in 1870 (*Takao Ozawa v. United States*, 2003, p. 38), Asian immigrants were denied access to American citizenship on racial grounds until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Park (2006) states that nearly all immigrant groups – including many from Europe – were at some point subject to questions about “the fitness of [their] racio-cultural heredity” (p. 183). Immigrants from Asia, however, were the only ones prevented by law from becoming naturalized citizens. The laws and rulings that excluded Asians from full political participation reflected powerful beliefs that Asians were racially inferior to whites, and that they were a group marked by an indelible foreignness unique to their kind. These twin beliefs were particularly evident during times of white labor unrest, when Asian workers were seen as foreign competition depressing white wages. At these times, those calling for an end to Asian immigration sometimes warned of the Asian threat to white racial purity. According to Takaki (1989), a speaker at the California constitutional convention of 1878 stated, “Were the Chinese to amalgamate at all with our people, it would be the lowest, most vile and degraded of our race, and the result of that amalgamation would be a hybrid of the most despicable, a mongrel of the most detestable that has ever afflicted the earth” (p. 101). Others advanced the notion that Asians were uniquely and persistently inassimilable, and that their foreignness was a heritable racial quality that would make them and their offspring permanently unfit for citizenship. As Park (2008) has noted, as late as 1942, U.S. Army Lieutenant General John Lesesne DeWitt was able to argue for the internment of Japanese Americans—even those who were U.S. citizens—on the basis of this heritable racial foreignness:

In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by migration.

The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States Citizenship, have become “Americanized,” the racial strains are undiluted... That Japan is allied with Germany and Italy in this struggle is no ground for assuming that any Japanese, barred from assimilation by convention as he is, though born and raised in the United States, will not turn against this nation when the final test of loyalty comes (p. 452).

This dual reasoning about Asians’ racial inferiority and their racial inassimilability, in the midst of a clamor to restrict the flow of labor from Asian countries, led Congress in 1882 to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act—among the first of a series of laws that would whittle down and ultimately block Asian immigration for more than 80 years. The subsequent Immigration Act of 1924 made the racial character of this exclusion quite plain by banning the entry of any “alien ineligible to citizenship”—a category that included only people from Asia, who had previously been deemed racially ineligible for naturalization (Sect. 11d). Asians were thus the only group in U.S. history to experience a race-based immigration ban.

Today, the popular perception of Asian Americans includes a new (and superficially quite different) idea of them as successful immigrants following a well-worn path toward assimilation. In 1966, *The New York Times Magazine* ran an article praising Japanese Americans as “better [citizens] than any other group in our society, including native-born whites” (Petersen, 1966, p. 21). The 1965 Immigration Act abolished discriminatory immigration restrictions based on national origin, giving preference to the family members of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents as well as to professionals and people with “exceptional ability in the sciences or the arts” (*Act to Amend the Immigration and Nationality Act*, 1965, p. 913). Following this

legislation, Asians with college degrees and already-developed technical skills flocked to the United States to find jobs, and their family members followed (Lee, 1998). By the 1980s, mainstream publications such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, and *The New Republic* were running cover stories with titles such as “America’s Super Minority” and “The Triumph of Asian Americans: America’s Greatest Success Story.” As recently as October 2012, *The Wall Street Journal* ran an article praising Asian Americans for rising “to the top in pursuit of the American dream” (Siegel, 2012, para. 4).

Some scholars today argue that, contrary to past notions of their inassimilability, Asian Americans are now undergoing a “whitening” process, and that their racial and ethnic identities will “[decline] in salience for them as they increasingly access the privileges of whiteness, much like Irish, Italian, and Jewish Americans before them” (O’Brien, 2008, p. 12). In a fairly typical assessment of Asian Americans’ racial standing in the United States, the Pew Research Center (2012) recently concluded that

A century ago, most Asian Americans were low-skilled, low-wage laborers crowded into ethnic enclaves and targets of official discrimination. Today they are the most likely of any major racial or ethnic group in America to live in mixed neighborhoods and to marry across racial lines (p. 1).

The report suggests that, while racism was once a problem for Asian Americans, they have met so many “milestones of economic success and social assimilation” (p. 1) that it would be hard to conclude that racial “discrimination” still poses real obstacles for them.

These modern portrayals of Asian Americans—as the latest batch of successful, soon-to-be-white immigrants—are based, paradoxically, on a presumption of their ineradicable difference. In many of these accounts, the very engine driving Asian Americans’ assimilation is

“Asian culture”—that is, some heritable, non-American link to foreign lands that persists indefinitely even in native-born generations of Asian Americans. Their essential and unattenuating foreignness, according to these articles, is precisely what allows Asian Americans to leapfrog over the oppression of American racism. The 1966 article in the *New York Times Magazine*, for instance, attributed the success of even third-generation Japanese Americans to their Asian work ethic, respect for authority, and sensitivity to public shaming. According to the article, they “could climb over the highest barriers our racists were able to fashion because of their meaningful links with an alien culture.” Meanwhile, American blacks, the “minority...with the least meaningful ties to an overseas fatherland,” also faced racial devaluation but could not similarly “salvage [their] ego by measuring [their] worth in another currency” (Petersen, 1966, p. 43). An “alien” Asian culture, in other words, was the critical factor that allowed Japanese Americans to transcend the negative effects of racism. Similarly, the 2012 *Wall Street Journal* article attributes Asian American success to “Asian discretion, deference to the community, and gifts for less verbal pursuits like music, science and math” (Siegel, 2012, para. 18). These qualities, according to the article, are cultural traits that have both made Asian Americans phenomenally successful and “kept most Asian-American groups away from the public glare and thus out of the cross hairs of American bias and hatred” (para. 15). These articles suggest that Asian Americans are a group little affected by interactions with American racism and instead, shaped by their own persistent cultural foreignness—what in 1869 the anti-immigration crusader Henry George, with a very different purpose in mind, called “habits of thought rendered permanent by being stamped upon countless generations” (George, 2003, p. 179).

There are a number of serious flaws in the idea that Asian Americans’ culture has allowed them to transcend the problems of race. The first and most basic problem is that the



very premise of Asian American success is questionable. Consider the oft-cited statistic that the annual median income of Asian American households is higher than that of white households. According to U.S. Census data, the Asian American annual median household income is nearly \$10,000 more than that of non-Hispanic white households (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2012). This finding, however, is an artifact of the reality that Asian American households are nearly 20 percent larger than white households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Indeed, Asian American income per capita is almost \$5000 less than that of non-Hispanic whites. Furthermore, Asian Americans are 25 percent more likely to live in poverty than are non-Hispanic whites (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2012) with 38 percent of Hmong and 30 percent of Cambodian populations living below the poverty line (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2008).

Another problem with the assumption that Asian Americans have escaped the problems of racism is that Asian Americans, unbeknownst sometimes even to themselves, regularly cope with forms of oppression that most people would easily recognize as manifestations of racism. For instance, Asian American men with a bachelor's degree earn 86 cents for every dollar earned by their white male peers. The disparity is even more stark for Asian American men with a high school diploma—they earn 76 cents for every dollar that a white male high school graduate earns, a wage gap nearly identical to the one that black and Latino high school graduates face (Julian & Kominski, 2011). Furthermore, Asian Americans have long had to contend (and still contend today) with overtly racist violence and domestic terrorism, such as the 1982 murder of the second-generation Chinese American Vincent Chin by auto workers in Detroit who were seeking to punish “Japs” (Takaki, 1989); the 1987 gang murder of Navroze Mody during a wave

of anti-Indian sentiment in Jersey City (Chang, 1993); and the 2012 mass shooting by a white supremacist at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

There is yet another problematic aspect of the assumption that Asian Americans have escaped the problems of racism by means of their culture—and this aspect is perhaps the most troubling for its ubiquity in the field of social work. *Social Work Abstracts* is a database produced by the National Association of Social Workers that offers “extensive coverage of more than 850 social work and human services journals” (EBSCO Industries, 2012). In May 2013, I performed a search of this database to see how often different racial groups were paired with the words “race” or “racial” as well as “culture” or “cultural” in the titles of articles published between January 2003 and December 2012. The goal of this search was to learn whether the social work literature reflects and reproduces the idea that Asian Americans are a group imbued with cultural difference and relatively unaffected by racism.

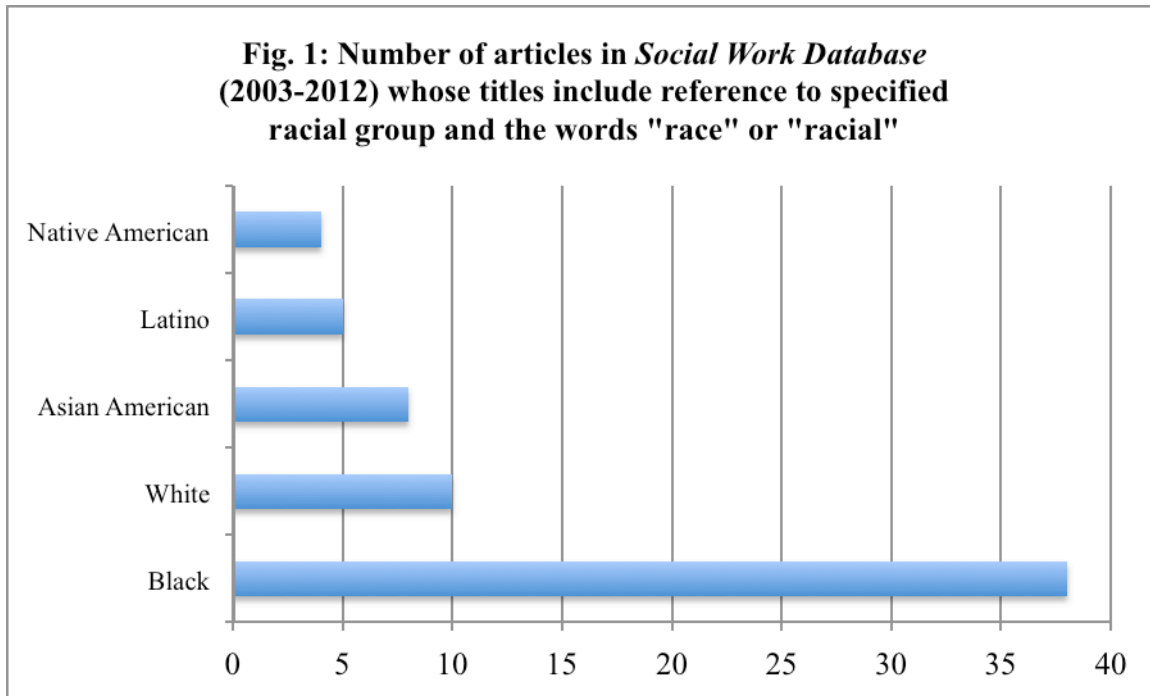
I entered a variety of common terms for each racial group into the *Social Work Abstracts* database (Table 1). I predicted that researchers studying a subset of either group might use specific ethnic designations. I therefore included in my search the six most populous groups classified as Asian American (Pew Research Center, 2012) and as Latino or Hispanic (Motel & Patten, 2012). I also included in my search the six most populous black immigrant groups (Kent, 2007).

Table 1: Search Terms

Race	Search Terms
Asian American	Asian or Chinese or Filipino or Indian or Vietnamese or Korean or Japanese (excluded results for American Indian)
Black	Black or African American or Afro American or Jamaican or Haitian or Trinidadian or Nigerian or Guyanese or Ethiopian
Latino	Hispanic or Latino or Mexican or Puerto Rican or Cuban or Salvadoran or Dominican or Guatemalan

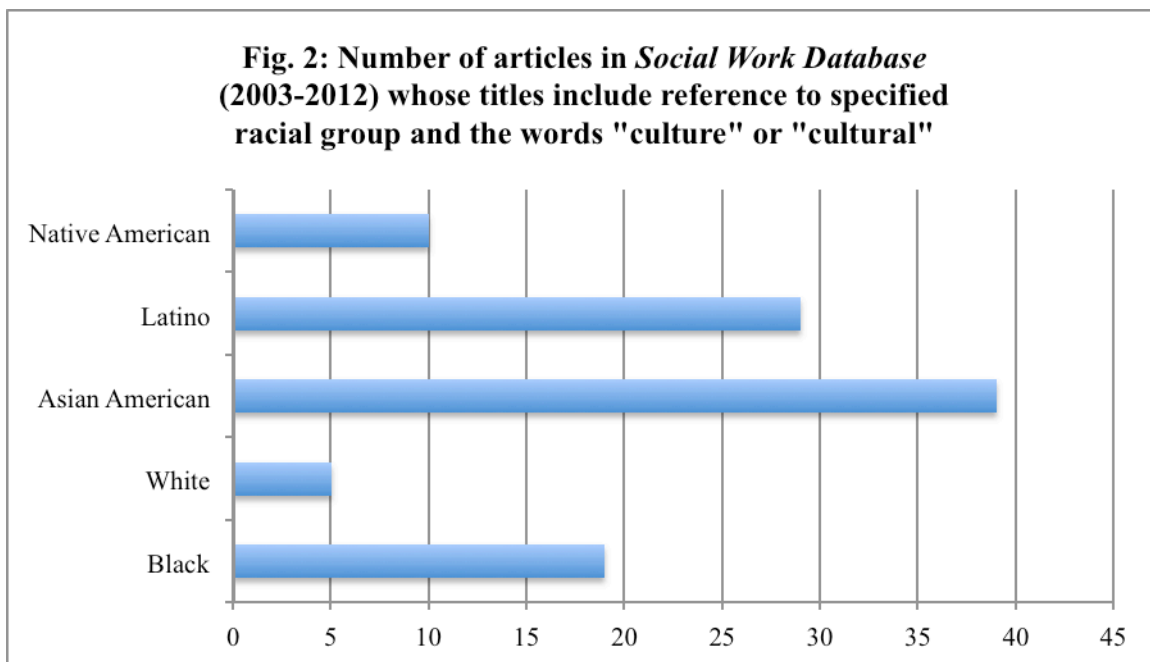
Native American	Native American or American Indian (excluded results for Asian Indian)
White	White or Euro American or European American or Caucasian or Anglo

Blacks were far and away the racial group most commonly associated with the words “race” or “racial” in the titles of the articles searched (59%). They were nearly four times as likely to be mentioned in this context as were whites, almost five times as likely as Asian Americans, almost eight times as likely as Latinos, and about 10 times as likely as Native Americans.



It is worth noting here that, out of 10 article titles referencing whites, five made reference to other racial groups also. This finding suggests that whiteness, as the normative, blank racial “center” against which all other races are defined, often is not deemed a suitable object of study on its own in the social work literature. At least half the time, whiteness becomes visible in its encounter with racial difference—and this usually means in the encounter with blackness.

In an attempt to understand how social work researchers are making sense of other racial groups, I repeated this exercise in exactly the same way as before—but instead of entering the search terms “race” and “racial,” I entered the terms “culture” and “cultural.” Suddenly, Asian Americans and Latinos were extremely well represented in the literature. Asian Americans in particular were about one-and-a-third times as likely as Latinos to be associated with the terms “culture” or “cultural” in article titles, twice as likely as blacks, four times as likely as Native Americans, and eight times as likely as whites.



Based on this search, it appears that the cultural dynamics of Asian Americans are perceived by social workers as much more salient a concern than their racial dynamics. This suggests that the field’s production of knowledge both reflects and advances the dominant notion of Asian Americans as “perpetual immigrants” who are both fundamentally different from mainstream Americans in their “culture” and relatively untroubled by American racial oppression. To identify Asian Americans (even admiringly) as a group marked permanently by “alien” cultural values is itself an under-acknowledged manifestation of racism. Chang (1993)

argues that Asian Americans face a particular kind of “nativistic racism” (p. 1257) that associates Asian phenotypes with foreignness. It is far from innocuous to constantly cast Asian Americans—even those born in the United States—as people who are somehow from somewhere else. As the third-generation Japanese American Ron Wakabayashi, National Director of the Japanese American Citizens League, put it, ““We still feel that we’re a guest in someone else’s house...that we can never really relax and put our feet on the table”” (Takaki, 1989, p. 11).

Park (2005) argues that assigning the attribute of “culture” to a particular group both reinforces the centrality of the white mainstream and marginalizes the “cultured” group. Park writes:

Against the blank, white backdrop of the “culture-free” mainstream, the “cultured” Others are made visible in sharp relief, and this visibility—a sign of separateness and differentiation from the standard—are inscriptions of marginality. Embedded in the conceptualization of culture as difference, in other words, is that of difference conceptualized as deficiency. “Culture” in this arithmetic is a marker for the periphery, a contradictory descriptor for a deficit, since to *have* “culture,” in this schema, is to be assigned a position subordinate to that of those inscribed as without “culture” (p. 22).

To be sure, Asian Americans are often seen as imbued with a culture that makes them successful. However, Park argues that “the Other, the object of knowledge and intervention, cannot be construed as other than subordinate to its dominant counterpart who occupies the position of the knowing, intervening Subject” (p. 26).

This subordinate status—this assignment of deficit associated with their social location as foreigners with “culture”—is keenly felt by many Asian Americans. Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal,

and Torino (2007) conducted focus groups with Asian American college students who were born and raised in the U.S. These groups identified eight types of racial microaggressions—that is, “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (p. 72)—that the students persistently encountered from “well intentioned friends, neighbors, teachers, co-workers, and colleagues” (p. 77). These included being made to feel like “an alien in their own land” and having their racial reality denied as a result of the model minority myth. “Most participants described strong and lasting negative reactions to the constant racial microaggressions they experienced... They described feelings of belittlement, anger, rage, frustration, alienation, and of constantly being invalidated. Common comments from the groups were they felt trapped, invisible, and unrecognized” (pp. 77-78).

The failure to recognize how the construct of “culture” and the associated idea of foreignness exclude and oppress Asian Americans represents a kind of blindness to the differential manifestations of racism. Social workers reproduce the racist exclusion of Asian Americans when they generate scholarly articles about the problems posed by their “cultural differences.” Culture and cultural attributes, according to Park (2005), are presented within the social work literature “as reified characteristics—fixed difference rather than positional divergence—which can be attributed to groups of people, who in turn can be identified by those essential attributes” (p. 23). This problematic notion that “culture” is a static quality that inheres in a group that is “different” from the blank mainstream—rather than “an inconstant identity which is constructed rather than found” (p. 22)—can lead social workers to essentialize the “cultural” attributes they may observe among Asian Americans, avoiding a broader sociopolitical analysis that accounts for the workings of oppression. For instance, social workers may fail to consider how U.S. immigration and naturalization policy may have shaped our idea of “Asian

success” by offering preference to Asian professionals skilled in math and science. They may also fail to consider how longstanding dynamics of racial exclusion in America might produce a nearly invisible (but visibly different) Asian American population remarkable for its “discretion” and “deference” (Siegel, 2012, para. 18).

The field of social work as a whole has not yet critically considered how it differentially ascribes the quality of “culture” to certain groups, and how the construction of cultural difference may be experienced by those groups as a variant of racial oppression. According to the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics (2008), social workers must understand the workings of “oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability” (Section 1.05c). In the same section, social workers are informed that it is their professional obligation to have a “knowledge base of their clients’ cultures” and provide services that are sensitive to “differences among people and cultural groups” (Section 1.05b). In this section of the Code of Ethics, culture is still portrayed solely as a fixed and apolitical marker of real difference, rather than as a socially constructed aspect of identity that, like race, can sometimes become a locus of oppression. And nowhere does the Code of Ethics suggest that the ascription of “culture” to a particular group, such as Asian Americans born and raised in the U.S., can in fact be an unappreciated dimension of racial oppression.

One of the main reasons Asian Americans so rarely figure in discussions of race is that, since the inception of slavery in the United States, race, racial resistance, and racism have been constructed as properties and experiences uniquely belonging to African Americans in their struggle against whites. In the next chapter, I will discuss the framework of American race as a

black-white binary. Relying on the work of several critical race theorists and legal scholars, I will use the idea of this binary to explore some of the legal, historical, and political reasons why American society—and by extension, social workers—so rarely think of race as a salient property of Asian American identity, and why racism is so rarely identified as an important dynamic in their lives.



## CHAPTER III

### The Black-White Racial Binary

The apparent blindness of American society to the racial experiences of Asian Americans has deep roots in the construction of race itself as a black-white matter. Perea (1997) defines this bipolar construction “as the conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White. Many scholars of race reproduce this paradigm when they write and act as though *only the Black and the White races matter* for purposes of discussing race and social policy with regard to race” (p. 133).

Most of the writing on the black-white binary has been generated by scholars who identify with the Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement. CRT first sprang up in American law schools in the 1980s as a way of challenging the idea, common in traditional civil rights discourse, that “the exercise of racial power [is] rare and aberrational rather than...systemic and ingrained” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xiv). Rather than thinking of racism as “an intentional, albeit irrational, deviation by a conscious wrongdoer” (p. xiv), CRT scholars seek to identify the ordinary ways in which white supremacy expresses and reproduces itself structurally in institutions that may seem a-racial and apolitical. Since the 1980s, scholars in fields as different as education, English, political science, and anthropology have drawn on the CRT movement to articulate the quiet operations of racism in many realms of American life. In this chapter I will rely primarily on the work of CRT scholars to identify the structural factors

that have created and maintained the black-white racial binary and that continue to pose obstacles to the widespread acknowledgement of the racial experiences of other groups.

In her widely cited paper “Whiteness as Property,” the law professor and CRT scholar Cheryl Harris (1995) argues that the legal construction of American slavery, with its designation of blacks as property, first gave race its bipolar orientation: “The ideological and rhetorical move from “slave” and “free” to “black” and “white” as polar constructs marked an important step in the social construction of race... Because whites could not be enslaved or held as slaves, the racial line between white and black was extremely critical” (pp. 278-279). White identity, “built on exclusion and racial subjugation,” is constantly shifting, Harris argues, but it has always positioned itself in sharp contrast to “an oppositional definition of black as Other” (p. 285).

The relationship between whites (the most dominant racial group in America) and blacks (arguably the most subjugated racial group in America) has proven to be a reliable source of “shame, guilt, and anxiety” for whites (Green, 1970, p. 395). This white anxiety, coupled with prominent black resistance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has fostered a narrow understanding of “race relations” that equates the term with black-white relations. Racism, in turn, is widely seen to be the set of injustices blacks experience in the context of white dominance. This black-white polarity was perhaps most strikingly expressed in the bestselling 1968 Kerner Commission report, which proclaimed that “[o]ur nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal” (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, p. 1). More recently, this black-white binary became a point of overt conflict during the first meeting of the President’s Advisory Board on Race in summer 1997. At that meeting, the Korean American lawyer Angela Oh suggested that the panel examine diverse manifestations of racial conflict. “I just want to make sure that we go beyond the black-white paradigm,” she said. The

panel's chairman, the venerable African American scholar John Hope Franklin, disagreed and replied, "This country cut its eyeteeth on racism in the black-white sphere" (Zoroya, 1998, para. 49).

There may be some good political reasons for blacks to support a binary notion of race. Writing in defense of the black-white binary, Brooks and Widner (2010) assert that blacks would not benefit from a racial paradigm that gave more weight to the experiences of other groups of color. Given limited resources, "achieving progress on one group's agenda can come at the expense of another group's agenda. The game is, indeed, often zero-sum" (Section III-B, para. 4). This is particularly true, the authors argue, because blacks have persistently constituted the "social marker for disadvantage" and "have watched as other racial and ethnic groups with whom they have aligned in the past have leapfrogged past them in resources and power" (Section III-B, para. 16). When people of color are pitted against each other in critical realms such as employment and education, blacks have little incentive to give up their strategic position as one of the two "true" races—particularly if their experience is that interracial coalitions have been of limited benefit to them.

Those who defend the concept of a black-white binary usually do so on the grounds of black exceptionalism—the idea that black "history is so distinctive that placing it at the center of analysis is, in fact, warranted," and that if we understand how blacks experience racism, we will also understand how all groups experience it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 77). This idea is embedded in many social work articles that turn Asian Americans into ghostly afterthoughts, invisibly present in the term "other people of color." The view that the black experience of racism is simply an extreme form of what all other racial minority groups experience, however, does not account for the theory of differential racialization. This theory holds that "each

disfavored group in this country has been racialized in its own individual way and according to the needs of the majority group at particular times in its history” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 77). Arguing against the black-white binary, Delgado (1999) writes:

Latinos and Asians (to take two examples) are not...merely African Americans with slightly lighter skins. Mainstream society has racialized Latinos and Asians differently from African Americans. Skin color comes into play, of course, but so does discrimination based on accent, national origin or immigrant status, religion, and culture. The invidious stereotypes that afflict these groups differ as well (p. 1576).

Higham (2002), Sanchez (1997), and Chang (1993) argue for the existence of a specific type of nativist racism, for instance, that targets solely those perceived to be immigrants. Those who characterize even native-born Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners—for instance, by asking, “Where are you really from?” and “Do you ever go ‘back home’?”—betray a racist assumption that one cannot have an Asian phenotype and truly belong in America. Questions like these sting all the more because they retain the negative valence associated with a long history of Asian exclusion, and reproduce the idea that there are some races that are essentially un-American. Although separated by time and context, such ideas hearken back to the ideas of American eugenicists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who feared the pollution of the Anglo-Saxon “native” stock and thus called for an end to immigration “for the conservation of the ‘American race’” (Higham, 2002, p. 152). A question such as “Where are you really from?”—however well-intentioned—sends a clear and insulting message to the recipient that because of her race, she, unlike the questioner, can never be “really” be from the place where she happens to be standing. This is a manifestation of racism that most blacks are unlikely to experience.

The black-white race binary generates a type of blindness to the unique racial oppressions that other groups experience. Arguing against the binary, Perea (1997) identifies the focus on black-white relations as a type of paradigm: “the set of shared understandings that permits us to distinguish those facts that matter in the solution of a problem from those facts which do not” (p. 1216). While any paradigm offers critical boundaries that make it possible to deeply investigate a question, as it becomes more established, the paradigm also “tends to exclude or ignore alternative facts or theories that do not fit the expectation produced by the paradigm” (p. 1217). Perea argues that, in this way, the black-white binary “renders the particular histories of other racialized peoples irrelevant to an understanding of the only racism—White racism against Blacks—that the paradigm defines to be important” (p. 1253). By obscuring how other racisms work, the binary thus hurts not only those marginalized by it, but all Americans who seek to understand and uproot racism. This includes social workers, whose Code of Ethics tasks them with seeking to “understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race” (National Association of Social Workers, 2008, Section 1.05c).

By making invisible the experiences of Asian Americans as a racial group, the binary robs Asian Americans of credibility when they do use the framework of racism to speak about their experiences of oppression. The binary forces Asian Americans to “side” with either blacks or whites in a bipolar hierarchy when they enter interracial coalitions—thus ensuring that even in such coalitions, Asian Americans are likely to face the kind of dynamics of exclusion and invisibility that they face elsewhere in society. Asian Americans’ unique experiences of racism, when acknowledged at all, are rarely recognized as the psychologically painful insults that they are. Asian Americans in interracial coalitions therefore face an unarticulated pressure to work as

advocates on agendas authored by and primarily relating to the experiences of other racial groups, rather than addressing issues related to their own distinct experiences of racism.

One might suppose that, as demographics change in the US, the racial lives of Asian Americans and Latinos will inevitably become more and more prominent. According to U.S. Census Bureau projections, the Asian American and Latino populations will both triple by 2050, and blacks will make up only a third of the non-white population. Meanwhile, white Americans will be a plurality rather than a majority (Hajnal & Lee, 2011). In this racially reconstituted America, it may be harder to ignore the stories that Latinos and Asian Americans tell about their own lives—including their recountings of their racial reality.

However, I argue that the black-white binary is likely to have tremendous staying power even as blacks and whites make up less and less of the population. The primary reason is that, in effectively limiting the visible scope of race and racism, the binary colludes with white dominance and protects the interest of whites (as a group) in not “seeing” racism of any kind. Whites consistently underestimate and minimize the material costs of racism for blacks, even when they are provided education on this topic (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Mazzocco, Brock, Brock, Olson, & Banaji, 2006). One explanation for this phenomenon is that whites enjoy a wide range of unearned privileges that are “invisible” to them, but that protect them from “many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence” (McIntosh, 1990, Sect. 2, para. 4). These privileges span most realms of activity: housing, education, employment, wealth, health, mental health, criminal justice, politics, and media (Miller & Garran, 2008). Harris (1995) suggests that this vast structure of unearned privilege constitutes a type of property right—“an expectation of continued privilege” that “is seen by whites as part of the natural order of things, something that cannot legitimately be disturbed” (p. 288).

It would become psychologically and politically difficult for whites to protect their system of unearned privilege if they were to become aware of the multifaceted nature and impact of racism—its “intrapyschic, inter, interpersonal, institutional, and social-structural” aspects (Rasmussen & Salhani, 2010, pp. 491-492). Historically, to the extent that whites as a group have acknowledged the existence of racism, they have thus sought to understand it as narrowly as possible—as a conscious and purely interpersonal phenomenon. For example, in a landmark 1987 case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the only way a person could challenge racial bias in the criminal justice system under the Fourteenth Amendment was to prove “the existence of purposeful discrimination” (*McCleskey v. Kemp*, 1987, Sect. IIA). In her thoughtful analysis of this case, Michelle Alexander (2012) explains that the appellant, a black man named Warren McCleskey who was facing the death penalty, had marshaled an extraordinary amount of statistical evidence of discrimination in criminal sentencing. The Court, however, ruled that he would have had to prove that “the prosecutor in his particular case had sought the death penalty because of race or that the jury had imposed it for racial reasons” (p. 110). With this decision, the Court seemed to suggest that “racial bias would be tolerated virtually to any degree as long as no one admitted it” (p. 109). The Court thus revealed its wish to define racism in a very limited way, as a conscious and purely interpersonal phenomenon rather than the largely unconscious, multilevel phenomenon that it is (Rasmussen & Salhani, 2010). Lest anyone suspect that the Court had changed its stance on this point in recent years, Chief Justice John Roberts reiterated in 2007 that “the way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race” (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007, Sect. IV).

If, even within a black-white binary, whites as a group minimize the nature of racism and its impact on blacks in order to protect a system that offers them a great deal of unearned advantage—however unconsciously—they clearly have no compelling incentive to expand their definition of racism to include the kinds of experiences with racism that Latinos and Asian Americans routinely have. Perceiving Asian Americans as a group that has historically suffered from racism (and still does) would be particularly threatening to whites, as Asian Americans increasingly compete with whites for “white” jobs and seats in higher education. For example, there is statistical evidence that many elite colleges quietly impose an “Asian quota” to keep the percentage of Asian American students at a constant level (Unz, 2012). When compared to white students, Asian Americans applying for college admissions face a racial disadvantage equivalent to subtracting 50 points from their SAT score (Espenshade & Chung, 2005). If this practice were to be recognized for what it is—affirmative action for white students—and if Asian Americans were suddenly to be acknowledged as a group significantly impacted by historical and present-day racism, such practices would become even harder to defend than they are now. White students would have little choice but to accept the weakening of one of their most valuable privileges and see a greater proportion of “their” college acceptance letters go to Asian Americans. This is just one example of the scant incentive white people have to expand their racial paradigm to include groups beyond the white and black.

In this chapter, I have explored how the black-white paradigm of race limits Americans' ability to recognize how racism affects groups that fall outside of that paradigm. I have also argued that the primary reason the paradigm has been able to root itself so deeply in the American consciousness is that it helps to protect an established system of white racial dominance. The black-white binary is one of the primary drivers of a widespread tendency to



see Asian Americans as people exempt from the problems of racism—and Asian Americans themselves are not immune to this idea. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Asian Americans' subjectivity, including their notion of their racial and cultural position in America, is shaped by the prevailing idea that they are permanent foreigners unaffected by modern racism.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Making of Asian American Identity

Thus far, I have argued that Asian Americans are persistently seen as foreign beings imbued with cultural difference, and that this “othering” is a variety of racial oppression that is rarely acknowledged. Relying on the work of critical race theorists, I have argued also that the prevailing blindness to the racial experiences of Asian Americans results in part from a paradigm that conceptualizes race as a matter involving only blacks and whites.

In this chapter, I will focus on the specific mechanisms by which Asian Americans are made (and make themselves) into “others” marked by cultural difference. I will rely primarily on the work of the poststructuralist theorists Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, both of whom have written extensively about the production of identity. Poststructuralists take issue with the basic premise of identity politics: that “the subject has certain core essential attributes that define her or his identity, over which are imposed forms of socialization that cause her or him to internalize other nonessential attributes” (Heyes, 2012, sect. 7). Poststructuralist thinkers argue that those who seek justice for marginalized groups (immigrants or people with disabilities, for example) may do so on the basis that there are indeed essential differences among people—that there is such a thing as “blackness” or “Asianness” that inheres in the people possessing those attributes. Poststructuralist thinkers assert, in contrast, that any identity “is a historical idea and not a natural fact” (Butler, 1988, p. 522). That is, “categories of human being... have been invented in institutionalized arrangements of power,” and people “come to understand

themselves in relation to such categories” (McWhorter, 2004, p. 43). This theory about the origins of identity has important implications for how marginalized individuals and their allies can and should respond to oppressive conditions. From a poststructuralist perspective, the assumptions of identity politics, if used uncritically to challenge the oppression of exclusion, may simply reproduce the dynamics that result in the further alienation and “othering” of Asian Americans.

In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990) analyzes the power relations that produced the categories of sexual identity that are familiar to us today—particularly marginalized sexual identities. First, via a set of historical contingencies, a norm for sexual behavior emerged (for instance, sexuality is normal only in monogamous, heterosexual marriage). Any behavior that diverged from this norm was variously examined, censured, and classified. This objectification of sexual behavior—the making of sexual behavior into a locus of difference and an object of scientific and medical study—created new categories of people whose essence was defined by sexual difference, in other words, sexual identity. For instance, while sodomy had long been a “category of forbidden acts” punishable according to legal codes,

[t]he nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular

nature... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species (Foucault, 1990, p. 43).

Foucault argues that the process of identity production—of investing bodies with created identities that appear to spring from deep inside of them—is not typically experienced by people as oppressive in itself. This is because the process also involves a shaping of the sense of self of those identified as “different.” The process calls forth from people a belief that this “different” identity is a real and defining property originating in them—a fact about them with substance and a kind of metaphysical heft. Being a Latina, a woman, or a lesbian may evoke anything from pride to shame for a given person, but regardless, each identity is likely to be felt subjectively to be a core aspect of her being. Further, her subjective desires—the things she wants—are shaped by this process, so she may seek to conduct herself in a way that aligns with her sense of identity. In this way, the workings of power are inscribed invisibly on her sense of herself: the “real, noncorporeal soul is not a substance; it is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power” (Foucault, 1984, p. 177).

This understanding of identity production is based upon a reimagining of what power is. McWhorter (2004) states that Westerners have for centuries understood power to be “a tool like any other. Some people have that tool in their tool kit, and others lack it. A shift in the balance of power is simply a transferal of some of those tools from some people’s tool kits to others” (p. 41). Foucault calls this understanding of power “juridical,” in that it is premised on a top-down model in which power is a thing primarily possessed by those who make and enforce laws. Foucault asserts that, in reality, power is not a thing; one can neither hoard it nor take away from another. From a poststructuralist perspective, power is more akin to the outcome of a never-ending series of events, a “multiplicity of force relations” that are produced by and among all

people at all times (Foucault, 1990, p. 92). Every free person, regardless of her position in a given institution or group, has a range of actions she might take at any time. Power is “a kind of tension that emerges when people have different goals or perspectives or conflicting projects,” and a power struggle consists of “everybody attempting to affect the others and everybody resisting the efforts of others to the extent of their ability” (McWhorter, 2004, p. 42). The exercise of power cannot then involve a linear kind of domination; rather, it is the ceaseless and multidirectional effort by everyone to “structure the possible field of action of others”—to manage the range of possibilities conceivable to a given subject (Foucault, 1982, p. 790).

If power is the result of constant struggle and resistance by all parties—if it is the result of ceaseless attempts to “act upon the actions of others” (Foucault, 1982, p. 792), then identity production cannot be a matter of the imposition of a label by powerful people upon a passive and powerless “other.” That “other” has many options; indeed, power “is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free” (p. 790). Thus, people must continually reproduce their assigned and assumed identities (marginalized or otherwise) in order for those identities to take on what Butler (1988) calls “the *appearance of substance*” (p. 520):

To be female is... a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of “woman,” to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project... Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives (pp. 522-526).

For instance, human bodies are born into a world in which gender norms exist. These norms are

their “script.” Those designated female then have a range of options about how to perform their gender. A cisgender woman—that is, one whose body and personal identity match the gender assigned at birth (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009) – may habitually wear her hair long and walk around in high heels. It is true that she is performing her gender “under duress”—that is, she is subject to external punishment (censure, mockery, violence) if she “fail[s] to do [her] gender right” (Butler, 1988, p. 522). However, it is unlikely that she consciously dresses the way she does to avoid reproval. It’s far more likely that she feels her gender identity to be fixed and inborn, as much a part of her as her ears and eyes, and that her sartorial choices merely reflect what is felt to be a core attribute. She reproduces the notion that gender has “substance” by performing it as if it is merely an expression of what is already inside. In this way, although gender may be imposed upon a person from without, it becomes a “performative accomplishment” that “the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (p. 520).

What about the person whose body is designated female but who identifies as male? This person uses a male pronoun, wears his hair short and spiky, and regularly dons a tie to go to work. He may identify as transgender—that is, as someone whose gender identity does not match that assigned at birth. He is “not doing his gender right”—he is subverting the idea that there is an unbreakable link between one’s body and one’s gender—and thus he is likely to face external punishment. However, he, too, chooses his clothing based on some notion of how he wishes to express his “true” gender identity. His performance, no less than the cisgender woman’s, reflects and reproduces the notion that there are two naturally occurring genders in this world—male and female—and that one must naturally identify with one or the other. Neither of

these performances does much to suggest that gender is a social construction rather than a fixed and inborn attribute.

The idea of Asian American foreignness is the result of a similar process of identity production. People living in America with “Asian” features are subject to a raciocultural script that long preceded their birth. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a genealogy of Asian American “otherness,” Edward Said (1979) argues that the idea of the “Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (p. 1). According to Said, the notion of Asian Americans as strange foreigners with strange customs—some admirable, some deplorable—has its origins in the European colonial project: the process of knowing, describing, and dominating the “East.” The “Oriental” has long been seen as a person defined by some inherent difference, and the primary effect of this otherness was (and arguably is) to reinforce the centrality and superiority of the Westerner: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (p. 40).

Each ethnic subtype falling under the heading of Asian American must contend with a different version of its own “otherness.” For instance, Vijay Prashad (2000) describes the Western idea of the “ghastly and beautiful mystery of India” (p. 32), a place marked both by its exoticism and “pure spiritualism” (p. 19). The New England Transcendentalists, in particular, understood India to be simultaneously a place of filth and indolence – and a place whose teachings could provide a spiritual correction to the “modern alienation” of Western capitalism (p. 18). Many Indian Americans are familiar with the ways in which this idea of cultural difference is seen to inhere in their bodies. It is commonplace for them to be questioned about their origins on the basis of their racial presentation; and regardless of the answer given, the

questioner frequently then embarks upon a reverie of longing for (or nostalgic memory of) the mysteries of India: both the beauty of its spirituality and the ugliness of its poverty. Such conversations make evident the way Asian Americans are thought to possess (and may also feel themselves to possess) innate qualities of foreignness that, whether exposed or hidden, exist in a factual way in their bodies.

Poststructuralist thinking, in its insistence that identities are not merely imposed but also performed, offers individuals some agency in resisting this kind of reification. If identity is “constituted” rather than inborn, then it is “capable of being constituted differently” (Butler, 1988, p. 520). Each of us retains the ability to “do” our identities in a variety of ways and thus expand the range of ways these identities might be “done.” Given the frequent “othering” that Asian Americans experience, how might they resist the idea that they are fundamentally different from whatever is designated central and normal? Even if they cannot escape the meanings that others ascribe to their appearance, how might they innovatively expand the range of ways they “do” their identity?

On one end of the identity spectrum, some Asian Americans perform difference by hewing to an idea of authentic ethnic identity. They wear clothing, celebrate festivals, and eat food according to the customs of the region with which they are identified. These are acts that in themselves contain no inherent meaning, nor are they tied inextricably to some core aspect of those who perform them. If two men eat sandwiches on a park bench in most American cities, for instance, no one (including the men) will assume there is something about men—something inborn and peculiar to their bodies—that makes them eat sandwiches in public parks. Performances of Asian American ethnic identity, in contrast, often reinforce and reproduce the belief in the reality of an “authentic” Asian American cultural difference that is inseparable from



body of the performer. This belief may be held both by onlookers and by the performers.

Indeed, according to poststructuralist thinkers, the process of being “othered” is only complete when the performers themselves reproduce it—in this case, by believing that their marginalized ethnic identity inheres in their bodies, and that the way they eat or play is expressive of that core identity.

On the other end of the identity spectrum, Asian Americans respond to and perform their difference by vigorously asserting they are not different. They reject their designation as cultural outsiders and seek to perform their sameness. A move of this kind is akin to what Butler might call “performing one’s culture wrong,” and it has consequences: others might respond with anything from disappointment to incredulity to scorn. For example, suppose an Asian American were to assert that she had experienced significant racism in the form of others’ assumptions of his foreignness. This person would be implicitly asserting her status as a cultural insider and challenging “the distinction between appearance and reality that structures a good deal of popular thinking” about identity (Butler, 1988, p. 527). Some of her listeners would reject the notion that someone who looked like her could have experienced real racism; others might have trouble taking in the idea that she was not truly foreign. Some might feel some anxiety stemming from her suggestion that her cultural difference did not truly inhere in her body—that it was “only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated” (p. 528). However, just as the transman’s performance may evoke anxiety while still reifying gender binaries, the Asian American’s assertion of cultural belonging reproduces the idea that there is some fixed and real “inside/outside” cultural binary, and that one must fall on one side or the other. This effort to challenge her difference would be a way of performing her identity differently, but it would not be a radical form of resistance.

For instance, consider the dilemma posed by one second-generation Indian American:

I consider myself American for a very simple reason. I was born here. I've been brought up here and I'm going to die here. I know I lived in India for five years...Being in India brought about a pride of being American. Before then, I would have been very happy to be called Indian. But when I went to India and lived there, I realized I was not Indian. I think like them and have the same values but I'm American...Over here, my sensation is like being a child with one black parent and one white parent. Am I black? Am I white? So I've had to take a stand (Rangaswamy, 2000, pp. 172-173).

This narrator perceives that she has a choice to make, but that very choice has been constructed by the idea that being American and being Indian are fixed and real categories that she must choose between. If she decides that she is Indian, she complies in the performance of this type of reified difference. If she insists that she is American, she reproduces the idea that there is such a thing as "Americanness" that definitely excludes anything associated with the Indian subcontinent. She has some choice about how to identify, but as long as she feels the "insider/outsider" binary to be a thing of real substance, she is constrained by her need to identify with one side of it or another.

A more radical form of resistance might take the form of this musing by another second-generation Indian American:

It's so hard to define what exactly an American is because we are such a diverse country...And I've become comfortable saying, "I don't have an identity." I don't have to have one. It sometimes frustrates me when people tell me I have to have an identity. I don't know. Maybe we're in a limbo state where we're not going to have one (Rangaswamy, 2000, p. 6).

This person can no more escape oppressive labels than anyone else. According to the poststructuralists, the end of resistance is not to upend systems of power, because power is not a thing that inheres in a particular group or institution. The point of resistance, rather, is to persistently work to enlarge the possible repertoire of acts that are imaginable for oneself. From this perspective, if the person quoted above understands her identity to be a performance rather than an expression of some essential difference that lies within her, then her range of actions expands greatly. The question of whether she is inherently foreign or not “acts upon her actions” less, and she is no longer so limited by the need to establish her position in relation to a fixed binary. Her rejection of the essentialism of a cultural binary may constrain her range of choices in a different way—after all, she does feel “frustration” over a separate question of whether one must have an identity at all. But freed of the notion that she must choose to be an insider or outsider, she can perform “Asian Americanness” in a way that is less bound by the illusion that those are the only choices in front of her. She may even choose to employ what the literary theorist Gayatri Spivak has called “strategic essentialism”—the temporary assumption of an “essential” group identity in order to accomplish a shared political goal—while “continuing to debate and contest the hegemony of essential identity” (Bahri, 2006, p. 209). This stance is only possible if she understands her assigned and marginalized ethnic identity to be both an inescapable constraint on her range of action—and a social construction that is anchored in her body only by collective belief.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

In the preceding chapters, I have argued that Asian Americans are subject to a discourse that frames them as foreigners—and that social workers rarely challenge this characterization. In the topics they choose to research, social workers reveal their tendency to view Asian Americans as permanent immigrants imbued with cultural difference. Furthermore, social workers often think of race as a black-white matter that has little relevance for Asian Americans. In this paper, I have argued that the cultural “othering” of Asian Americans is in fact a type of racial oppression that social workers have both reproduced and largely failed to acknowledge.

Critical race theory (CRT) offers one way to address this problem. Critical race scholars might argue that social workers, who are explicitly tasked by their Code of Ethics with helping prevent and eliminate racial domination, can only fulfill this obligation if they understand that racism plays an important role in the lives of Asian Americans. Asian Americans often suffer from a type of racist exclusion that characterizes people with Asian phenotypes as foreign and un-American. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) suggest that different racial groups are racialized differently: that each group experiences its own unique variant of racism. To ignore the racialized “othering” of Asian Americans is to ignore a significant manifestation of racism—and thus to be blind to a form of domination that social workers are obliged to work against.

The specific prescription that CRT scholars might write for social workers would involve a mix of theoretical understanding and political action. The two main features of CRT

scholarship are, first, an effort “to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America,” and second, “a desire not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to *change* it” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii). With their theoretical work tied so closely to political work, CRT scholars might suggest, for instance, that social workers help organize coalitions of people of color—including Asian Americans—who could come together around their shared experiences of oppression to accomplish common political goals. On the clinical level, CRT scholars might suggest that social workers learn about the varieties of racial oppression Asian Americans face—what Dean (2001) terms the “sociopolitical perspective” on cultural competence. This perspective assumes that “it is not just the traditions, norms, and patterns of behavior that influence the functioning of a member of a cultural group but also the way that group is treated within the larger culture” (p. 626). If social workers truly wish to make sense of the Asian American experience, they must attend not only to Asian American cultural difference, but also to the impact of being constantly thought of as culturally different on the basis of one’s racial presentation.

CRT theory can thus provide social workers with a way of understanding Asian Americans as a group struggling with a little-recognized form of racial oppression. However, this approach has its limits. The problem is that affording Asian Americans room under the “people of color” tent is to understand them primarily as people who, along with Latinos, Native Americans, and African Americans, are defined by their oppression by whites. The fact of their marginalization does not change; it now just falls under the heading of “person of color” rather than “foreigner.” The “people of color” identity both reifies the marginalization of those to whom it is assigned and also reestablishes the dominance, centrality, and normalcy of whiteness.

This critique of the methods of CRT is based on the poststructuralist idea that it is inaccurate to understand oppression as the straightforward domination of one group by another. Rather, according to Foucault (1990) and Butler (1988), any marginalized identity is the product of exercises of power both by those who are designated dominant and those who are designated subjugated. The constitution of any identity—whether Asian American, white, black, gay, man, woman, or person of color—is a never-ending, dynamic process that is propelled by efforts on all sides to limit the range of actions imaginable to others. Identities are certainly imposed upon human bodies through discourses that distinguish human beings on the basis of, say, particular anatomical features or sexual behavior. But identity is also the accumulation of individual performances—an ever-changing historical script that individuals interpret and perform every day. Oppression operates through an individual’s understanding of her identity as a fixed and essential quality of her being, and not as a mutable script that is both imposed upon her and performed by her. That is to say, the marginalization of an individual is accomplished not only through the external designation of a particular identity, but by the internal limitations of the range of actions she can imagine performing constrained by those external designations.

The poststructuralists would argue, then, that for an Asian American (or a member of any nondominant racial group) to define herself in opposition to a racial oppressor is to subject herself to a discourse in which her very possibilities are limited by the oppressor/oppressed power dynamic. An individual who understands herself as a person of color (or as having any identity at all) is doing something akin to stepping each day inside a box that has been provided for her, one with fixed walls. She accepts the limits of the box and the range of action it affords her. Regarding white people, her stance might be, “You will be in your box (a roomier box, for sure) and I will be in mine, and we will do our best to fight each other from these positions.”

This power relation constantly reestablishes the fixed boundaries around the Asian American individual. She will continually perform her own marginalization and bolster the centrality and dominance of whiteness.

Foucault (1982) argues that there is no way to free oneself entirely from power relations if one chooses to live within society. However, one can achieve a greater measure of freedom. Human bodies are assigned identities of various kinds—but these identities are endlessly open to interpretation. The boundaries of a given identity are determined in part by a historical script, and in part by an individual’s performance of that script. If human bodies perform their assigned identities in innovative ways, those identities change. The walls move a little. The boxes may expand in size and afford a broader range of action.

The ideas of Foucault and Butler provide a basis for critiquing what Dean (2001) calls the “anthropological approach” to cultural competence (p. 626). One example of the anthropological approach can be found in a contemporary social work textbook whose authors inform us that “hierarchy is important to Asian American families,” and “treatment plans should include high-status members of the family or community” (Collins, Jordan, & Coleman, 2013, p. 333). This anthropological approach is premised on the idea that Asian American “culture” is a fixed and knowable property. The job of social workers, from this perspective, is to know enough about the foreign properties of Asian Americans—the particular ways in which they are “different” from the norm—to be able to provide services that will be intelligible and useful to them.

Poststructuralist theory would suggest that clients would be better served if social workers understood cultural identity as the product of both an oppressive imposition and a type of individual performance. Instead of attempting to “know” the client’s culture, social workers should attempt to understand both the parameters of identity in the current discourse—what it is

supposed to mean to be a woman, a lesbian, or a South Asian—and how any given individual chooses to interpret these assigned identities. This work does not involve the social worker’s possessing “competence” in the client’s avowed cultures; rather, it requires that “we distrust the experience of ‘competence’ and replace it with a state of mind in which we are interested, and open but always tentative about what we understand” (Dean, 2001, p. 629). If we think of identity as a permanent and real object to which one either does or doesn’t adhere, we reproduce the oppressive limits that bind marginalized individuals every day. If we understand identities instead as endlessly mutable concepts fixed in place only by collective belief and historical contingency, then we have the capacity to help our clients imagine for themselves a whole new range of possible actions.

It is true that some clients may benefit if their social worker knows something about the cultural ideals and group histories that may affect individuals in different regions of the world. Poststructuralist theorists would not likely recommend that social workers close their eyes and attempt to learn nothing of the forces that may have an impact on their clients. Indeed, understanding those forces is necessary for understanding the dynamic power that creates and maintains essentialized identities. However, an anthropological approach to cultural competence—an attempt to “know” people by mastering some fixed profile of their differences from the norm—is harmful. It fails to acknowledge that the very act of categorizing people, the act of itemizing the differences that are understood to reside in them, is a reproduction of their marginalization.



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