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Inroads and Isolation: How Asian American Educators Work Toward Collective Liberation with Their Students and School Communities

JESSICA KONG

Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

Abstract:

Because the classroom is a locus of socialization and a microcosm of larger social contexts, it is often the place where students begin building their political consciousness. One of the best paths forward toward dismantling White supremacy, decolonizing our minds and practices, and creating new liberated futures comes in the form of building multiethnic, cross-racial coalitions that require people of different groups to center each other's liberation demands in their own work. If the classroom is a locus for this change in students, then teachers have an opportunity to equip students with the tools to stand in solidarity with both peers and mentors. While there has been much research into anti-racist teaching practices, little research exists on the anti-racist practices and pedagogies of Asian American teachers in particular. The specific positionality of Asian American educators in the classroom affects their relationships with their students and the ways they may employ anti-racist, coalition building practices. This capstone illuminates the practices employed by eight Asian American public school educators on their own understandings of racial positions in the classroom as well as the difficulties and successes encountered in employing anti-racist, solidarity-building pedagogies. The capstone finds that through building a racial consciousness informed by the existence of both White supremacy and anti-Blackness, the Asian American educators create learning spaces with their students that approach anti-racist, liberatory education from entry points unique to the Asian American experience. Specifically, the educators co-conspire to resist oppressive systems with their students by reimagining their curriculum, creating distinctive homespaces for students, and adopting a posture of accompaniment with other people of color in pursuit of liberatory work.

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Inroads and Isolation: How Asian American Educators Work Toward Collective Liberation with
Their Students and School Communities

Jessica Kong
EDST 400: Senior Capstone
Adviser: Talya Zemach-Bersin
Second Reader: Daniel HoSang
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And thanks, God, for everything. Thanks for being a God of justice, righteousness, and steadfast love. You teach me new things every day. This is my small piece of worship to you.

We can only recover our souls by connecting our work to the creation of community and to the great work of the universe, which is a form of worship.

–Grace Lee Boggs

Abstract

Because the classroom is a locus of socialization and a microcosm of larger social contexts, it is often the place where students begin building their political consciousness. One of the best paths forward toward dismantling White supremacy, decolonizing our minds and practices, and creating new liberated futures comes in the form of building multiethnic, cross-racial coalitions that require people of different groups to center each other's liberation demands in their own work. If the classroom is a locus for this change in students, then teachers have an opportunity to equip students with the tools to stand in solidarity with both peers and mentors. While there has been much research into anti-racist teaching practices, little research exists on the anti-racist practices and pedagogies of Asian American teachers in particular. The specific positionality of Asian American educators in the classroom affects their relationships with their students and the ways they may employ anti-racist, coalition building practices. This capstone illuminates the practices employed by eight Asian American public school educators on their own understandings of racial positions in the classroom as well as the difficulties and successes encountered in employing anti-racist, solidarity-building pedagogies. The capstone finds that through building a racial consciousness informed by the existence of both White supremacy and anti-Blackness, the Asian American educators create learning spaces with their students that approach anti-racist, liberatory education from entry points unique to the Asian American experience. Specifically, the educators co-conspire to resist oppressive systems with their students by reimagining their curriculum, creating distinctive homespaces for students, and adopting a posture of accompaniment with other people of color in pursuit of liberatory work.

Introduction

The seeds of this capstone began in a conversation I shared with Alexis¹, a Taiwanese-American middle school STEM teacher and alumna of my college Christian fellowship. In an initial conversation about entering the teaching workforce, we talked about how she is sometimes the first Asian person her students have engaged meaningfully with, which often led to a unique set of learning experiences for everyone involved. Alexis taught at a predominantly Black and brown public K-8 school in Baltimore. I wondered whether her students thought she was another TFA White savior-esque figure, even though she wasn't White. I wondered how she dealt with the racial slurs as an outsider to this community, and more importantly, how she could even form genuine relationships with her students as an outsider in many senses; from my perspective, the only thing they seemed to share in common was their Baltimorean heritage.

As a hopeful future educator, I hadn't really thought about the ways that my racial identity could influence classroom settings. In college, I've built a racial, social, and political consciousness equipped with a much larger vocabulary to explain the forces that shape our collective existence than I had in high school. Most of the times, save for the one Asian Diasporas class I managed to take this year, I have not been able to explicitly understand Asian American positioning in this conversation. Most of what I knew came from my own experiences growing up in a predominantly White, middle class suburb that emphasized meritocracy as a path toward social mobility. I knew though, that like Alexis, many young teachers did not necessarily teach in the same communities they came from. What do classroom dynamics look like when everyone is a stranger to each other? How do you navigate those spaces? What do

¹ All names used in the capstone are pseudonyms.

Asian Americans have to offer in the national and international conversations on racial positioning?

This capstone is an investigation into the possibilities of the classroom as a site of liberatory practice. Furthermore, it is an investigation into the existing spaces and practices that Asian American educators inhabit and share with their students. In highlighting individual educators' stories, this capstone attempts to bring theory into practice, bringing to light the complexities and nuances of racialized human relationships and struggles for liberation.

Racialized capitalism and solidarity as resistance

As we enter the third decade of the century, it is clear that America is far from a post-racial society. Despite the United States' trajectory toward a majority non-White population in this century, capitalist, colonialist White supremacy has as strong of a chokehold on its people as in previous eras.² In 2020 alone, anti-Black police brutality, pandemic-induced anti-Asian racism, and disparate health impacts of COVID-19 on Black, Latinx, and Native communities have been some of the most visible examples of racial injustice.³ Just as pervasive are the daily structures that often pit racialized groups against one another. A sense of job scarcity sets immigrants against each other as well as working-class citizens, affirmative action creates a false racialized model minority / underclass dichotomy, and the criminal justice system simultaneously shapes and is shaped by racialized notions of violence. Because a racialized zero-sum system rules this

² "Older People Projected to Outnumber Children." Accessed December 13, 2020.

<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/cb18-41-population-projections.html>.

³ Mapping Police Violence. "Mapping Police Violence." Accessed April 27, 2021. <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org>; Jeung, Russell, Tara Popovic, Richard Lim, and Nelson Lin. "ANTI-CHINESE RHETORIC EMPLOYED BY PERPETRATORS OF ANTI-ASIAN HATE," n.d., 3; Moore, Jazmyn T., Jessica N. Ricaldi, Charles E. Rose, Jennifer Fuld, Monica Parise, Gloria J. Kang, Anne K. Driscoll, et al. "Disparities in Incidence of COVID-19 Among Underrepresented Racial/Ethnic Groups in Counties Identified as Hotspots During June 5–18, 2020 — 22 States, February–June 2020." *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69, no. 33 (August 21, 2020): 1122–26. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6933e1>.

country, members of minoritized groups often tear each other down in pursuit of success, often misplacing their frustrations with their socioeconomic statuses onto racially prejudiced attitudes towards other marginalized groups.

However much this system of oppression would like to convince people that survival comes through self-sufficiency, communities have called on each other to move beyond self-interest and stand together in cross-racial solidarity. The *Solidarity Is* podcast defines solidarity as, “a verb, a practice, and an action that we do time and again, over and over, in order to build shared connections and power... We practice solidarity to bring about collective power, mutual liberation, equity, inclusion, healing, and justice for all people.”⁴ This requires recognizing and unlearning the multidimensional structural and individual racism we are all complicit in to move toward a new vision for humanity. It is through a cross-racial solidarity requiring members of different groups centering each other in their practices that sustained liberation from White supremacy can be achieved.

Replicating power structures through the education system

The schoolhouse mirrors this broader ecosystem as a site for sowing both injustice and justice, disunity and coalition. Here, children first learn to socialize with peers and mentors outside of their usual caretakers. Here, they encounter external structures that shape their sense of self, including their priorities, sense of self-worth, and judgments of those around them. In the schoolhouse, systemic racism persists through inequitable distribution of resources across school districts. Through curriculum and testing requirements, teachers’ expectations, and encounters (or lack thereof) with disciplinary measurements, students eventually become self-aware of their

⁴ *The Project*. (n.d.). Solidarityis. Retrieved December 13, 2020, from <https://www.solidarityis.org/project>

tracked existence. As educators, disciplinarians, and supervisors of student growth, teachers track students into “gifted” or “underachieving”, into “pleasant” or “troublesome”, into future positions of corporate power or incarceration. Here, students can either view themselves as active citizens, like the Mississippi Freedom Schools sought to cultivate, or as pawns in a capitalist structure, valuable only for their productivity, as the factory model often induces.

At their best, teachers can use their influence in the classroom to inspire and equip students like those in the Mississippi Freedom Schools did. However, teachers also have the potential to inflict a great deal of psychological and emotional harm onto students. Research shows that teachers affect student outcomes more than any other factor does, including student characteristics and home environment.⁵ In addition to impacting test scores, teachers also affect noncognitive student behaviors as measured by rates of attendance, suspension rates, and high school graduation rates.⁶

Anti-racist practices in the classroom as resistance

Just as the schoolhouse mirrors society as an ecosystem, anti-racist pedagogies, curricula, and practices centered around solidarity building in the classroom focus on dismantling the racialized capitalist underbelly that sustains practices harmful to students. Organizations like the Anti-Racist Teaching and Learning Collective and Learning for Justice provide teacher-authored resources on sustaining anti-racist work both in and out of the classroom.⁷ Culturally responsive pedagogy asks teachers to recognize students’ cultural backgrounds and help students relate

⁵ Opper, Isaac M. “Teachers Matter: Understanding Teachers’ Impact on Student Achievement.” *RAND Corporation*. 2019. <https://www.rand.org/education-and-labor/projects/measuring-teacher-effectiveness/teachers-matter.html>.

⁶ Goldhaber, Dan, Roddy Theobald, and Christopher Tien. “Why We Need a Diverse Teacher Workforce,” n.d. <https://kappanonline.org/why-we-need-diverse-teacher-workforce-segregation-goldhaber-theobald-tien/>.

⁷ Anti Racist Teaching & Learning Collective. “Teacher-Authored Curriculum.” Accessed April 27, 2021. <https://antiracistteaching.org/teacher-authored-curriculum>; Learning for Justice. “Learning for Justice | Education Resources.” Accessed April 27, 2021. <https://www.learningforjustice.org/home>.

course material to their own cultural contexts.⁸ However, an effort toward coalition-centered pedagogy and practice requires teachers not only celebrating students in their cultural contexts as fully human, but also equipping students to likewise recognize the interdependence and structural inequalities that influence their relationships to each other as well as their teachers. This subset of anti-racist teaching recognizes the need to collectively stand in solidarity with each other in the face of all injustice.

The tools and resources surrounding anti-racist, coalitional pedagogy often do not explore teacher identity, or, if it does, will focus on how White teachers can acknowledge their positionalities as inherent centers of power in their interactions with students of color. Sometimes, this literature also dives into the benefits of “race-matching” for students of color, particularly Black and Latinx students who have teachers of similar cultural backgrounds and racial identities.⁹ However, when studies and resources are disaggregated by racial or cultural background of the educator, scant resources exist that speak specifically to the positionality of Asian American educators in anti-racist work.

Asian American educators underrepresented in education, education research

This lack of research in education, including anti-racist education, on Asian American teachers may be a result of the dearth of Asian and Asian American educators in the United States. In 2012, teachers of color made up only 18% of the elementary and secondary school teacher workforce, even though students of color made up 49% of total public school enrollment. Although Asian Americans comprised 5% of the public student population and 5.6% of the

⁸ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.” *Theory Into Practice* 34, no. 3 (June 1995): 159–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849509543675>.

⁹ Cherng, Hua-Yu Sebastian, and Peter F. Halpin. “The Importance of Minority Teachers: Student Perceptions of Minority Versus White Teachers.” *Educational Researcher* 45, no. 7 (October 2016): 407–20. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16671718>.

overall population, they only comprised 2% of the teacher workforce in the United States. In comparison, 24% of students and 8% of teachers were Hispanic, while 16% of students and 7% of teachers were Black. These percentages fluctuate depending on locality – for example, teachers of Asian descent comprised 7.6% of California’s teacher workforce in 2018. However, in other states, students may complete their entire primary and secondary education without encountering a single Asian educator.

Current research that does exist on Asian American educators does not intentionally focus on any anti-racist work that might engage teachers’ understandings of their own positionalities and the positionalities of their students. A recent 2020 case study by Kari Kokka and Theodore Chao explored how four Asian American male math teachers perceived their own racial identities and the racial identities of their students. They taught in majority Latinx and Black classrooms and varied in their own perceptions of commitment to building solidarity with their students. Kokka and Chao began their photovoice interviews with a simple task: “Take or choose five photographs or images about how you see yourself as a mathematics teacher and/or as an Asian American.” While this study dove deeply into both these educators’ racial and occupational identities, the authors did not explore how different aspects of the educators’ identities, such as their generational status, affected these perceptions and relationships. Likewise, a study on Southeast Asian educators, while addressing class status, did not bring into conversation how these educators’ gender identity may have influenced their classrooms and their own racial identities. These two recent studies have begun to carve out a new body of research centered on Asian American racial formation in teachers as it relates to teacher-student relations. Another case study on one Asian American educator using techniques from culturally relevant pedagogy elucidates how the teacher engages in anti-racist work, but does not elaborate

on the teacher's positionality in the classroom besides noting the lack of shared background between the educator and his majority Black and Latinx classroom.¹⁰ Importantly, the existing studies do not explicitly connect the racial self-identity of the educators to their racial consciousness in a way that accounts for the multidirectional cross-racial relationships present in a classroom and educational community setting.

Incorporating intersectionality

New complexities arise when we begin to consider the intersections of a marginalized racial identity with other marginalizing identifiers. Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality by arguing that Black women face a unique, compounded type of discrimination as a result of their intersecting marginalized racial and gender identities. Lumping all those who may be considered "Asian American" into this monolithic racial identity ignores the diversity of experience within the Asian diaspora to America. Further research must disaggregate this racial identity and put it in context with identifiers like ethnicity, linguistic background, generational and migratory status, gender, sexual orientation, class, and dis/ability.¹¹ Specifically, in solidarity-building work, centering other factors along with race opens up new dimensions of understanding housing injustice, health disparities, food insecurity, gender discrimination, criminal injustice, and more.

¹⁰ Smith, Patriann. "“Mr. Wang Doesn't Really Care How We Speak!": Responsiveness in the Practice of an Exemplary Asian American Teacher." *The Urban Review* 52, no. 2 (June 2020): 351–75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-019-00531-4>.

¹¹ Kokka, Kari, and Theodore Chao. "“How I Show up for Brown and Black Students”: Asian American Male Mathematics Teachers Seeking Solidarity." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 23, no. 3 (May 3, 2020): 432–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1664002>.

Toward race-conscious coalition building in Asian American educator-led classrooms

There is a need within education research broadly to unite the work of understanding Asian American educators' positionalities and practices with the work on anti-racist pedagogies and practices. Liberation in coalition building stems from understanding the positionalities of both ourselves and others in the current power structure. Therefore, educators hoping to equip students to partake in coalition building must simultaneously recognize the ways White supremacy has taken over their own perspectives of the world, including any biases held against students, and equip students to do the same. The specific biases and positionalities present in a classroom led by an Asian American teacher demand a deeper understanding of the nuances around their liberation practices.

Research Questions and Scope

1. In what ways do Asian American educators conceptualize their identity and consciousness as Asian American educators?
 - a. In what ways do these teachers perceive their identity and consciousness as shaping their practice in the classroom?
2. In what ways do Asian American educators understand their classroom as a site of racial coalition building?
 - a. What do current Asian American educators do to pursue coalition building with their students and broader school communities?

While this capstone adds to the growing body of literature on Asian American educator perspectives and pedagogy, it is by no means an exhaustive representation of views. As coalition building is inherently a collective action between educators, students, and the broader education community, a comprehensive understanding of cross-racial solidarity in classrooms requires perspectives from all stakeholders. This capstone therefore contributes only a piece of this effort by focusing on teacher perspectives of themselves, their students, and the relationships in between.

This capstone also focuses only on Asian American educators who have consciously begun the work of anti-racism in their classrooms. It does not aspire to capture perspectives from Asian American educators of all teaching and cultural backgrounds, but rather provides a vignette of some teachers' practices. Furthermore, it rejects tokenizing these teachers as representatives of Asian Americans with their specific backgrounds or worldviews, or even Asian American educators as a whole. Rather, the capstone seeks to unveil possibilities for what racial consciousness formation and coalition building could look like in 21st century classrooms led by Asian American educators.

Literature Review

This capstone, exploring how Asian American educators' conceptions of racial consciousness informs their anti-racist work in the classroom, emerges from the intersections of four major bodies of scholarship:

1. Asian American positionality and racial formation in America
2. Historical and contemporary practices of interracial racial solidarity and coalition building involving Asian Americans

3. Racial identity formation and practice of Asian American educator

While most work in the field of antiracist work in the classroom focuses solely on teachers understanding students' identities, this capstone will focus on teachers conceptualizing and positioning their own racial identities in relation to students' identities. Scholars have already argued that Asian American educators often conceptualize their identities with internalized racism, but often neglect to incorporate theories of intersectionality into their work. This capstone takes identity conceptualization a step further by exploring the specific practice of coalition building implemented by teachers. By then putting this in the broader context of race relations in the United States, this capstone will illuminate how classrooms can also function as sites of intervention and evolution in broader racialized hierarchies.

Asian American positionality and racial formation in America

I have struggled to prove myself into existence.

—Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings*

Yuji Ichioka coined the term “Asian American” in 1968 as a political tool to unite different ethnic groups under the Asian American Political Alliance at the University of California, Berkeley so that, “we would have an effect on the larger public [and] we would extend our influence beyond ourselves, to other Asian Americans.”¹² Although Chinese, Indian, and Filipino labor migrants lived in the United States dating back to the early 1800s, they existed in a world defined in terms of Black, White, and alien. With the rise of the Asian American movement of the 60s, members of East, Southeast, South, and West Asian groups united under

¹² Maeda, Daryl J. *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*. American Social and Political Movements of the Twentieth Century. New York: Routledge, 2012, 10.

collective political consciousness that both gave power to its members and at times restricted understanding of the heterogeneity that lies within such a monolithic term.

Claire Jean Kim asserted in her foundational piece, *The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans*, that Asian Americans are not racialized in a vacuum, but rather in intimate relationships with other racial groups along multiple axes.¹³ The two axes she presents in that piece are ‘inferior/superior’ and ‘foreigner/insider’, noting that Asian Americans have been triangulated between Blacks and Whites on the inferior/superior scale but are located far on the foreigner scale, whereas both Blacks and Whites remain insiders.¹⁴ American legal and political history—hallmarked in part by the Chinese Exclusion Act, Japanese American internment, *US v. Thind*, and Prop. 209—influenced Asian American racialization, conjuring up different, yet persistently oppressive images over time: the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the perpetual foreigner, the model minority.¹⁵ In response to and apart from these legal parameters, racialized groups have sought resistance and empowerment in community movements. Kim ends her piece with a calling to be more sensitive to, “the impact of each group’s empowerment strategies upon the relative positions of other subordinated groups and gain new insight into both the difficulty and promise of multiracial coalitions.”¹⁶

Notable examples of these cross-racial tensions include anti-Black racism in Asian American communities as well as anti-Asian racism in the Black American community. The LA Riots of 1992 following the death of Rodney King as well as Latasha Harlin’s murder at the

¹³ Kim, Claire Jean. “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans.” *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (March 1999): 105–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027001005>.

¹⁴ Ibid, 109.

¹⁵ Okihiro, Gary Y. *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History*: Columbia University Press, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.7312/okih11510>.

¹⁶ Ibid, 129-130.

hands of Soon Ja Du, a Korean American store owner, resulted in over \$1 billion in property damages and 63 deaths.¹⁷ Soon Ja Du was initially sentenced to 16 years in prison by a jury for her voluntary manslaughter of Harlin, but Judge Karlin reduced the sentence to five years on probation.¹⁸ In 2014, Officer Peter Liang was convicted in his shooting of Akai Gurley, the first NYPD on-duty shooting conviction in over a decade, sparking protests from the Chinese community that the justice system scapegoated Liang. However, in 2016, Justice Chun ultimately sentenced him to only five years on probation. Throughout this time, the Black Lives Matter movement protested the killing of Gurley.¹⁹

In both of these cases, anger at injustice resulted in cross-racial unrest and frustration. The Black community was doubly scarred by the relatively light sentences, especially in a context where Black people are consistently given more severe sentences for violent crimes than other racial groups. The Asian community felt that they were targets of an unjust system as well, seeing as their businesses received relatively no protection from LAPD during the 1992 riots, and that no White NYPD officers had received convictions for on-duty shootings in the decade prior to Liang. The reasoning by the judges in these cases rely on both the model minority myth that upholds Asian Americans as innocent workers and the stereotype of Black people as savage and inferior, undeserving of the justice written law demands.

¹⁷ Anjali Sastry and Karen Grigsby Bates. "When LA Erupted In Anger: A Look Back At The Rodney King Riots." *NPR*, April 26, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots>.

¹⁸ Press, The Associated. "Grocer Given Probation in Shooting of Girl (Published 1991)." *The New York Times*, November 17, 1991, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/17/us/grocer-given-probation-in-shooting-of-girl.html>.

¹⁹ "NPR.org. "'Awoken' By N.Y. Cop Shooting, Asian American Activists Chart Way Forward." Accessed December 15, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/04/23/475369524/awoken-by-n-y-cop-shooting-Asian-American-activists-chart-way-forward>.

The far right has also tried to mobilize this cross-racial hostility by enlisting Asian Americans in affirmative action campaigns. Edward Blum brought a lawsuit against Harvard in *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard*, claiming the university's affirmative action policies discriminated against Asian Americans.²⁰ Blum had previously attempted to challenge affirmative action policies at the university level, but failed in the case *Fisher v. University of Texas*. His recruited representatives at the time, Abigail Fisher and Rachel Michalewicz, were White students denied entry to the University of Texas. They claimed that they had been discriminated against on the basis of race, and that Black and Latinx students with similar or worse credentials had been admitted ahead of them.²¹ The SFFA case garnered much more national attention, perhaps because in national consciousness, two White women claiming reverse racism seems entitled, while a narrative of Black and Latinx students entering highly prestigious schools at the cost of high achieving Asian American students can play off of the racial animosities present between Black and Asian American communities.

All of these examples highlight the difficulty of building the multiracial coalitions Kim alluded to, as anger and violence is either directed across minoritized groups, or, when directed at the system that maintains White power, results in negative impacts on other subordinated groups. Later on, this capstone will also discuss moments of successful coalition. Importantly, these complex relationships continue to persist across time and space, shaping children's collective political consciousness. The narratives that are told, as well as agency given to the

²⁰ Lockhart, P. R. "The Lawsuit against Harvard That Could Change Affirmative Action in College Admissions, Explained." Vox, October 18, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/18/17984108/harvard-Asian-Americans-affirmative-action-racial-discrimination>.

²¹ LII / Legal Information Institute. "FISHER v. UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN." Accessed December 15, 2020. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/11-345>.

next generation in shaping these narratives, can likewise significantly change the trajectory of cross-racial dynamics.

Observing Asian American racial formation solely through a comparative racial lens runs the risk of treating Asian American people as a monolith. Lisa Lowe calls us to recognize the heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity inherent in this political consciousness and identity. She argues, “for the Asian American necessity—politically, intellectually, and personally—to organize, resist, and theorize *as* Asian Americans,” while simultaneously inscribing, “this necessity within a discussion of the risks of a cultural politics that relies upon the construction of sameness and the exclusion of differences.”²² Differences within and between Asian diasporas in America, produced by both differentiated social realities as well as personal cultural experiences, include but are not limited to differences of: generation, migration background, legal status, religion, color, gender, mixed-race status, language, and dis/ability. Taking Asian Americans as a monolith ignores the socioeconomic gap persistent between different Asian American ethnicities, as well as the varying transnational hegemonic structures that resulted in these differences.²³

Historical and contemporary practices of interracial solidarity and coalition building involving Asian Americans

Revolutions are made out of love for people and for place.

—Jimmy Boggs

²² Lowe, Lisa. “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences.” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 24–44. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.1991.0014>.

²³ National Partnership for Women and Families. “Asian Women and the Wage Gap.” Accessed December 15, 2020. <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/economic-justice/fair-pay/asian-women-and-the-wage-gap.pdf>; Hong, Cathy Park. *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. First Edition. New York: One World, 2020.

The rise of the Asian American Movement in the 1970s and 1980s drew heavily on the wisdom and practice of Black Power and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The wave of solidarity in activism and organizing in the 1960s centered around a shared political consciousness that liberation must be achieved across all oppressive systems and forces; that is, liberation must be both intersectional and unified.

Asian American solidarity existed across multiple planes, including interethnic, interracial, and international platforms. The formation of an “Asian American” coalition in the 60s was in and of itself an interethnic uniting of power, bringing together Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino voices at UC Berkeley. The Asian American Movement also took inspiration from the contemporary Black Power and anti-war movements. Crucially, prominent Asian American political figures like Grace Lee Boggs and Yuri Kochiyama, who did not necessarily begin as activists for Asian American rights, centered Black liberation and the Black freedom struggle in their work. By doing so, the policies and changes activists called for inherently included systems change across housing, food security, workers’ rights, and more.²⁴

Racial identity formation and practice of Asian American educators

Remember that consciousness is power. Tomorrow’s world is yours to build.

–Yuri Kochiyama

The previous sections begin to tease out the difference between racial *identity* formation and racial *consciousness* formation. The stereotypes, cultural practices, and relational experiences for Asian Americans creates shared patterns of racial identity formation. However,

²⁴ Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*.

Asian Americans' responses to such identity formation may indicate vastly divergent racial and political consciousnesses. As a result, Asian Americans fall along a spectrum of viewpoints when considering their racial positionalities and the most just response to America's racial landscape. Consciousness therefore weaves together an understanding of self-identity and sociopolitical positionality in relation to others.

Teachers likewise enter classrooms with both their own racial identity formations and political consciousnesses that simultaneously inform and are informed by their classroom practice. The racial consciousness of Asian American educators shapeshifts within the broader educational ecosystem in which they operate; pedagogy, practice, and relationships with students, faculty, and the broader community all intersect with a teacher's racial consciousness. In response, teachers may choose to either reinforce or subvert the dominant racial consciousness embedded in these delineated structures.

Two axes used to map out the spectrum of racial consciousness include the axis of an individual / systemic understanding of racism as well as the axis of colorblindness / color-consciousness.

Along the first axis, a 'liberal' or 'individual' understanding of race sees racism as aberrant. The default state of the world is free of bias and prejudice, and racism only exists as an individual affliction and choice. An individual's identity determines their politics, and responses to racism address the phenomenon at an individual level via moral codes, accountability as culpability, and punishment for racist offenders. On the other hand, a 'systemic' or 'collective' understanding of racism assumes that the world exists in a default state of racism. Instead of individuals occupying spaces of culpability or innocence, this understanding implicates every individual, since living off of racist structures inherently perpetuates them. Rather than punishing

racist individuals, this end of the spectrum requires shifts in policy, practice, and the structuring of institutions.

Along the second axis, a colorblind perspective does not “see” race. According to Jenny Gordon, colorblindness is “resistance to acknowledging the power differentials of skin color.”²⁵ At the individual level, this assumes that the very recognition of race is racist, and on the systemic level, an equal playing field is assumed.²⁶ Gordon notes that colorblind people “working on themselves” at the individual level do so in a way to skirt responsibility to critically examine racism at the structural level. “It becomes a way to validate ourselves as “good” people without having to relinquish the privileges that we receive from the existing system.”²⁷ At the other end of this spectrum, color consciousness proactively recognizes that although fundamental racial differences do not exist, the societal response to perceived differences linked to race disproportionately negatively affects some individuals over others.²⁸

For Asian American educators, heterogeneity in experiences leads to a wide array of identity formations and subsequent racial consciousness formations. Depending on an educator’s comfortability with articulating and sharing their identity, classroom power dynamics and relationships may look wildly different. Current studies centering the experiences of Asian American educators vary widely from focusing on different frameworks that influence their racialization, including internalized racism, the model minority myth, and goals toward social justice. However, existing studies on Asian American educators pursuing teaching for social

²⁵Gordon, Jenny. “Inadvertent Complicity: Colorblindness in Teacher Education.” *Educational Studies* 38, no. 2 (October 2005): 139. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326993es3802_5.

²⁶ Ibid, 140.

²⁷ Ibid, 140.

²⁸ Appiah, Anthony, and Amy Gutmann. *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*. 2. printing, and 1. paperback printing. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1998.

justice do not focus on how teachers engage with education communities beyond their classrooms, nor do they contextualize educators' practices in a framework that connects to educators' formed racial consciousnesses. If they do account for consciousness, such articulation does not take into account both White supremacy and anti-Blackness as analytical lenses that may shape such racial formations or subsequent practices.²⁹

Methodology

To answer these research questions, I conducted one-time interviews with eight Asian American public school educators across the United States.³⁰ I connected with these educators through snowball sampling, first by reaching out to personal contacts and meeting their networks from there. These educators were told that the purpose of the interview was to understand how Asian American educators understand their own racial positionalities and build cross-racial relationships with their students, as well as how they employ anti-racist, coalition building pedagogies in the classroom. Because the interviews were semi-structured, no two interviews were alike. Each interview began with questions on their journey to becoming educators, ways they have felt racialized as an Asian Americans, and how they work with students and members

²⁹ Kim, Grace MyHyun, and North Cooc. "Teaching for Social Justice: A Research Synthesis on Asian American and Pacific Islander Teachers in U.S. Schools." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 94 (August 2020): 103104. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103104>; Chow, C. J. (2017). Teaching for Social Justice: (Post-) Model Minority Moments. *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.7771/2153-8999.1155>; Kohli, R. (2009). Critical race reflections: Valuing the experiences of teachers of color in teacher education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 12(2), 235–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320902995491>; Kohli, R. (2014). Unpacking internalized racism: Teachers of color striving for racially just classrooms. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 17(3), 367–387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.832935>; Kokka, K., & Chao, T. (2020). 'How I show up for Brown and Black students': Asian American male mathematics teachers seeking solidarity. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 23(3), 432–453. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1664002>; Chow, Candace J. "Faith and Pedagogy: Intersections of Asian American Teachers' Identities and Practice." *Multicultural Learning and Teaching* 15, no. 1 (May 19, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1515/mlt-2017-0021>.

³⁰ I received IRB approval prior to conducting the interviews.

broader school community who come from different backgrounds from them to pursue anti-racist practices.

Making explicit the broader position of anti-racist education limited the scope of teachers to those who felt they pursued this work to some extent. Because the educators included in these interviews all identify as Asian American, I have intentionally chosen to limit the scope of this paper to Asian Americans rather than Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI). I do not want to conflate the identities and experiences of Asian Americans with those of Pacific Islanders, who face separate experiences of marginalization and racialization. All names have been changed.

Although I desired to seek out Asian American educators from different ethnic, gender, and generational backgrounds in order to maintain a broad selection of members from various Asian diasporic communities, due to the nature of the sampling method, many educators shared similar demographic vectors. Of the eight educators interviewed, four were men and four were women, five had less than five years of experience in the education field, and two no longer worked in teaching positions. Only one educator did not identify as East Asian, and only one educator identified as queer. All educators taught either middle or high schoolers in either urban or suburban public schools that had a majority non-White student population. While seven of the eight educators taught in the United States, one teacher exclusively had experience teaching English abroad.

Using an AsianCrit framework emphasizing *strategic anti-essentialism* and *story, theory, and praxis*, I will present findings from the interviews in thematic comparisons. Strategic anti-essentialism argues that Asian Americans are not a monolithic group in the United States, but that Asian Americans still can congregate around their racialized experiences to build coalitions

for political power.³¹ Story, theory, and praxis argues that, “stories inform theory and practice, theory guides practice, and practice can excavate stories and utilize theory for positive transformative purposes.”³²

I put the conversations in context with literature and narratives on anti-racist education as well as Asian American studies. As such, even though findings from the interviews cannot be generalized to a set of best practices for all Asian American educators, nor will the stories resonate with all Asian American educators, they represent possibilities for Asian American self-perception and cross-racial coalition building in the classroom.

Framing and positionality

Before diving into the analysis, it is important for me to share my own positionality in this work, as it inevitably shapes my perspectives and interpretations of data in their social contexts.³³ I am a first-generation Chinese-American woman studying at Yale University, in part with the Education Studies department. I was born and raised in the United States by two Chinese immigrants-turned-citizens as parents. I grew up in a middle-class and then upper-middle class suburban home and spent my grade school years in public schools and later, public magnet programs. I do not have any formal experience in the classroom as an educator, and have only worked in education contexts previously as a tutor. Although I do not share my interviewees’ backgrounds in education work, my experiences in Education Studies fuel my

³¹ Iftikar, Jon S., and Samuel D. Museus. “On the Utility of Asian Critical (AsianCrit) Theory in the Field of Education.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 31, no. 10 (November 26, 2018): 940. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2018.1522008>.

³² Ibid, 941.

³³ Milner, H. Richard. “Race, Culture, and Researcher Positionality: Working Through Dangers Seen, Unseen, and Unforeseen.” *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 7 (October 2007): 388–400. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07309471>.

excitement for this paper. My racial, ethnic, and cultural background also shape my understanding of race relations in the United States. I therefore come from a limited insider perspective in terms of connection with the interviewees in this capstone.

It is important to note that between the time of the first interview and the last interview, anti-Asian American hate crimes were thrown into the national spotlight at an accelerated rate. Instances of targeted elder abuse in different Asian American communities continued, and the Atlanta spa shootings that killed six Asian American women on March 16, 2021 catalyzed a wave of discussions of the ways Asian Americans are marginalized and harmed. This is reflected in some of the interview responses and reminds us that consciousness building is a constantly evolving process. It also grounds this piece in the urgent reality that reflection on consciousness and practice is not just a theoretical exercise, but rather a critical component of resisting and responding to daily injustice and violence.

Frameworks for Analysis

When the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can often find their voice. Those injured by racism and other forms of oppression discover that they are not alone and moreover are part of a legacy of resistance to racism and the layers of racialized oppression. They become empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against them are framed and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves.

–Tara Yasso

In this paper, I use AsianCrit and the structural Asian-Black gap to understand my interviewees' experiences of racialization and racial consciousness building. I also frame the pedagogical and curricular work of the teachers in and outside of the classroom through Tomlinson and Lipsitz's theory of accompaniment and improvisation in insubordinate spaces.

Finally, I look to bell hooks' and Bettina Love's philosophies of education as the practice of freedom and abolitionist teaching, respectively, to inform such practices of accompaniment and improvisation. Below, I will outline the framework of AsianCrit. I will introduce the other frameworks during the analytical portion of this paper.

AsianCrit

AsianCrit builds on the tenets of Critical Race Theory to incorporate Asian American Studies scholarship and directly address the specific experiences, issues, and concerns that Asian Americans face.³⁴ AsianCrit as a pan-ethnic framework is a lens into understanding how Asian Americans are racialized under a system of White supremacy. In naming AsianCrit as a tool in analyzing the experiences of Asian Americans in education, Iftikar and Museus outline seven interrelated tenets³⁵:

1. **Asianization**, which articulates that people are racialized as "Asian" by White supremacy. White supremacy racializes Asians as perpetual foreigners, yellow perils,

³⁴ Iftikar and Museus, "AsianCrit in Education," 939. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2018.1522008>. Iftikar and Museus also outline a set of core tenets for CRT in their paper. According to them, these tenets include the following beliefs: **1. Social constructionism** is the principle that there is no biological basis for racial categories, and race is a socially constructed phenomenon (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). **2. Racism as normal** suggests that racism is endemic to society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Put another way, racism is a natural and normal part of everyday life and a perpetual feature of US social fabric. **3. Differential racialization** is the notion that different racial groups are racialized in varied ways, and the same racial group can be racialized in different ways in different time periods and contexts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). **4. Interest convergence** suggests that Whites who wield disproportionate decision-making power in society only support laws, policies, or programs that improve the lives of people of color when they also benefit themselves (Bell, 1980). **5. Anti-essentialism** argues that there is no essential experience or trait that defines a racial group (Grillo, 1995; Harris, 2003). For instance, there is no singular 'Asian American experience' or 'Black experience'. **6. Intersectionality** refers to the ways that racism intersects with capitalism, heterosexism, patriarchy, ableism, and other structural forces to shape the forms of oppression and exploitation as well as individual identities (Crenshaw, 1991). **7. Storytelling** is grounded in the belief that stories of oppressed and exploited people constitute valuable knowledge and can be utilized to counter dominant narratives (Delgado, 1989; Chon, 1995).

³⁵ Ibid, 941.

model and deviant minorities, sexually deviant emasculated men, and hypersexualized women through laws, policies, and attitudes that dehumanize Asian Americans.

2. **Transnational contexts** call for situating Asian American experiences and White supremacy in a global context that accounts for transnational economic, political, and social influences.
3. **(Re)constructive history** recognizes that Asian Americans are silenced and invisible in US history. Unlike deconstruction, reconstruction starts from a place of nothingness to build a collective Asian American narrative that centers Asian American voices.
4. **Strategic (anti)essentialism** employs both strategic essentialism and anti-essentialism to highlight the ways that Asian Americans actively intervene in the racialization process. Anti-essentialism, from CRT, recognizes that no core trait defines a racial group. Strategic essentialism points to the ways that members of a marginalized group mobilize based on shared traits or interests.
5. **Intersectionality** makes visible the fact that White supremacy works hand in hand with other compounding systems of oppression to shape the conditions that Asian Americans live in. Vectors such as gender, sexual orientation, class, age, religion, and dis/ability all intersect with race.
6. **Story, theory, and praxis** offers an alternative epistemology that centers and values the stories and lived experiences of people of color. According to Iftikar and Museus, “stories inform theory and practice, theory guides practice, and practice can excavate stories and utilize theory for positive transformative purposes.”
7. **Commitment to social justice** underscores AsianCrit’s resolve to pursue liberation for the oppressed and destroy all systems of exploitation and dehumanization.

Interviewee Profiles

Alexis Sun

Alexis, a self-identified Baltimorean, is a daughter of two Taiwanese immigrants who teach at HBCUs in Maryland. Motivated by a sense of teachers as the frontline defenses toward combating racism in the education system, Alexis dropped her premed path to teach through Teach for America Baltimore after college. Alexis believes that, “the work of anti-racist teaching begins with the teacher themselves” and spent much of her three years teaching processing her own racial consciousness. She taught at her urban, predominantly Black and Latinx middle school for three years, staying on for one more year past her TFA tenure. Within TFA, Alexis was also active in her local Asian American Pacific Islander Alliance. Alexis currently works as a policy fellow for a state senator.

Luke Bai

Luke’s parents immigrated from Taiwan and settled in North Carolina, where he attended a “really great charter school.” In college, Luke realized that there were many barriers to accessing his high school, such as the lack of public transportation, that led to a homogenous student population. Although he was set to enter the finance sector in college, an education professor encouraged him to reconsider and pursue his interest in education instead by getting experience in the classroom. Luke ultimately chose to enter teaching through TFA because it promised a support network of peer teachers that could ease the transition from undergrad to being in charge of a classroom. Luke is currently in his third year teaching high school social studies at a predominantly Black and Latinx school in Baltimore.

Harold Park

After majoring in African American Studies in college, Harold spent over a decade teaching at six different New York City schools: two in the Bronx, two in Queens, and two in Manhattan. His time in both education policy at the DOE and teacher education as an instruction coach have also contributed to his understanding of New York’s public education landscape. Growing up, Harold had an uncomfortable relationship with school, and instead found intellectual empowerment in his Korean American church community, where he learned literary analysis through Bible study. Now an English and Special Education teacher at an alternative transfer school in NYC, Harold emphasizes the importance of storytelling in his classrooms. Although he understands the value of coalition building through his time teaching at predominantly Black and Latinx schools, Harold often thinks about what it would be like to teach Asian American students and be able to affirm them in a way that he did not experience growing up.

Mark Hall

Mark Hall is in his fourth year teaching math at a public middle school in Berkeley, CA after graduating with a math degree. Although he attended predominantly Hispanic and Latinx public

schools as a student, he was tracked into honors classes with mostly Asian peers. As a student, he bonded with and was deeply impacted by teachers who shared his Christian faith. His goals as an educator are intricately tied to his overall goal in life, which is to love people around him. In the math classroom, Mark is very focused on fostering a growth mindset for students' relationships with their own "math identity." Mark does not think about his Asian American identity super consciously as a teacher, although he does try to balance the cultural tenets learned from his Taiwanese American upbringing with healthier mindsets. For example, he values respecting authority, but not to the point of refraining from giving feedback.

Samina Muhammad

Samina moved with her family from Pakistan to the United States when she was three years old. After moving around a bit, she spent most of her childhood in Pittsburgh and Michigan before teaching middle school social studies with TFA Baltimore. Frustrated by the Baltimore school district's financial inaction to fix solvable issues like toxic leaks in her classroom, Samina decided to attend graduate school before teaching again in Boston, where she now works as a high school humanities and history teacher. As one of few Muslim and South Asian teachers in her schools, Samina finds herself in a unique position to be a role model to students with similar backgrounds. She also intentionally takes opportunities to connect with students' heritages when teaching about histories of resistance to colonialism. Even at explicitly anti-racist schools, however, Samina struggles to push back against people who assume she is willing to give up her space and voice as an Asian woman.

Elisa Lam

Elisa, a second generation Cantonese American with roots in Hong Kong, grew up in a very diverse neighborhood of Charlotte, North Carolina. In her sophomore year, Elisa's low performing high school underwent a school redesign to become five smaller, project-based learning experiences. Elisa's positive experience with the school redesign motivated her to pursue teaching in North Carolina and later school administration in Boston as she sought to understand what makes schools highly successful. As a math teacher, Elisa's primary goal was to create a safe, loving environment where her students felt seen as human beings. Now, as an instructional coach at a primarily Latinx and White school in the Boston area, Elisa works with teachers to improve their practice and with school leaders to make school wide decisions.

Grant Chen

Grant, a Chinese American immigrant, had a long-standing interest in education and teaching that led him to teach English abroad in both France and China. As an Asian American representative of the United States abroad, Grant found himself navigating the space of the "foreign other" in different ways from his time domestically. Grant taught mostly Black and Arab students in France, and is currently in his second year teaching Chinese high school students, although he has had to transition to virtual asynchronous instruction due to the

pandemic. He spoke to the power of sharing space with and building coalitions with other people of color. He is currently simultaneously teaching English, working at a Chicago non-profit, and pursuing a master’s in education in preparation to teach secondary education in Chicago.

Seishin Ueno

Seishin moved with her parents from Japan to St. Louis as a young child and grew up in a predominantly African American neighborhood. She credits much of her own racial and political consciousness to the Black community. As a student in the 80s, Seishin found that school did not challenge her, so she spent much of her time skipping class to participate in more enriching opportunities like the St. Louis desegregation program and an experiential education outdoors group. After college, Seishin returned to St. Louis to teach at a local public school, where she has been teaching high schoolers for the past 28 years. She currently teaches American Studies, Civics, and Psychology, although she has taught a wide variety of subjects in the past, including Humanities, African Studies, Asian Studies, US History, and Sociology of Class, Gender and Race.

Interviewees Summary

Name	Pronouns	Years Teaching	City of Schools teaching in	Grades Taught	Subjects Taught	Current Position	Ethnicity	Generational Status	School student racial demographics	Interview Date
Alexis Sun	she/her	3	Baltimore, MD	6, 7, 8	math, science	Policy Fellow for state senator	Taiwanese American	2	40% Black, 40% Latinx, 20% White	2/24/2021
Luke Tsai	he/him	3	Baltimore, MD	10, 11, 12	social studies	teacher	Taiwanese American	2	80% Black, 20% Latinx	2/26/2021
Harold Park	he/him	13	New York, NY	high school	English, special ed	teacher	Korean American	2	43% Latinx, 36% Black, 13% White, 4% Asian, 3% Other	2/26/2021
Mark Hall	he/him	4	Berkeley, CA	7, 8	math	teacher	Taiwanese American	2	45% White, 20% Latinx, 16% Mixed Race, 24% Black, 6% Asian, 1% Other	3/24/2021
Samina Muhammad	she/her	3	Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA	6, 7, 8, 9	history, English	teacher	Pakistani American	1.5	mostly Black, a few Latinx and Asian, least White	4/1/2021
Elisa Lam	she/her	4 (9 in education roles)	Boston, MA	high school	math	instructional coach	Cantonese American	2	47% Latinx, 40% White, 5% Black, 5% Mixed Race, 3% Asian	4/2/2021
Grant Chen	he/him	3	Strasbourg, France; Changsha, China; Chicago, IL	high school	English as a foreign language	teacher	Chinese American	1.5	France: 50% White, 50% Black and Arab; China: 100% Chinese	4/2/2021
Seishin Ueno	she/her	28	St. Louis, MO	high school	social studies	teacher	Japanese	1.5	46% White, 27% Black, 18% Latinx, 6% Asian, 3% Other	4/6/2021

Findings and Analysis

Asian American Educator Racial Consciousness Formation

How would you define anti-racist teaching?

Alexis: The work of anti-racist teaching starts with the teacher themselves. I don't think you can have an anti-racist classroom without a teacher who is very firmly grounded in their own racial identity and recognizing that like, I think, for me, being aware of my own racial consciousness is a journey, so I'm not saying to be an anti-racist educator you need to have that all figured out, but I think you need to be committed to knowing your own racial identity, processing your own racial consciousness, and confronting and unlearning your own racial biases because everyone has racial biases. I think it's especially needed for teachers who are teaching Black students, indigenous students, brown students, or really like any teacher teaching students who are racially different from them, it's especially needed. So I think it starts with the teacher and then from there, I think you know, in the classroom I think there is needed this broad lens of being able to recognize systems of oppression in your own pedagogy or curriculum or instructional practices. Even the way you relate to and think about students and families and your co-workers and then being able to resist buying into broader systems of oppression and really having liberatory thinking in every aspect of your planning and student engagement. Just like all your relationships, really.

I want to first share how the eight Asian American educators I interviewed came into these conversations with a working understanding of their own racial positionality as something shaped by both Whiteness and Anti-Blackness. Alexis's quote contextualizes the importance of processing and forming a liberatory racial consciousness in relation to classroom relationships and learning. Although this journey is not linear, and each teacher's racial consciousness was shaped by a unique set of experiences, relationships, and theory, they all possessed a general understanding that the world they live and function in is framed by both White supremacy and anti-Blackness.

Jack Linshi says of Asian Americans' racial positioning in the United States, "They are neither white nor black; they assume the benefits of non-blackness, but also the burdens of non-whiteness."³⁶ What are these burdens and benefits? Two of the most salient forms of *Asianization*, or racialization of people as Asian under a White supremacist hegemony, to these educators are the "model minority" and "perpetual foreigner" stereotypes. The interplay of these two racializations highlight the ways that Asian Americans both benefit from structural anti-Blackness and are disadvantaged by structural White supremacy.

Who Is Engineering This? Anti-Blackness in the Model Minority "Myth"

The idea that Asians are a "model minority" not only perpetuates the idea that Asian Americans are proximate to Whiteness, but that they are distant from Blackness. This stereotype perpetuates a false image of meritocracy leading to justified social stratification, when in fact structural, anti-Black forces are at play that make any notion of meritocracy moot. The interviewees reflected on times that they benefited from such perceived proximity as students. For example, Luke shared how he attended a "really great charter school" growing up, but that because there was no public transportation or bus system connected to the school, students had to rely on parents or other means of transportation in order to attend. It's clear then that the only students who could really attend such an institution with its wealth of resources would be those whose parents either could afford to not work, or had flexible enough work schedules to drop their kids off at school, or had the social networks within the school community to arrange carpools for their children.

³⁶ Time. "Why Ferguson Should Matter to Asian Americans." Accessed April 30, 2021. <https://time.com/3606900/ferguson-Asian-Americans/>.

At least three other interviewees grew up attending schools in which they were tracked into separate, “more rigorous” classes than the general population of their schools. Seishin, who grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood in St. Louis, talked about this racialized tracking with great exasperation:

Seishin: Why on earth in a school that would be considered by whatever measures, a dropout factory right? I think it was 42 or 43% graduation rate in my high school. Why would they have a calculus class? What are they doing? Who is engineering this so that there are all of these opportunities for my classmates who, I went to Yale with another person from my high school, we had only 1700 people in my high school, 85% Black. Something close to that in terms of the poverty rate. 42% graduation, and there are two of us who go to Yale? ... You're just like just what is happening in there? And it's that every resource in the school was kind of designed around the students the school liked, and I was in that category, and so, even though I didn't like school, school really liked me and it provided anything that I wanted pretty much.

Part of her racial consciousness formation includes a recognition that the school institutionally perpetuated a model minority racialization that materially benefitted her. The minority White PTA-involved parents—those with institutional power in the school community—lobbied the school to spend money on more rigorous courses like calculus, even as it struggled to invest in the 58% of students who would not make it to graduation. As one of two Yale admits in a school of 1700, Seishin was likely lauded by her school and community as a success story. However, upon reflection, Seishin recognizes both the moral falsehood and structural truth of the model minority stereotype in her life. She does not internalize the lie that this “achievement” comes solely as a result of her own hard work, but recognizes that she is racialized as a type of student “the school liked,” widening the structural gap between her and students that the school conversely did not like.

Claire Jean Kim calls this the structural Asian-Black gap, which is made visible by bringing both Whiteness and anti-Blackness into the conversation on how Asian Americans are

racialized in the United States.³⁷ A reading of the Model Minority “Myth” under White supremacist lens critiques the racialization as a falsehood fabricated to drive a wedge between two non-White, minority groups. The assumption then is that if Asian Americans call out the Model Minority Myth as a tool for division and instead draw closely in kinship to other people of color, we will have outsmarted and defeated White supremacy. We can stand together, unified as the oppressed. However, Cathy Park Hong articulates a more nuanced perspective in her book *Minor Feelings*:

In the popular imagination, Asian Americans inhabit a vague purgatorial status: not white enough nor black enough; distrusted by African Americans, ignored by whites, unless we’re being used by whites to keep the black man down.³⁸

Here, Hong acknowledges that the Model Minority phenomenon does not only function as a tool to divide, but in fact functions as a means to reinforce the existing racial order where Whites are at the top and Blacks are at the bottom of this hierarchy.

What does this mean for Asian American educators? Luke, Seishin, and every other Asian American who fit the part of “student that the school likes” benefitted from educational tracking based on structural anti-Blackness. To have “liberatory thinking” as part of your racial consciousness formation then is to recognize complicity in systems of oppression in your life, as Alexis mentioned. For the eight educators interviewed for this capstone, this means naming and contending with the fact that they are racialized through structural anti-Blackness that affords them the benefits of non-Blackness.

³⁷ UMass Fine Arts Center. *Asian Americans in an Anti-Black World*, 2021.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvdOgPQD17M&t=4022s&ab_channel=UMassFineArtsCenter.

³⁸ Hong, Cathy Park, *Minor Feelings*, 9.

Can You Teach Chinese? Perpetually Non-White, Forever Foreign

This does not end once the students become teachers. When contemplating the ways she is acutely aware of her embodied identity as an Asian American woman educator, Seishin notes that she is afforded a level of trust and authority that her Black women colleagues do not have. “I’m never questioned about my knowledge base in the way that my Black women friends are at school. People don’t wonder about my education... [Although] they may assume that I maybe shouldn’t be teaching the topics that I am.” She goes on to explain that people did a double take when she taught African studies, but never questioned her authority and abilities as an educator in the classroom.

The above example underscores the interplay between the model minority myth and perpetual foreigner stereotypes in *Asianizing* these educators’ experiences. The perpetual foreigner racialization, which predictably treats Asian Americans as forever foreign rather than American regardless of their immigration or citizenship status, highlights the particular way Asian Americans possess the burden of non-Whiteness.³⁹ Part of what White supremacy does is essentialize knowledge according to a perceived experiential authority. A clear example of this is when administrators and other school members upon meeting Grant and Luke, both members of the Chinese diaspora, suggested they teach a Chinese language class at their respective schools even though Grant and Luke’s certifications were to teach English in France and social studies in Baltimore, respectively. Neither were hired to teach Chinese, nor did they have the certification to do so. However, their outward appearance as East Asians and language credibility in Chinese undercut their authority to teach “American” subjects like English. Grant also spoke of the implicit expectation in both France and China for foreign English teachers to be White, evident

³⁹ Iftikar and Museus. “AsianCrit in Education.” 940.

through the attention his White coworker would receive from local community members compared to himself or his Latinx colleagues. This dual essentializing and equation of Whiteness to English, a “domestic” or “native” language of the United States, as well as Asian to “foreign languages” show how Grant and Luke’s perceptible “Asianness” distances them from Whiteness. The perpetual foreigner racialization imposes a burden of non-Whiteness.

This understanding that despite what the model minority myth would have the public believe, Asian Americans will never possess the property of Whiteness, allows for an inroad between Asian Americans and other communities of color. Although the interviewees recognize that White supremacy and anti-Blackness differentially impact them compared to Black or brown colleagues and students, they still share the common thread with other people of color of marginalization by Whiteness. Five of the interviewees talked about how, in education they exist in mostly White spaces, they have always been acutely cognizant of their race and non-Whiteness. Two more interviewees further spoke about their racialization, by self and others, as a person of color and immigrant. By adopting this overarching label of being a “person of color,” these educators claim kinship with Black, Latinx, and indigenous neighbors.

This kinship not only allows a sense of intimacy and personal responsibility to the collective liberation of all people of color, but also allows some of the Asian American educators to shape their racial consciousness according to wisdom from people of color who have long had to explicitly work through intersectional racialization. Seishin and Alexis in particular highlighted the wisdom and support of Black women friends and co-workers in their lives “who really own their racial identity.” In these spaces, they are able to talk explicitly about race. This active practice of naming, critiquing, and reconstructing experiences and identity allows for the

continuous reshaping of a racial and social consciousness that ultimately informs classroom practice and pedagogy.

Furthermore, the Asian American educators strategically essentialize “non-White” to strengthen political, coalitional power under the moniker “people of color.” The common reality for these educators is isolation in a room overflowing with whiteness. At age four, Alexis could count only two other non-White people apart from herself. Seishin reckons that besides her sister and herself, there were only three other Asians at her high school. Out of a staff of over 160 people, Elisa is the only Asian American at her school. The strategic alliance in proximity to Blackness and away from Whiteness affords these Asian American educators political power in a way that could not happen if they only identified as Asian American.

So what is the consciousness that these educators ultimately arrive at? Through experiences both prior to and throughout their time in the classroom, the eight interviewees demonstrated, either explicitly or implicitly through a description of their classroom praxis, that their racial consciousness accounts for both the forces of Whiteness and anti-Blackness that pervades American society at all levels. Their commitment to social justice and anti-racism in their teaching practice stems from both an understanding of the kinship they share with other people of color as people burdened with non-Whiteness, as well as the differential, unjust benefits they receive in possessing non-Blackness. When faced with this reality of structural injustice learned through both theory and personal experience, they respond with a desire to pursue liberatory practices in the classroom. Luke perhaps sums this up best when he explains what resulted after first grappling with the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes in college:

It really pushed my understanding of advocating for equal rights and equal treatment across communities is not ever a siloed thing. It's the idea that liberation and equality can

only be achieved when it's across the board right? And so I would say, it's what drives me to kind of want to be in the classroom, this social justice component, but it's more like an internal reflection that helps kind of guide my understanding of how I internalize experiences here.

The Inroads of Accompaniment and Improvisation

In their book *Insubordinate Spaces: Improvisation and Accompaniment for Social Justice*, Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz outline a framework for social justice through the concepts of accompaniment, improvisation, *konesans*, and *balans*.⁴⁰ In the insubordinate space that is the public classroom, I will share in which ways the educators interviewed purport to practice solidarity and build coalition with their students and education communities. I argue that because they have built a racial consciousness that acknowledges and contends with both Whiteness and anti-Blackness, the educators are able to accompany and improvise with their students and broader education communities to work toward collective liberation.

By insubordinate spaces, Tomlinson and Lipsitz mean the community places where, “new politics and new polities are emerging through reciprocal practices of speaking and listening, asking and answering, teaching and learning.”⁴¹ These spaces “emerge from and speak to the needs of social movements, doing important ideological and activist work inside struggles for rights, recognition, and resources.”⁴² People in these spaces use a set of tools to pursue and enact liberatory goals. Tomlinson and Lipsitz note that this toolkit includes, “acts of accompaniment and improvisation carried out within the temporality of the middle run and informed by the concepts of *konesans* and *balans*.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Tomlinson, Barbara, and George Lipsitz. *Insubordinate Spaces: Improvisation and Accompaniment for Social Justice*. Insubordinate Spaces. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019.

⁴¹ Tomlinson and Lipsitz, *Insubordinate Spaces*, 8.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 23.

Improvisation, *konesans*, and *balans* inform and entwine with the practice of accompaniment. Improvisation is a “pedagogical, epistemological, and political practice” inside insubordinate spaces that “entails a shared process of agency and accountability through which [new] solutions can be discovered.”⁴⁴ Taken in tandem with accompaniment, improvisation represents the alertness that each participant maintains to creating new possibilities. *Konesans* asks that people acknowledge “the pull of the past on the present, recognizing the lifetime of indebtedness that individuals have to the suffering, struggle, and sacrifice of ancestors and elders.”⁴⁵ Finally, *balans* recognizes the ways everyone holds good and evil as two ends of one unity. The authors assert that, “Moral excellence comes from *reconciling* opposites rather than *choosing* between them. It emerges from appreciating differences and embracing contradictions.”⁴⁶ *Balans* encourages us to embrace the both/and instead of the either/or.

Accompaniment, according to Tomlinson and Lipsitz, “is a disposition, a sensibility, and a pattern of behavior.”⁴⁷ It comes from the Latin root *com* meaning “being together” and *panis* meaning “breaking bread” connotes “physical proximity, shared sustenance, and reciprocity.”⁴⁸ Tomlinson and Lipsitz point to accompaniment in liberation theology, music making, and movement as a group of travelers to articulate its nuances and relevance. From Archbishop Romero, they draw that accompaniment is the meeting together of people from different backgrounds to chart a common journey together. Romero highlights the ways that the economically comfortable must listen to, learn from, and be co-creators with the mistreated and

⁴⁴ Ibid, 35.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 40.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 41.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 25-26.

marginalized poor.⁴⁹ From jazz musicians, the authors suggest that accompaniment, “requires attention, communication, and cooperation. It starts with careful listening, empathy, and identification.”⁵⁰ Jazz music sounds good not because of one star player, but because everyone is doing their own job well, attentive to each other and readily responding in improvisation to create new sounds together.⁵¹ Tomlinson and Lipsitz round out the concept of accompaniment by detailing a group of people walking together, all headed in the same direction with an implicit commitment to travel together. This commitment still allows for fluidity in movement as some people march ahead and others loll behind and different groupings of people connect to chat along the way.

While accompaniment, improvisation, *konesans*, and *balans* are all key aspects of the way insubordinate spaces function, I will focus on the ways the interviewees specifically practice accompaniment and improvisation with their students to turn their classrooms into insubordinate spaces. I argue that they do this through three primary means, motivated by the particular ways their racial consciousness takes shape in light of both Whiteness and anti-Blackness. Furthermore, these practices and interactions, which at times extend beyond the physical classroom space itself, simultaneously mold and shape their racial consciousness. This first shows up when the Asian American educators co-conspire with their students’ in their academic success, By contesting and reforming curriculum and pedagogy to both maintain high expectations while creating opportunities for everyone to meet and exceed those standards, the teachers foster joy and confidence in content learning. The second way this manifests is when they openly share and explore with students the differential ways that Whiteness operates in each

⁴⁹ Ibid, 25.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 27.

⁵¹ Ibid.

of their lives as Asian Americans and other racialized people of color. Finally, stories from some of the interviewed Asian American educators show how they interrogate the ways they benefit from anti-Blackness, thus resulting in a posture of listening and decentering when engaging with people who come from different backgrounds from them. All of these practices shape the insubordinate space that is a multi-racial learning community, and point at the ways in which these Asian American educators intentionally build coalitional relationships in everyday work to dream of collective, emancipatory futures with their students.

Co-Conspirators in the Curriculum

In her book *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, Dr. Bettina Love declares the backbone of abolitionist teaching as “solidarity with courageous co-conspirators.”⁵² By abolitionist teaching, Love means “the practice of working in solidarity with communities of color while drawing on the imagination, creativity, refusal, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination, and subversiveness of abolitionists to eradicate injustice in and outside of schools.”⁵³ While the interviewees did not frame their thinking in terms of abolitionist pedagogy, I argue that their daily practices as curriculum creators, classroom managers, and community collaborators demonstrate a desire to practice abolitionist teaching. Abolitionist teaching calls for solidarity with co-conspirators, who are a subset of allies. Love notes that co-conspirators are sustained to “life-giving ally relationships” who strive for the following:

⁵² Love, *Abolitionist Teaching*, 118.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2.

- Understanding where we stand in relation to systems of privilege and oppression, and unlearning the habits and practices that protect those systems, which is lifelong work for all of us, without exception
- Authentic relationships of solidarity and mutuality, which are not possible when we try to avoid or transcend power imbalances
- Honestly acknowledging and confronting those imbalances to create authentic relationships
- Social change work is always rooted in collaboration, humility, and accountability
- The interior journey into silence, mediation, inner wisdom, and deep joy is inextricably linked to the outer work of social change

The first tenet of these life-giving ally relationships is to understand “where we stand in relation to systems of privilege and oppression, and unlearning the habits and practices that protect those systems.” This echoes Alexis’s sentiments at the beginning that anti-racist work means “recognize systems of oppression in your own pedagogy or curriculum or instructional practices.” In the next few sections, I will also discuss the ways that the Asian American educators interviewed act as co-conspirators in their relationships with students and broader communities, accompanying them in their educational journeys. In those spaces, the racial consciousness and self-racialization of these educators more explicitly informs their praxis. However, in this section, I want to highlight that although an understanding of “Asian American” in relation to systems of privilege may not explicitly surface, the educators interviewed actively swim upstream by creating curriculum and pedagogy that disrupt traditional expectations and structures of schooling.

Let's take a closer look at Mark's practice. Mark, a middle school math teacher in the Bay Area, shared that his goal in the classroom is to show students that "there is someone at school that cares about them... that is rooting for them, that believes in their ability to, you know, grow and to learn." He noted that this is particularly salient in the math classroom, where students often come to him with a deficit math identity mentality and believe that they're failures in math.⁵⁴ Mark grew up attending tracked honors classes and graduated from a top public university with a degree in math. For all intents and purposes, Mark likely did not suffer from a poor math identity over the course of his academic journey. Certainly, now as an educator who teaches math, Mark likely has a strong math identity—one that enables him to confidently teach the content to students.

The same neoliberal, competitive "meritocratic" academic culture that shaped the schooling experiences of the interviewees growing up still permeates classrooms today. It is this sense of comparison, in addition to being externally evaluated as underperforming, either explicitly through grades or implicitly through interactions with teachers and classmates in the classroom, that demoralizes students and contributes to their insecure math identities. By the time they enter Mark's seventh and eighth grade math classrooms, students have already solidified their math identity through dozens of experiences prior. Mark's goal is to change students' fixed mindsets toward their math identities to growth mindsets that believe in their abilities to improve in their command of math.

Instead of reproducing systems that track students into those who excel at math and those who continue to fail and thereby reinforcing an academic achievement gap in his classroom, Mark focuses on changing students' relationships to their math identities by "creating moments

⁵⁴ By "math identity" Mark means how a student views themselves in the math classroom.

in class where everyone can feel successful.” The two practices Mark shared as examples for creating moments of success really encouraged and excited me.

First, Mark starts his classes off with really easy warm-up problems—some that are equivalent to third grade level math. He makes “a big deal out of it,” cold calling students to answer these warm-up questions with the promise that he firmly believes anyone in the class can answer them. A tunnel vision, neoliberal, “rigor” centered perspective may say that this is in fact a waste of class time, since students do not actually practice and learn grade-level math. Mark, however, points to the fact that one of his students with learning difficulties who performs at four grades below grade level used to get so excited at these warm-ups and want to participate two, three times because this was the one chance he had to be successful.

Mark rejects the systems of privilege and oppression that say public school teachers cannot afford to care for the lowest performing students, as this will come at the expense of those who need more rigorous material. He understands that though he has no control over students’ math identities prior to entering his class, he can change their relationship to math by creating opportunities for success. Mark understands that part of learning in this learning community is not just having a relationship to each other, but also a relationship to the content:

You know that five minutes of engagement will change the way they tackle the rest of the class. Like you get a kid who you know will just put their head down or just act out because they don't get anything, and it's like, you know it's almost a defense mechanism. To not learn is to act out so they get in trouble, whatever and then they don't have to learn.

Mark’s mentality toward his students’ behaviors recognizes and rejects reproducing processes in school that choose to criminalize students for their behavior and highlights one way he accompanies his students. Much like the musical accompanist, Mark begins with “listening, empathy, and identification” to understand where students are coming from before judging

them.⁵⁵ He recognizes that when students act out, it is not because they are incapable of loving learning. Rather, they have been told that the school system was not created for them, or that there is something wrong with them, so it's better to just disengage, even though they may have loved learning if given the chance to be successful. He instead works to bring joy and rigor to the classroom by creating opportunities for students to internalize that they are capable of success in a system that has always told them they would be failures. He co-conspires to redefine success by disrupting the curriculum for his students.

Homespaces and Humanity: Creating Authentic Learning Communities

The classroom as an insubordinate space functions to create *homeplaces* for students. Bettina loves describes a homeplace as “a place that honors the emotional, physical, spiritual, and financial struggle of living under what [bell] hooks calls ‘the brutal reality of racial apartheid’ in the US and finding one’s humanity within the struggle against it.”⁵⁶ Every single Asian American educator that I interviewed spoke to the importance of showing up authentically in their relationships with their students. In the context of our conversations, this meant being honest about their racial background and identity as an Asian American. Like I mentioned at the beginning of the capstone, the conversation that sparked this project was one in which Alexis shared that she was one of the first Asian Americans some of her students had ever met. To find one another’s humanity within the struggle against the brutal reality of racial apartheid, we must first listen to each other’s stories. There’s a difference between sharing stories in order to contribute to a multicultural, diverse melting pot, and sharing stories in a way to resist and complicate dominant narratives. The following section observes how the teachers and students

⁵⁵ Tomlinson and Lipsitz, *Insubordinate Spaces*, 27.

⁵⁶ Love, *Abolitionist Teaching*, 118.

accompany each other in a learning community to better understand each other and the world around them.

The interviewed educators have an opportunity to share with students a unique facet of the ways Whiteness operates in the world. Specifically, for the educators' non-Asian students, engaging in a learning community with these educators exposes them to unique experiences and stories that they would not be able to learn about otherwise in the same manner. Love speaks of one co-conspiring White teacher, Mrs. Knight, as someone who “would tell me about her difficult childhood and the struggles of her mother, but always with the understanding that while our life stories may have intersected and overlapped, that my darkness was a factor that further complicated my life, while her Whiteness eased hers.”⁵⁷ With the aforementioned nuances and complexities in racializing Asian Americans along vectors of proximity to Whiteness, Blackness, and general otherness, this darkness/Whiteness divide is not so apparent. Instead, the classroom operates as a space where teacher and student improvise together, learning to speak humbly and honestly, in authenticity and grace.

Whiteness and anti-Blackness as racial framings do not only color the consciousness and practice of educators. These forces also mediate the actions and responses of students. Five of the eight educators shared moments when students, in an attempt to foster rapport through humor or curiosity with their educators, made off-colored remarks that could be judged as microaggressions. Four interviewees shared moments when their students talked about stereotypically “Asian” cultural topics, like anime and kpop, with these educators specifically in an effort to share their interests. I will analyze a story that Seishin shared in order to show how the educators created a shared homespace with students, for students and themselves alike,

⁵⁷ Ibid, 82.

through their responses to these moments. I share the story below in full in order to make evident the specific ways Seishin articulates it. Besides some edits for clarity, these stories come directly from the transcript.

I had... this amazing, amazing young man who was in my class... he was thoughtful and kind and generous and very much a community maker.

And he said to me one day, “Wait, you speak Japanese, will you say something in Japanese?”

And I said, “I can, but I just want to stop for a moment and say, I want you to know that what I hear when you say that is, ‘will you perform for me?’”

And I said, “And I understand that for you, that comes from really you're interested and I appreciate that.

“But you know, if you just wanted to hear Japanese, some people can suggest [to] you some great anime. If what you want is to really hear the language, that is totally accessible to you. If you'd like me to teach you something, if you'd like to be able to say something to me, if you ask me that way, then... we have a different interaction, right? There's a different power dynamic here. Otherwise, you're just asking me to say something you don't understand, knowing full well that you don't understand it, and I think that's very uncomfortable.”

He went home and he really thought on that, and at the end of the year said, “I just want you to know that that might have been the most important conversation I had all year with anyone and it's really clarified how I think about lots of things.”

When Seishin first spoke about her role as an educator, she pointed out that she had the capacity to both inspire students and cause great harm. The moment she outlined above certainly could have been a moment of great harm: after making an honest effort to connect with and learn from his teacher, the boy Seishin speaks of does not receive what he was looking for. Instead, he is critiqued and asked to take a step back to evaluate his delivery and actions, as well as the greater forces they perpetuate. Seishin acknowledges, after sharing this story, that her husband, a White man who also taught for many years, never encountered these conversations. Students did not

ask him to speak a different language for them. In this space, however, Seishin has taken an incident reflective of the burden of non-Whiteness and subverted it in an improvisational state to accompany the student on his journey of learning about performativity, relationships, racialization, and power dynamics. Seishin took on the very real risk of putting her rapport and credibility on the line with both this student and his classmates in order to dig into the nuances of racialized human relationships. They were able to practice together analyzing a unique way that Whiteness shows up and oppresses in the world. Seishin does not do this to protect her own self-interests, although certainly a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Asianness, Japaneseness, and each other's identities would do so. She improvises and turns the classroom into a space for struggle against the racial order—rather than silencing the student or giving into his asks, she creates a homespace that honors his emotional and spiritual struggle existing in a world complicated by Whiteness.

Acknowledging, Decentering, and Listening: Responding to an Anti-Black World

Claire Jean Kim ends her recent talk on her book, *Asian Americans in an Anti-Black World*, which analyzes Asian American racialization in the context of both Whiteness and anti-Blackness, by responding to the question, “How can Asian Americans be good allies to the Black struggle?” She first calls for Asian Americans to name and talk through the Asian-Black gap, interrogating the ways in which they may benefit from structural anti-Blackness. She then asserts that being good allies means, “reconstituting Asian Americanness as a force that destabilizes, rather than reinforces, the existing economic and racial order.” The next section explores how some of the interviewees attempt to do so through practices of accompaniment.

When Luke reflected on the different vectors of his identity, he noted that one aspect that was more “jarring in terms of thinking through some things in the classroom” was the difference in class. Right before this statement, he noted that most of his students understood his racialization as a person of color and immigrant. However, coming from a middle class, suburban background to teach in a school where over 40% of students received free and reduced meals, it’s difficult to ignore the difference in class divide between “most of the teachers and most of the students.” This difference surfaces especially when he considers how to support students who may be struggling to juggle school with their other responsibilities. He recognizes that having grown up in a financially stable household, advice that may have benefited him, such as “don’t work, go to school,” is not helpful for some of his students who must work to support their families.

Instead, in these moments of distance and dissimilarity, Luke notes that he tries to show up for his students simply by listening and affirming their hardships. Instead of choosing to wield his power as an authority figure and person in power, he chooses to decenter himself in the conversation and allow students to speak truth from their own experiences, validating both their emotions and analyses.

Furthermore, Luke shared that every year except this year of distance learning, he asks his students to conduct a needs assessment for their community and to send the assessment out to family and neighbors to give their feedback on. At the end of the project, the school hosts a town hall where students share their proposed solutions to a need they assessed in the community. Equipping the students with the tools and opportunity to take the material they learn in class and apply it directly in their lives in a way that gives back to their communities is a key aspect of accompaniment between school and neighborhood. By doing so, Luke translates his

acknowledgement of class difference into action. Rather than centering his own voice, he steps back, listens to students, and centers their voices in their communities.

Discussion

Through these interviews with eight Asian American public school educators in the United States, I sought to understand how Asian American educators support and engage with their students, many of whom come from different backgrounds from them. While I have analyzed the ways their racial consciousness informs an accompaniment oriented praxis in coalition building and educating in the classroom, the interviews can only provide a limited perspective into the broader picture. Coalition work and accompaniment is inherently multidirectional and involves several actors, but these interviews can only provide insight into one of those players in each environment. Furthermore, because I only drew from interviews with the educators themselves, rather than a combination of interviews and classroom observations, I have no ability to gauge whether or not the educators practice what they preach. The only lens that this provides into the classroom is a reflection on self racialization and classroom practices through the filtered thoughts of the educators themselves.

If I were to continue this project or encourage others to explore more deeply the role that Asian American educators play in broader pursuits of social justice imagination in insubordinate spaces, I would absolutely speak to the educators' students, past and present. The classroom functions as a learning space and community builder for all who interact with it. However, while teachers opt in to this space through employment, students have little to no say in who they are in community with in grade school, or what they talk about. While the interviews I conducted can hint at a teacher's intentions for their interactions and relationships with students, it is crucial to

center student voices to get a fuller, more honest understanding of how coalition building toward abolitionist education functions in the classroom. How do the students view their teachers? Do they pick up on the differences between these teachers who purport to advocate for them and accompany them in their journey? What do they feel they are actually learning, and how? In what ways do they see the classroom community functioning as a site of cross-racial coalition building toward liberation? In what ways do they hope to imagine the classroom as such?

Conclusion

I came to this project hoping to unknot a bit of the intangible, tangled mass that is my understanding of Asian Americans' roles in destabilizing the present unjust racial order that pervades all of society. I had hoped that these educators, through their first-hand field experience in the classroom, could illuminate some broader truths or considerations for me. Frankly, I have had a tremendously difficult time this year articulating and responding to the knowledge, wisdom, and vulnerability I've been entrusted with this year through these eight stories. You can tell just by looking at all the extensions I've asked for and multiple last minute overhauls of the analytical frameworks I've come up with. After listening to the recordings countless of times, scouring interviews for different threads, and calling up various friends for hours to talk about Asian American racialization, I've found that it's near impossible to come to a tidy, neat conclusion on the ways even these eight educators theorize and practice and live as Asian American educators.

I think this speaks to the complexity of translating theory into practice. I wanted, in part, to come out of this project with a more confident understanding of how I could minimize harm and intentionally, intelligently, pursue justice in my embodied self as a Chinese American

woman. We all know that racism sucks, and as most of my fellow Yalies and peers on social media continue to discover, the more we dig into ourselves and the history of the world we've inherited, we realize that the extent of our complicity has no end in sight. The purpose, of course, isn't to rid ourselves of complicity, but to dream for freedom together, for a world that can genuinely love each other as full human beings and full living things and full inanimate things too. My initial concluding thoughts tried to capture this dream:

My vision is not grandiose. It is not special. My vision is simply that we would celebrate the full humanity present in each person and overthrow the structures in our minds, our relationships, and our livelihoods that say we can't.

How do we begin going about doing that? What role could this capstone play in moving toward that vision? Again, I must emphasize that this capstone does not claim to assert an overarching analytical framework nor draw generalizations about Asian American educators. This simply functions as a space that draws together eight distinct stories that contribute to, nuance, and (re)construct Asian American history, and American history more broadly. On the one hand, the scope of this paper is incredibly narrow and small, and represents only a small portion of the overall narrative on the intersections of Asian American racial formations and anti-racist, liberatory education.

On the other hand, stories raise the stakes. Visions no longer pertain to the theoretical, untouchable masses. News articles no longer remain detached data points. Theory no longer explains undercurrents that shape our existence. Theory explains the forces that shape your existence. My existence. We can no longer measure pain by increments or pleasure by numbers. Our actions matter because we see their effects right in front of us, in the humanity of the one. I

want to end this capstone with an excerpt by Valerie Kaur, a Sikh American author, from her book, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*.⁵⁸

You may say: *It's too much—all this grief, all this violence and injustice, it's too hard.* You are right: The mind can comprehend one death, but it cannot comprehend thousands, especially when one's own community, nation, or ancestors played some part in causing the death. Mother Teresa once said, "If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will." And so, begin with one. Can you choose one person to practice wondering about? Can you listen to the story they have to tell? If your fists tighten, or your heart beats fast, or if shame rises to your face, it's okay. Breathe through it. Trust that you can. The heart is a muscle: The more you use it, the stronger it becomes. Then the next time a black boy in your city is killed by a police officer, or a turbaned Sikh father is beaten, or a Jewish person is stabbed, or a trans woman is murdered, or an indigenous woman goes missing, or a Muslim child is attacked, show up. Show up at the public vigils and memorials to grieve, in person. You don't need to know people in order to grieve with them. *You grieve with them in order to know them.*

If you are like me, sometimes you are just too tired. Too tired to cry. Too tired to feel. When that moment comes, I ask you not to judge the emotions in your body. Let them come and go. There is something called "empathy fatigue" that happens when we get overloaded by other people's pain. The good news is that you don't need to feel empathy all the time. *Love is not a rush of feeling: Love is sweet labor.* What matters is the work your hands do.

⁵⁸ Kaur, Valerie. *Revolutionary Love*. First edition. New York: One World, 2020.

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