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Running head: CAMPUS RACIAL CLIMATE SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDENTS

Understanding the Impacts of Campus Racial Climate on Southeast Asian College Students'

Experiences

Chanira Reang Sperry

A dissertation in practice  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
in Educational Leadership

University of Washington Tacoma

2019

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Education

University of Washington Tacoma

# CAMPUS RACIAL CLIMATE SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDENTS

## Abstract

### Understanding the Impacts of Campus Racial Climate on Southeast Asian College Students' Experiences

Chanira Reang Sperry

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Christopher B. Knaus

School of Education

**Purpose:** Research has demonstrated that racial academic stereotypes can cause Asian American students to disengage in learning processes as well as avoid key institutional members both in and out of the classroom (Linley, 2018; Maramba & Velasquez, 2012; Museus, 2009; Museus & Park, 2015). The oversimplified portrayal of Asian American students as a homogenous, high achieving group, however, contributes to racial prejudice, and an unwelcoming academic environment for Southeast Asian college students. The realities of Southeast Asian students are more complex than the harmful racial stereotype suggests. As a consequence of such monolithic categorization and characterization is the denial of attention and support to Southeast Asian students and families (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Assumptions about Asian American success illustrates a need to better understand the various Asian American ethnic populations that have been in the U.S. for over 150 years, from the earliest immigrants to more recent ones. Focusing on Southeast Asian students is important for several reasons. First,

## CAMPUS RACIAL CLIMATE SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDENTS

current research with Southeast Asian students is needed to contribute to the knowledge base and determine future directions for research. Second, understanding Southeast Asian students' narratives within the context of a campus racial climate is critical to understanding academic and personal needs to achieve equitable educational outcomes.

**Method:** Study participants (N=24) were recruited to participate in in-person individual interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis, critical race theory, and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory were applied to analyze participants' navigational experiences in hostile campus racial climates.

**Findings:** The findings from this study indicate some of the challenges participants experienced related to racism and other forms of marginalization as well as how participants used forms of community cultural wealth such as social, navigational, and journey capital to navigate these challenges. Two major themes of how students experienced racism were identified from the data: (a) academic experiences with racism and (b) peer experiences with racism.

**Discussion and Implications:** Southeast Asian college students are in need of culturally affirming and encouraging academic and social spaces to fully participate in educational activities. Practitioners who seek to support this population would benefit from learning about the diverse histories, languages, religions, and ethnic identities of Southeast Asian student populations. Future research would benefit from a nuanced approach of further examining ethnic subgroups as well as linguistic differences among U.S. born and non-U.S. born Southeast Asian populations.

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## Dedications

To my Ma and Ba,

To my ancestors who came before me,

To my relatives, who I never got to meet, and

To the many Southeast Asian students who dared to thrive.

Understanding the Impacts of Campus Racial Climate on Southeast Asian College Students'  
Experiences

### **Introduction**

Academic colonialism, the imposition of dominant ideologies at historically White higher education institutions, is embedded in inequitable policies and practices that devalues diverse ways of knowing and knowledge production (Hurtado, 1992). Historically White colleges value assimilationist traditions that conflict with Southeast Asian students' experiences, thereby silencing their voices, creating disengagement, and contributes to feelings of isolation (Pang, 1998; Takaki, 1989; Yang, 2004). Evidence suggests that racism and marginalization influence and shapes these students' lives as they experience pressure to assimilate into the cultures of historically White colleges (Museus & Park, 2015).

Moreover, in their findings from their 2008 study on *Asian Americans in Washington State: Closing Their Hidden Achievement Gaps*, Hune and Takeuchi (2008) acknowledged a Eurocentric paradigm that devalues different ways of knowing that contributes to inequitable education opportunities for Students of Color. Au, Brown, and Calderon (2016) assert that omissions in curriculum can be answered by Tuck and Gatzambide-Fernandez's concept that mass schooling is a project of racist, settler colonialism. As such, curriculum studies is an extension of this project. Historically (and currently), the exclusion of voices from Communities of Color is a result of racist views from White settlers towards non-White communities. Thus, all non-White stories and ideas are prohibited from entering into U.S. history (Au et al., 2016). Not including voices from Communities of Color in the curriculum contributes to preserving

White supremacist knowledge and maintaining epistemicide, the killing of knowledge systems (Hall, 2017).

Gay (2013) further argues that the education of racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse students should connect with in-school learning and out-of-school living, promote educational equity and excellence, and develop student's agency and efficacy. Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 31). Culturally responsive teaching challenges the "deficit" perspective by focusing on cultural assets of Students of Color, thus creating affirming learning environments. Therefore, a better understanding of how Southeast Asian college students navigate hostile campus racial climates is needed by educational practitioners in order to understand the influence of cultural assets on their life experiences and educational outcomes.

While the term 'Asian American' (coined in 1968 by activists, Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee who were inspired by the Black Power movement) was intended to create a collective identity (Wang, 2019), important subgroup differences, such as Southeast Asians, are often overlooked in higher education policies and practices. In particular, the presentation of demographics in educational statistics for K-12 and higher education institutions rarely includes disaggregated data of Southeast Asian ethnic subgroups, an oversight that reflects our invisibility both within Asian American communities and the broader population.

This study also recognizes that the terms *Asian American* and *Southeast Asian* are socially, historically, and politically constructed (Au, Brown, & Calderon, 2016). As such, these constructions can vary as a function to reward or punish people (Hodson, 2016). Ono (1995) argues that the term *Asian American* may no longer signify resistive politics in the way it did

post-1968 during the creation of the term. The complex social categories of immigration, nationality, sexuality, race, gender, class, language, citizenship, age, ability, and generation prevent the kind of unity around the term *Asian American*. Moreover, Ono (1995) problematizes the use of the term *Asian American* and contends that, “The fact that such a label, Asian American, never matches the social discursive formation of Asian American subjects (the convergence of discourse produced by and about Asian Americans) produces an acute theoretical “alienation” between the signifier and the signified” (p. 75). For the purpose of this study, the term *Southeast Asian* will be used to refer to Lao, Cambodian, Hmong, Vietnamese, Burmese/Myanmar, and Mien populations.

When separate analyses are carried out with Southeast Asian populations, important differences and disparities are revealed. Notable are disparities in educational attainment levels and economic disparities among Southeast Asian populations (Ngo & Lee, 2007), which influences their access to educational opportunities and social mobility. Scholarly research on Southeast Asian students emphasize the critical importance of disaggregating data to better understand the lived realities of this population to better meet their specific needs (Her, 2014; Poon, Squire, Kodama, & Byrd, 2016; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Teranishi, 2002). Thus, this study specifically centers the experiences of Southeast Asian college students at a public four-year institution located in the Pacific Northwest and contributes to existing literature by offering an examination of ways in which Southeast Asian college students use assets-based community cultural capital to succeed in hostile campus racial climates. As the findings suggest, centering the Southeast Asian participants’ voices sheds light on how they shape counter-narratives in response to racist behavior, policies and practices in the historically

White institution's educational and social spaces. As such, the next section provides the impetus for directing specific attention towards Southeast Asian college student voices.

### **Motivation for the Study**

When my family fled the war and genocide in Cambodia in April of 1975, we could not have imagined what our lives would be like growing up in Corvallis, a small agricultural town in Oregon. Being uprooted from our homeland, we travelled on a naval ship (built to hold a crew of 30 people) crowded with over 300 Cambodians with one destination that was for certain – far away from the nightmare happening in Cambodia. With the assistance of two churches, who sponsored my extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, we were the first Cambodians to arrive in this predominantly White conservative community. All 14 of us piled into a two-bedroom duplex on the corner of Walnut Street. While we experienced the generosity of the churches' desire to help our family transition to the new culture, we were simultaneously told by our neighbors to “go back to your country.” To combat these harmful messages, my siblings and I became more ‘American,’ to the detriment of rapidly losing our language and culture.

Racism was not a word that I understood as a child, rather it was a feeling. I was first introduced to this feeling when one of my kindergarten classmates took the time and energy to dig up a pile of worms and throw them on my hair, followed by his dirt-stained finger pointing at me and mocking the color of my skin, while the air filled with his toxic laughter. These feelings would continue until I would finally learn a name for them when I attended college because racism was not talked about in school or at home. I took the first Asian American Literature course offered by my college and read about characters such as Moon, created by Marilyn Chin

(Chin, 1993), who experienced racism, and then sought revenge on her perpetrators. I connected with the character's pain and with her resolve to confront racist behavior.

Being and living “the only one” has also been and continues to be a recurring theme throughout my existence. We were the only Cambodians at the grocery stores, gas stations, banks, and laundromats. The space where we were not the only ones was in the berry fields, working alongside Cambodian, Lao, Mexican, Chinese, and Russian immigrants. However, in educational spaces, my siblings and I were the only Cambodians in our town's schools. When my younger sister and I attended the nearby state college, we were the only Cambodian American students where we collaborated with the only two Vietnamese Americans students and one Thai American student in our class to form the first Southeast Asian Club.

In the current educational spaces that I occupy at a historically white and urban four-year institution, I see, teach, and mentor undergraduate students who come from similar Southeast Asian backgrounds as mine - who share common experiences, ways of knowing, and ways of being – and I revel in the beauty of our wonderful resilient communities. While these students belong to a different generation than mine, we are connected through our histories and our partial stories, carefully selected and orally passed down by our families. The emotional pain and psychological trauma from losing family members, being uprooted from a homeland, and separation of families from war experienced by our ancestors and passed down to us through our families' stories, inspires a burst of hope for imagining and building future paths for ourselves and our communities. It is through this lens of hope that I write about, and for, generations of Southeast Asian college students who embody the courage and strength to create knowledge of greatest worth through their powerful voices and stories. Thus, the next section frames the research question in relation to data disaggregation to deepen our understanding of diverse

Southeast Asian voices and discover the types of strategies Southeast Asian participants use to navigate hostile campus racial climates.

### **Guiding Research Question**

The continued use of aggregate data by historically White higher education institutions conceals the challenges faced by Southeast Asian college students and maintains the silencing of their experiences by perpetuating the message that they do not require resources and support. The aggregation of data is problematic because higher education policies and practices are often data-driven. In the 2013 *iCount: A Data Quality Movement for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Higher Education* report, 88.1 percent of administrators report using data and research when making decisions (Teranishi et al., 2013). Data disaggregation allows administrators to determine which student populations are underrepresented, thus informing campus wide policies, programs and services effectively targeting resources for these student populations (Teranishi et al., 2013). Moreover, the popular belief that Asian Americans are “immune to racism” because they are viewed as the “model minority” (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009) contributes to the subjugation and dehumanization of this population. Scholars such as Museus and Kiang (2009) argue that the current levels of knowledge about Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI) needs to be deepened by higher education institutions to understand the realities of Southeast Asian college students.

Viewed through this lens, the aim of this study is for educational practitioners to better understand how Southeast Asian college students experience hostile campus racial climates, the strategies they use to achieve educational success, and implications for higher education policy and practices. Furthermore, this study aims to center Southeast Asian college students’ stories



and voices to discover ways in which they disrupt marginalized experiences in educational spaces. The guiding research question is:

RQ: How are Southeast Asian college students navigating hostile campus racial climates in ways that lead to educational success?

This study contributes to existing literature of qualitative findings of Southeast Asian college students' experiences in higher education settings. By listening to Southeast Asian college students' voices through their stories and counter-stories, emerging narratives of their experiences can provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which Southeast Asian college students navigate historically White college spaces.

### **Study Overview**

In Section II, I present the motivation for the study by sharing personal narratives. In section III, I discuss the development of the research question. I provide an historical overview of Southeast Asians' immigration patterns to contextualize the political and social conditions for arrival in the U.S in Section V. In Section VI, I present a review of the literature on Southeast Asian college students' educational achievement, deficit thinking and damage-centered frameworks, first generation, academic experiences and campus climate to provide context for the research question. Theoretical framing is presented in Section VII, beginning with my theoretical influences. I provide an overview of critical race theory, particularly drawing from Delgado's and Stefancic's work and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory to connect this lens to Southeast Asian college students' lives and create space for counterstories of resistance. I then define Yosso's six types of cultural wealth and provide examples from students' narratives of how participants employ each form of capital to assist them in negotiating educational spaces. Section VIII presents the methods, study procedures, and analytic method.

Section IX presents the findings and explores how participants use cultural capital in dynamic ways. The discussion is presented in Section X and provides new insights for how Southeast Asian college students navigate campus racial climates. I present the implications for practice by providing recommendations for future research, policy, and practice. Section XII describes the limitations of the study. Lastly, Section VXII provides the conclusion for the dissertation.

### **Historical Overview**

This section begins by reviewing the construction of the ‘Southeast Asian’ terminology and provides an overview of Southeast Asian immigration patterns, particularly highlighting the political and social conditions that characterized the three waves of immigration into the U.S. that sets the context for implications for postsecondary education for this population. The diverse Asian American, Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian populations make up people from almost half of the world and have ancestry from Korea, Cambodia, Tonga, Myanmar/Burma, India, China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Japan, Guam, Taiwan, Laos, Samoa, Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, and more. Asian American, Pacific Islanders, and Southeast Asians are an integral part of the U.S.’s past, present, and future (Hune & Takeuchi, 2008). Thousands of Southeast Asians fled their homelands due to genocide, political persecution from their governments, oppression, violence, and U.S. bombings in the region. The historical overview of Southeast Asia from colonization to the present provides the backdrop for how and why Southeast Asians became part of the U.S.

The term ‘Southeast Asia’ did not exist until World War II when territories south of the Tropic of Cancer were placed under Lord Louis Mountbatten’s Southeast Asian command and military strategists needed a way to refer to the colonial lands that were overrun by Japan (SarDesai, 1997; Warshaw, 1988). Many French, British and Indian scholars called the region

L’Inde Exterieur, Farther India, Greater India, and the Hinduized or Indianized States in reference to an extension of neighboring countries. Chinese writings identified the area as Kun Lun or Nan Yang (Little China), while others referred to the region between India and China as Indo-China from the French Indochina, which includes Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam (SarDesai, 1997). The variety of terms is suggestive of the colonial mindset with the goal of controlling a region of people with rich histories, languages, religion, and cultures by these major colonizers: Europe (Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and France), the U.S. and Japan (SarDesai, 1997). Figure 1 illustrates the imposed Southeast Asian boundaries divided by the colonizers.



Figure 1. Map of Western imperialism in Southeast Asia

Rudyard Kipling, a British poet, wrote about the ‘white man’s burden’ suggesting that Westerners were superior to Asians and Africans and had no obligation to share their privileges and abilities with subordinate people (Warshaw, 1988). The British clearly demonstrated their sense of moral superiority where it was profitable for them, imposing their government onto Burma, who could supply them with rice, minerals, and timber (SarDesai, 1997; Warshaw, 1988). Furthermore, the British captured large parts of the Malay Peninsula where they had a surplus of tin and rubber (Warshaw, 1988). While the British saw themselves as morally superior to Southeast Asians, the French saw themselves as culturally superior (Warshaw, 1988). As such, from the French perspective, Southeast Asians could no longer exist and serve themselves until they became ‘civilized,’ or in other words, became thoroughly French (Warshaw, 1988). Racism and the ‘white man’s burden’ helped Westerners justify colonization.

The imperial enterprise in Southeast Asian occurred over four centuries, causing severe destruction to much of the region (Warshaw, 1988). During World War II, Western colonists blew up mines, factories, oil wells, railroads, harbors, and mills when they learned that Japanese forces were preparing to invade (Warshaw, 1988). Guerilla forces rose up against the Japanese and destroyed facilities as they left, further damaging other parts of Southeast Asia (Warshaw, 1988). Millions of Southeast Asians suffered from the legacy of colonization and war. The destruction of Southeast Asia aroused a strong desire in the people of this region to be rid of all foreigners and gave rise to nationalist movements. The Young Man’s Buddhist Association in Burma (1906) and the Sarekat Islam in Indonesia (1912) were movements aimed to unite local people against Western powers. Moreover, Western education educated elite Southeast Asians about the concept of freedom, equality and dignity leading to resistance with the goal of national independence. Significant communist nationalist movements arose including the Vietminh (or

League for the Independence of Vietnam), the Khmer Rouge, and the Pathet Lao (Warshaw, 1988).

Communism in Vietnam in the 1960's quickly spread to neighboring Cambodia and Laos in the 1970's (SarDesai, 1997; Warshaw, 1988). The Vietnam War and the Cambodian genocide were seminal and tragic events that marked the exodus of thousands of Southeast Asians from their homelands. Refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia came to the U.S. in 1975 when their governments fell to communist takeovers. Approximately, 100, 000 Southeast Asians per year fled to the U.S. for refuge, with 45,000 arriving in Washington and settling in Pierce, King, and Yakama counties (Takami, 1999). Figure 1.2 illustrates a map of the post-colonial Southeast Asian countries and the imposed borders dividing the countries; remnants from Western colonizers. Southeast Asia is comprised of eleven countries: Brunei, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. These countries are diverse in religion, culture, language and history (Andaya, 2019). Southeast Asian communities in the U.S. make up 15.2% of people reporting Asian and/or Pacific Islander heritage (U.S. Census, 2000). Vietnamese Americans are the largest Southeast Asian group with 1.2 million in the U.S. There are approximately 206,000 Cambodian Americans and approximately 198,000 Lao Americans who live in the U.S. Laotians who populate Lao include the Lao, the Hmong, the Khmu, the Tai, and the lu-Mien (Pang, 1998). Hmong Americans make up the smallest number of Southeast Asian Americans with 186,310 living in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2000). While the Hmong settled in the mountaintops of northern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand more than 150 years ago, most of the Hmong living in the U.S. have come from Laos (Pang, 1998). The total Burmese population was 106,168 in 2011 (Vang & Trieu, 2014). Southeast Asian Americans are distinct from "Asian American" because the

majority of the individuals came to the U.S. as refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (Pang, 1998; Takaki, 1989).



Figure 1.2 Map of Southeast Asian countries. Siemreapshuttle.com

Many Southeast Asians fled from U.S. bombs and those who opposed the communist regimes escaped political persecution when the Vietnam War ended (Ngo & Lee, (2007). As such, the immigration of Southeast Asians is distinguished by three waves (Takaki, 1989).

During 1975 – 1979, the first wave comprised of members of the educated elite, professionals, and individuals who worked with the military. The second wave, 1979 – 1982, was composed of family members of the first-wave immigrants, who were educated and had economic as well as social resources. The third-wave refugees, 1982 – present, lived in the refugee camps in Thailand before immigrating to the U.S. and was primarily composed of Hmong and Lowland Lao, who were the least western educated of the Southeast Asian refugees (Ngo & Lee, 2007). The most recent wave also included Burmese refugees.

For the purpose of this study, the focus will primarily be on the following Southeast Asian ethnic groups as they are reflected in the study sample population: Vietnamese, Cambodian, Mien, Lao Americans, as well as Mixed race and Mixed ethnic identities with Southeast Asian ancestry. Understanding the importance of a particular group's historical experiences and cultural orientations in shaping their educational aspirations and achievement provides the context for educational practitioners to better understand their interactions with Southeast Asian students and their families as well as lead to meaningful, culturally relevant curriculum, resources and programming for students and their families (Ogbu, 1978, 1987; Pang, 1999). The next section addresses some of the strengths and challenges of Southeast Asian sub-groups.

**Vietnamese Americans.** There are several key components to the success of Vietnamese students, such as culturally based values that emphasize the importance of education, a strong work ethic, and achievement (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Moreover, educational success is the result of family bonds and obligation as many Vietnamese Americans view achievement as a collective affair (Ngo & Lee, 2007). While research literature on Vietnamese American emphasizes educational success, poverty, delinquency, gang involvement, oppression, and acts



of racism further affect the education of Vietnamese students (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Moreover, loss of parental authority and intergenerational conflict can influence delinquent behavior in Vietnamese American youth with the loss of cultural values as a result of Americanization (Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

**Cambodian Americans.** In terms of education in the U.S. for Cambodian Americans, in their study, Ngo and Lee (2007) clarify that the academic difficulties of Cambodian American students include racism, poverty, high drop-out rates, gang involvement, and cultural differences between American culture and Cambodian culture (i.e. the role of Buddhism and the idea of destiny). Furthermore, similar to Hmong female students, Cambodian girls have particularly high drop-out rates, a problem that is attributed to sexism as well as Cambodian cultural norms and pressures to marry and have children (Ngo & Lee 2007). Hopkins's (1992) study also suggests that the school curriculum fails to speak to their experiences and as a result, many of the students were bored with school.

While there are barriers to educational achievement for Cambodian American students, a smaller body of research focuses on the community's resilience in the face of adversity. Traditional Cambodian values that emphasize the family collective and obligation have been found to motivate Cambodian students. Furthermore, culturally relevant curriculum provides Cambodian students with developing positive ethnic identities and becoming social justice activists (Kiang, 1996; Reyes, 2007).

**Lao Americans.** Lao Americans have lived in the U.S. for more than 20 years. Some of the educational challenges that Lao students face include cultural conflict from gender and cultural norms, ill prepared or reluctant teachers who may not address Lao students' cultural and language needs, and gang involvement. Many teachers lack knowledge about Lao students and



often lump them with Hmong students (Ima, 1995). In Ima's (1995) study, findings showed that a school's lack of knowledge about Lao students discouraged them and often led to truancy and delinquency (Ima, 1995). In another study, Lao students were tracked into low-level classes, creating fewer advanced opportunities for learning (Fu, 1995).

Despite the educational challenges, some Lao students are successful in schools as a result of Lao cultural values, such as hard work. Family life is central to the teachings of cultural values. Manke and Keller (2006) also found that the involvement of parents and community members in the decision-making process to be based on commonalities in cultural values and not necessarily as a component of good parental involvement practices. Social barriers (such as poverty, racism, gang involvement, and truancy) and academic resiliency are similar for Vietnamese Americans, Hmong Americans, Cambodian Americans, and Lao Americans.

The research literature on the education of Southeast Asian students emphasizes collectivist values that are deeply embedded in the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao cultures. Within the context of education, the collective approach to academic achievement can put tremendous pressure on Southeast Asian youth to do well (Ngo, 2006). The collectivist value orientations stem from Theravada Buddhism as well as moral codes that shape Southeast Asian behaviors and attitudes (Pang, 1998). As Buddhists, many Southeast Asians believe in the concepts of *fate* and *karma* (as cited in Wycoff, Tinagon, & Dickson, 2011). *Fate*, as an adaptive mechanism, is rooted in Buddhist teachings and asserts that catastrophe and suffering are a part of existence. As such, Lee & Lu (1989) contend that people should accept and deal with terrible events and find meaning in them (Lee & Lu, 1989, p. 101). Moreover, *karma* influences people's belief systems and behavior. The causes of misfortune and traumatic events may be understood as coming from "bad karma" in a previous life (as cited in Wycoff, Tinagon,

& Dickson). Viewed from this lens, the educational success and failure of Southeast Asian college students is a matter of destiny rather than personal effort (Ngo, 2006). Moreover, the implications for Southeast Asians college students in navigating higher education spaces is that these concepts can provide a sense of resiliency in moving forward as they find meaning from traumatic or challenging experiences. Conversely, accepting misfortune and trauma as part of life can influence whether or not Southeast Asian students seek academic or mental health services on campus.

In addition to the shared value of a strong collective responsibility and cooperation, the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao cultures share values of hard work and education, family orientation, and filial piety (Pang, 1998). As such, educational and social spaces in higher education institutions that align with Southeast Asian values can enhance student engagement and student success. The next section provides a review of the academic literature regarding the educational attainment of Southeast Asian subgroups, deficit thinking and damage-centered frameworks, academic experiences of Southeast Asian college students, campus racial climate, and community cultural wealth.

## **Literature Review**

### **Educational Attainment of Southeast Asian Sub-groups**

The practice of aggregating Asian American and Pacific Islander data eclipses the disparities in educational opportunities for many subgroups within this category. As such, Southeast Asian Americans are often misrepresented in data reporting and analysis. When separate analysis is examined with Southeast Asians, important differences and disparities are revealed. Notably, the statistics for educational attainment from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey for 2008 – 2010 shows that nationwide 14.7% of Hmongs, 14.1%

of Cambodians, 12.4% of Laotians, and 25.8% of Vietnamese have earned a Bachelor's degree or higher. These rates of attainment are lower, with the exception of the Vietnamese population, than other racial and ethnic groups and the overall national population (28%) (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2011). The 2014 executive report on *Invisible Newcomers: Refugees from Burma/Myanmar and Bhutan in the United States*, shows that 23% of the Burmese population possess a bachelor's degree (Vang & Trieu, 2014).

Furthermore, college completion has also been a major agenda for higher education institutions (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2011). Among the Southeast Asian subgroups of AAPIs, 51.1 percent of Vietnamese, 63.2 percent of Hmong, 65.5 percent of Laotian, and 65.8 percent of Cambodian have not enrolled or completed any postsecondary education. Additionally, 33.7 percent of Vietnamese, 42.9 percent Cambodians, 46.5 percent Laotians, and 47.5 percent Hmong reported having attended college, but not earning a degree (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2011). Furthermore, the Burmese population have the highest high school dropout rate (39%) among all major Asian ethnic groups (Vang & Trieu, 2014). Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders also had a higher proportion of college attendees who had an associate's degree as their highest level of education. College completion has been connected with many challenges of inequities and diversity in higher education (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2011). While the disaggregation of quantitative data is important to understanding the variation in educational attainment for Southeast Asians, equally as important is understanding their lived educational experiences.

Institutions primarily focus on completion and graduation rates as metrics for success instead of focusing on how well students are thriving in college. Quayle and Harper (2015) contend that buzzwords such as diversity, social justice, equity and equality, and inclusiveness are used to espouse supposed institutional values. Students of Color show up on college

campuses expecting to see evidence of what they have been sold from the school's mission statement (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Yet, oftentimes the examination of students' well-being, sense of belonging, and whether they thrive in college environments is not measured or accounted for. Quaye and Harper (2015) recommend that institutional leaders strategize ways to enhance student engagement in all student populations and that social justice efforts depend on a specific focus towards students with historical engagement gaps. Supporting student engagement further requires institutional leaders to center strengths-based perspectives of students from diverse cultures.

### **First-Generation**

As previously mentioned, statistics reveal that a significant number of Southeast Asians have not enrolled or completed postsecondary education (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2011). Many Southeast Asian students are first-generation, whose parent or guardian did not attend postsecondary education (Ngo, 2006). First generation students made up 34% of the student population in the 2011-2012 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics). Many first generation undergraduate students are predominately from non-white and low-income backgrounds and English is not a first language for nearly 20% (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). First-generation students face many challenges with navigating college environments. Approximately 27% of first generation college students come from households making \$20,000 or less compared to 6% of generation college students. They also take out loans from the federal government at an increasingly high rate (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). In addition to economic challenges, Stephens et al. (2012) contend that there are also social and cultural challenges that first-generation college students face such as needing additional tutoring, mentoring, and social support. Lower rates of college readiness is prevalent

among first-generation college students, which puts them at greater risk of failing out of college. Furthermore, first-generation college students might question their belongingness in White heteronormative institutions because they may not know how to act the “right” way (Stephens et al., 2012). Not understanding how college works can also “...hinder their ability to take full advantage of all opportunities that college has to offer” (Stephens et al., 2012). Moreover, first-generation students may spend more time exploring interests because they often don’t have guidance from family members who have paved the way for them. The next section addresses the need for educational practitioners and institutional leaders to shift from deficit thinking frameworks and work towards understanding assets, contributions, and different ways of knowing from culturally diverse student populations.

### **Moving From Deficit Models to Community Cultural Wealth**

One of the biggest obstacles to successful educational practices is the problem of deficit thinking (Noguera, 2004; Valencia, 2010). The discourse on race and education has largely been defined by hegemonic deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). Deficit thinking permeates schools and some educators who work in them embrace these beliefs. Valencia (1997) defines deficit thinking as “the notion that students (particularly those of low income, racial/ethnic minority background) fail in school because such students and their families have internal defects (deficits) that thwart the learning process (for example, limited educability, unmotivated; inadequate family support).” As such, deficit thinking theory, “blaming the victim,” explains students’ underachievement or failure as a result of their purported intellectual and motivational deficits instead of examining school structures that exclude students from learning opportunities (Valencia, 1997).

Connected to deficit thinking is damage-centered frameworks, which focuses on colonization, domination, and historical exploitation to explain contemporary brokenness (Tuck, 2009). The danger with damage-centered frameworks, Tuck (2009) warns, is that “it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community” (p. 413). She argues for an approach that focuses on desire-based frameworks that look at “understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (Tuck 2009, p. 416). Desire-centered frameworks account for loss and suffering, while also accounting for the hopes and the visions of lived lives and communities (Tuck, 2009).

But it is crucial to recognize that our communities hold the power to begin shifting the discourse away from damage and toward desire and complexity...More importantly, damage can no longer be the *only* way, or even the main way, that we talk about ourselves (Tuck, 2009, p. 422).

Deficit and damage-centered frameworks perpetuate the deficiency in the individual, assuming that the individual is at fault, rather than the broader context within which the individual is located. Even though students from diverse cultural backgrounds have different types of knowledge they bring to educational environments, these ways knowing are not valued in higher education institutions. Capital that is valued is one that is defined by Bourdieu, which are the social networks and economic connections, education, and language that can be acquired through family and schooling (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The assertion, then is that some communities are culturally wealthy and some are poor (Yosso, 2005). White middle-class culture becomes the standard and all other communities are compared to this standard (Yosso, 2005). Thus, cultural capital refers to the accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are valued by privileged groups.

Moving away from Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) deficit framework for cultural capital, Yosso (2005) provides a Community Cultural Wealth model that identifies the cultural resources that students develop in their families and communities and bring to higher education environments (Yosso, 2005); thus, promoting their persistence in higher education. Yosso (2005) argues that Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital has been used to postulate that some communities are culturally wealthy, and others are culturally poor. As such, White, middle class culture is viewed as the standard and other forms of culture are assessed in comparison to the 'norm.' Bourdieu's (1977) cultural capital theory places value on a narrow set of assets and characteristics.

Tara Yosso's (2005) notions of capital focuses on community cultural wealth, which includes an array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts that are often unrecognized or unacknowledged in Communities of Color (see Figure 2.1). Community cultural wealth is a major theme that emerged from the research data and shapes the ways in which study participants maneuver and negotiate university spaces. Moreover, this type of wealth opens new ways of producing and reproducing capital rather than mirroring the current dominant power structure. Drawing from the desire-centered framework and community cultural wealth theory, which provides lenses for valuing multiple ways of knowing and being, this research explores the lived experiences of Southeast Asian college students and the various types of capital they bring to educational environments that contribute to their educational success.

Yosso (2005) argues that, "These forms of capital draw on the knowledges Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom. This CRT approach to education involves a commitment to develop schools that acknowledge the multiple strengths of Communities of Color in order to serve a larger purpose of struggle toward social and racial justice" (Yosso, 2005, p. 82). Tara Yosso's six-part Community Cultural Wealth

model provides a framework for educational leaders to use when interacting with students and their families. Using an assets-based framework, such as the Community Cultural Wealth model, in this research study centers Southeast Asian students’ knowledges, strengths, and agency as they negotiate and navigate higher education spaces. Communities of color nurture six forms of capital in dynamic ways. These forms of capital include, aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance.

Figure 2.1 Illustrates Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model.

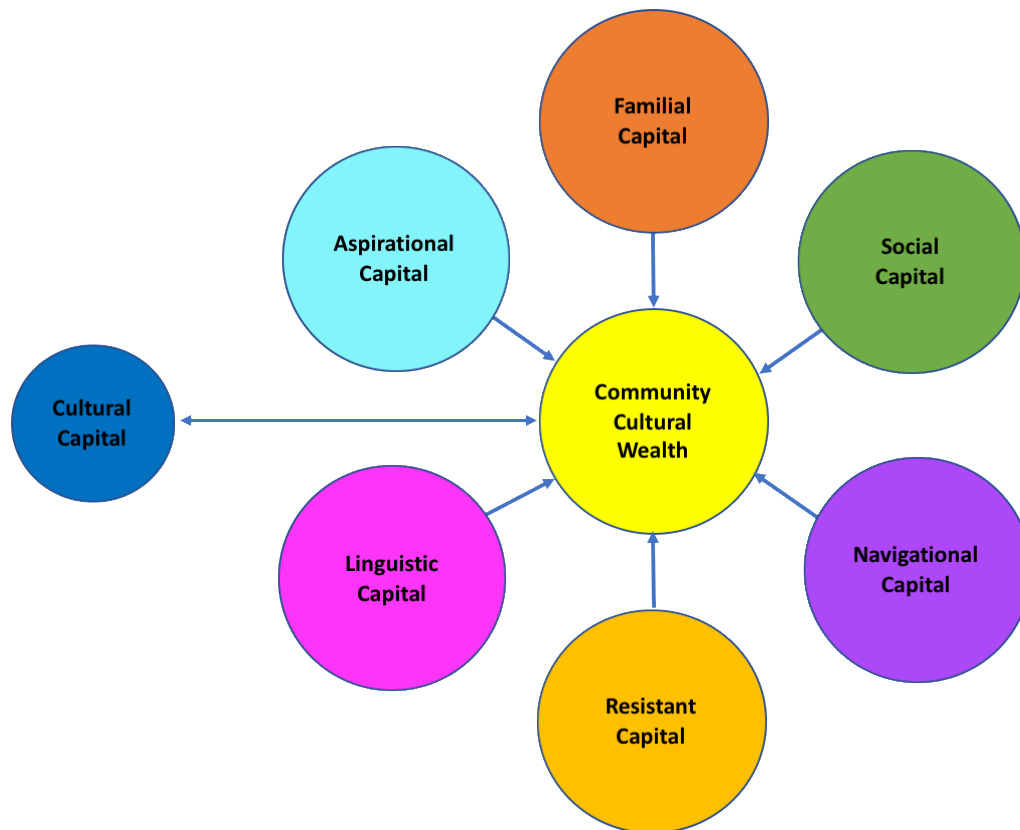


Figure 2.1 Community Cultural Wealth model. Adapted from “Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth” by Yosso, T., 2005, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.

Aspirational capital refers to hopes and dreams for the future that are maintained by Communities of Color in the face of real and perceived barriers (Yosso, 2005). Family stories of



resiliency nurture a culture of possibility and families also maintain high aspirations for their children's future.

Linguistic capital is an aspect of cultural wealth that recognizes the connections between racialized cultural history and language and understands that Students of Color arrive at school with multiple language and communication skills (Yosso, 2005). The majority of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual. One-fifth of those over age five in the U.S. reported speaking a language other than English at home (Marian & Shook, 1999). The benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism begins from early age and continues to old age as the brain processes information more efficiently and positively influences attention and conflict management (Marian & Shook, 1999). Additionally, the policy for many refugees and immigrants was rapid assimilation, which also meant rapid linguistic assimilation (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Moreover, most programs in the U.S. emphasize learning English than they do with the retention of students' primary languages (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Thus, the loss of linguistic diversity means the loss of intellectual diversity, which is a tool for analyzing and synthesizing the world. To lose this tool is to erase perspectives and forget ways of constructing knowledge (Crawford, 2013).

Familial capital is produced and maintained by family members. Cultural knowledge is nurtured among aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and friends and carries a sense of community, memory and cultural intuition. Additionally, family capital models lessons of caring, coping, and wisdom as well as maintaining a health connection to our communities and resources (Yosso, 2005).

Social capital refers to the network of people and community resources (Yosso, 2005). Peer and social contacts are instrumental in providing emotional support in navigating society's

institutions (Yosso, 2005). These social networks can also assist students in identifying job opportunities, scholarships, mental health counseling, legal counseling, and many more campus and community resources. In turn, individuals seeking support through these social networks of peers and community members gave the information and resources back to their social networks (Yosso, 2005).

Resistance capital is defined as the knowledge and skills cultivated through oppositional behaviors that challenges inequality (Yosso, 2005). Solorzano and Bernal (2001) contend that resistance can include different forms of oppositional behavior such as self-defeating or conformist strategies that feed back into systems of subordination. Communities of Color maintain and pass on multiple dimensions of community cultural wealth such as Japanese communities who resisted racism in internment camps and African American mothers who taught their daughters to assert themselves (Yosso, 2005).

Navigational capital is understood as the skills of maneuvering through institutions that historically were (and currently are) not created for Communities of Color (Yosso, 2005). Navigational capital acknowledges the resiliency and ability to sustain high levels of achievement despite stressful encounters in racially-hostile campus environments. Resiliency is defined as “a set of inner resources, social competencies and cultural strategies that permit individuals to not only survive, recover, or even thrive after stressful events, but also to draw from the experience to enhance subsequent functioning (as quoted in Yosso, 2005 by Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000, p. 229). The next section examines the literature on cultural affirmation for Southeast Asian students in higher education.

### **Cultural Affirmation of Southeast Asians**

Because much of the Asian American Pacific Islander literature focuses on deficit thinking and centers the model minority myth, a tool that maintains and preserves whiteness, research and practice should critically focus on who AAPIs are (i.e. what they experience) instead of what they are not (Poon et al., 2015). Prevailing discourse centers the argument that Asian Americans are the model of success for communities of color to follow, and they therefore are not in need of educational services. (Boun & Wright, 2013; Hune & Takeuchi, 2008; Kasinitz, 2006; Kuo, 2015; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Poon, Squire, Kodama & Byrd, 2015). Moreover, the model minority terminology, crafted in the 1960's, was tied to the racialized experiences of Asian Americans, but not groups such as Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asians, who have distinct voices and experiences (Poon et al., 2015).

Maramba and Palmer (2014) examined the distinct voices of Southeast Asian college students, focusing on the saliency of cultural validation and how it shaped their educational trajectories. Using student interviews, they examined the notion of students separating themselves and integrating into the college environment. Cultural validation, as defined by Rendón, includes the recognition, respect, and appreciation of students as well as their families (Maramba and Palmer, 2014, p. 517). Four themes emerged from their data collection: cultural knowledge, cultural familiarity, cultural expression, and cultural advocacy (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). In their findings, participants reported that there were low numbers of students from Southeast Asian backgrounds on their campuses, which influenced how they spoke about cultural expression, advocacy, familiarity, and knowledge (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). As such, this helped them gain cultural knowledge and increased familiarity with their ethnic backgrounds as well as helped to increase their confidence (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). These students also

felt a stronger sense of personal identity after taking such courses (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). Their findings showed that students from Southeast Asian backgrounds experienced cultural validation by participating in ethnic organizations, which helped them feel a sense of belonging on their campuses (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). This research study seeks to help institutions understand what it means to culturally validate students by expanding the focus on the variables that facilitate college success (Maramba & Palmer, 2014).

The study further emphasized the importance of disaggregating the Asian American category in order to unmask the disproportionate educational outcomes for students from Southeast Asian backgrounds as they relate to major differences in language, immigration, and socioeconomic status. Scholars such as Hune and Takeuchi (2008) recommend that schools disaggregate data by ethnic groups to produce a more accurate picture about students' backgrounds and academic outcomes for a more meaningful analysis. Hune and Takeuchi's (2008) study highlights disaggregated data to identify differences across and within Asian American ethnic groups in education. Ngo and Lee (2007) further contend that aggregating data of Asian American student achievement masks the differences in educational achievement and attainment among Asian ethnic groups. Their study contributes to a more nuanced perspective of Southeast Asians students by examining explanations for success and struggle within this population. For example, Lor's (2008) study found that Hmong participants were challenged with academic and social adjustments because of assimilating into a new culture and learning a new language. Hmong participants felt excluded and isolated from mainstream culture. However, through these challenging experiences Hmong participants learned to address and improve academic weaknesses (Lor, 2008). Furthermore, Tang, Kim, and Haviland's (2013) noted that several first-generation Cambodian American students in their study felt unprepared

for college because of the uncertainty of expectations and limited knowledge of college.

Participants drew on aspirational capital to navigate the journey through college (Tang, Kim, & Haviland, 2013). The above studies examined the impact of cultural validation on Southeast Asian college students' sense of belonging and the disaggregation of data to better understand the successes and challenges of this population. In addition to cultural validation, other studies examined the role of cultural community and decreasing cultural dissonance among Southeast Asian college students.

Museus (2015) sought to understand how campuses foster cultural community connections that influence the success of Southeast Asian American college students. In this qualitative study, he used the intercultural perspective, which clarifies that the incongruence between students' home and campus cultures is positively related to the levels of cultural dissonance of students' college experiences, as his conceptual framework for the study. The intercultural theory contends that policies, programs, and practices that can help decrease the amount of cultural dissonance can increase the likelihood of success for Southeast Asian American college students. Hence, this framework was useful for analyzing how campus spaces can be used for students to cultivate connections with their cultural communities.

In sum, research on Southeast Asian college students emphasize the significant role of family and culture (Hune & Takeuchi, 2008; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Museus et al., 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007), hence programs that focus on social support, family support systems, and ethnic communities should be developed in addressing Southeast Asian students' academic and social needs. In addition, research illustrates the importance of cultural affirmation in fostering success among students of color (Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus et al., 2012). Participating in ethnic student organizations and taking courses in ethnic studies programs have been shown to

have a positive impact on college adjustment, engagement, and success among Asian American students (Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus et al., 2012). For example, Kiang (2002, 2009) observed that Asian American studies provided Southeast Asian students with a better understanding of themselves, motivation to succeed and to persist. This next section discusses racial campus climates and their effects on Students of Color.

### **Campus Racial Climate**

There is extensive research on campus racial climate (Garcia, 2016; Harper & Hurtado, 2016; Hurtado, 1992; Kwong & David, 2015; Lundy-Wagner & Winkle-Wagner, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Victorino, Gibson, & Conley, 2013; Yosso et al. 2009) and there is a growing body of research on the impacts of racial campus climate specifically related to Southeast Asian college students (Maramba & Velasquez, 2012; Museus & Truong, 2009; Tang, Kim, & Haviland, 2013; Thor, 2008). Analyzing and understanding campus racial climate is an important part of examining educational experiences of Southeast Asian students to ensure affirming environments they can thrive in.

Early student retention perspectives, such as those from Tinto (2007), emphasized student integration, deriving from a social integrationist perspective. Tinto's integration model theorizes that students who academically and socially integrate into campus communities increase their participation in the school environment, and therefore are more likely to graduate (Tinto, 2007). While students may be more likely to graduate, the theory does not account for the process in which students are integrating into campus communities and the psychological impacts of racism and marginalization they encounter in higher education spaces. The integration model suggests that students who can assimilate into their campus environments have higher chances of academic achievement. However, the perspectives in this model do not explain nor affirm the

experiences of Students of Color and how they must negotiate their home communities with their school community (DeWitz et. al., 2009; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Museus, 2016; Museus et. al., 2013).

Furthermore, the model presumes that integration into white hetero middle-class norm is the goal of college (Quaye & Harper, 2015; Strayhorn, 2012). Quaye and Harper (2005) add campus racial culture to the campus racial climate discourse and argue that most historically White institutions “are founded on deeply embedded Eurocentric values, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the norms and behaviors of faculty, staff, and students on college campuses” (Quaye & Harper, 2015, p. 24). In general, college Students of Color tend to come from cultures with collectivist values, such as Southeast Asian ethnic groups, and institutions that perpetuate individualistic and competitive values create environments in which Students of Color have difficulty engaging, have low levels of satisfaction, and are less likely to succeed (Quaye & Harper, 2015).

Furthermore, cultural incongruence (which refers to the distance between the cultures of students’ campuses and the culture of their homes) and cultural dissonance (which refers to the tension that students from this distance between campus and home life) can shape the experiences of Students of Color (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Quaye & Harper posit that postsecondary educators can increase engagement and success among Students of Color by minimizing cultural dissonance and creating spaces that align with their home values. According to Strayhorn (2012), a sense of belonging becomes more important in new and different environments and in contexts where students may feel marginalized and unsupported. Students’ motivations are diminished and their development is impaired when their needs are not met in educational settings (Strayhorn, 2012).

As such, the college community can be a culturally invalidating environment where Students of Color feel isolated (Solorzano et al., 2009). Extensive research shows that a hostile campus racial climate at historically White institutions negatively affects the experiences, perceptions, and educational outcomes (Garcia, 2016; Hurtado, 1992; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solorzano (2009) define *campus racial climate* as the overall racial environment of the university that has the potential to foster outstanding academic outcomes and graduation rates for all students. Additionally, Allen and Solorzano (2001) identify a positive racial climate as including these four elements: a) the inclusion of students, faculty, and administrators of color, b) a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color, c) programs to support the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of color, and d) a college/university mission that reinforces the college's commitment to pluralism.

Furthermore, a hostile campus racial climate often contributes to poor academic performance and high dropout rates for Students of Color (Allen & Solorzano, 2001). Solorzano et al. (2000) examined undergraduate students' experiences through racial microaggressions. Their findings indicated that students had negative experiences in both academic and social spaces, which led to feelings of self-doubt as well as decreased academic performance. Yosso et al. (2009) focused on Latina/o college students and concluded that these students experienced microaggressions at the interpersonal level, which impacted their stress-levels and academic performance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study applies the concept of counterstories as forms of resistance from critical race theory (CRT) and uses Tara Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) theory as



framing for the research study. CCW grew out of CRT as a framework to critique “deficit theorizing and data that may be limiting by its omission of the voices of People of Color” (p. 75). Yosso (2005) challenges deficit views of Communities of Color and promotes an asset-based model of community cultural capital that focuses on the unique strengths and perspectives of students in higher education. Thus, CCW can offer an approach to this study that challenges systemic factors contributing to deficit thinking and nurtures the rich histories, language, and lives of Southeast Asian communities. Furthermore, CRT and CCW expands the view of one’s accumulated assets and resources (cultural capital) and centers the experiences of Communities of Color in critical historical contexts, revealing an array of valuable knowledge, skills and abilities they possess (Yosso, 2005).

While CCW grew out of CRT, critical race theory moved away from critical legal studies (CLS), a legal movement in the 1970’s (Bell, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1996). CLS scholars (such as Gramsci, Gordon, Unger, Kelman, Gabel, Horwitz, MacKinnon, and Kennedy) critiqued mainstream legal ideology, but failed to include racism in their critique (Critical Legal Studies Movement, 2017). As such, legal scholars of color (such as Bell, Freeman, Matsuda, Williams, and Crenshaw) created CRT beginning with the notion that racism is a permanent fixture of everyday life (Bell, 2002; Hiraldo, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1996). Because racism appears ‘normal’ and embedded in all aspects of society, the strategy for CRT is to unmask and expose racism in all its configurations (Ladson-Billings, 1996).

CRT’s theoretical framework includes the following five tenets: story-telling; the permanence of racism; Whiteness as property; interest convergence; and the critique of liberalism (Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). CRT provides a tool to counter the dominant,

monolithic story and opens up space for knowledge and voices of people of color to emerge (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1996). Storytelling and naming one's own reality are important tools for achieving racial emancipation. CRT also places race at the center of analysis (Maramba & Velasquez, 2012; Yosso et al., 2009). In recognition of the silencing of Southeast Asian student voices, this study is based on counterstorytelling as a critical tool in analyzing higher education's climate when exploring Southeast Asian students' narratives about their educational experiences.

Furthermore, as stated earlier, one of the aims of this study is to center Southeast Asian college students' stories and voices to disrupt their silenced experiences in educational spaces. Rodriguez (2011) argues that silence and silencing are raced, classed, and gendered (as referenced by Montoya, 2000). As such, People of Color are often silenced by a dominant White majority, who maintain racial hegemony. Students of Color are silenced by the White majority and they strategically remain silent for self-protection and self-preservation (Rodriguez, 2011). Silence may not only serve as self-protection, but it may also indicate a refusal to reveal the self (Rodriguez, 2011). Silencing maintains white supremacy. The silencing effects of whiteness are insidious, not readily identifiable, and are continuously present in the academy (Rodriguez, 2011).

Majoritarian stories silence and make assumptions based on negative stereotypes about people of color (perpetuating deficit-thinking). As such, counterstorytelling is a method and tool for challenging majoritarian stories of racial privilege (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). While counterstories can challenge the dominant discourse on race and contribute to the struggle for racial reform, in Solorzano and Yosso (2002), Ikemoto argues that, "By responding to the standard story, we let it dominate the discourse" (p. 136). There are numerous untold stories by

people of color and as Pang (1998) notes, Southeast Asians are “struggling to be heard” (p. 291). Not only do counterstories challenge dominant ideology, they build community among oppressed communities by providing a space to share their realities of lived experiences as well as teaching people how to construct new realities (Rodriguez, 2011).

The control of knowledge and who is included in history or literature is determined by settler colonialism values. Patel argues that “the academy and educational research has codified knowledge as ownable...it is only property for some, namely those whose lineages are already readily visible within the culture” (Patel, 2015, p. 35). Knowledge and knowledge production are therefore owned by dominant white culture and different cultural ways of knowing are not valued in U.S. society. Additionally, people of Southeast Asian ancestry should not be studied solely as statistics, but as humans with voices and stories that they can share through their own words (Takaki, 1989). By listening to Southeast Asian college students’ voices through their stories and counterstories, emerging narratives of their experiences can provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which Southeast Asian college students negotiate identities in predominately white college spaces.

Ladson-Billings notes that “Our notions of race (and its use) are so complex that even when it fails to “make sense” we continue to employ and deploy it” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9). As such, the category of Southeast Asian, from a CRT perspective, contributes to the centering of whiteness. Patel also argues that “Instead of focusing attention on the dysfunctionality required by this societal system and how else people might be in relation to each other, the trend has been to focus...attention on the lower strata, echoing the pattern of erasing to replace” (p. 42). Patel points out the maintenance of dominant narratives when social structures are not critically scrutinized.

Critical race theory advocates a storytelling experience and narratives to honor voices that are often ignored (Bell, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998). By naming one's own reality, marginalized groups can heal from internalized oppression through storytelling, which functions as medicine. Ladson-Billings (1998) points out that when marginalized groups understand their stories of their conditions, they begin to realize how they became oppressed which can lead to less masochistic mental violence that they inflict upon themselves. Delgado and Stefancic contend that, "races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" and they don't have anything to do with one's personality, intelligence, or moral behavior (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Furthermore, the social construct of race negates human variation and it ranks races against one another producing superiority and inferiority among the racial categories.

### **Methods**

This section describes the methods undertaken in this study and begins with a research design that includes the sample strategy, recruitment process, data collection and processing. The steps of analysis are then described in detail. Next, the sample description is presented with descriptive background information of the participants. Lastly, I end with a discussion of my positioning as a researcher relative to the study.

### **Research Design**

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how Southeast Asian college students navigate campus racial climates, a qualitative approach using focus groups and individual interviews was the selected method. Interviews and focus groups provided insight into individual and collective experiences as described by participants as well as contributed to a deeper understanding of Southeast Asian college students' navigational strategies. Qualitative research provides an in-

depth and interpreted understanding of the social world by learning about peoples' histories, circumstances, experiences, and perspectives (Ritchie, Lewis, Nichols, & Ormston, 2014).

Furthermore, both critical race theory and the Community Cultural Wealth framework offered ways to investigate the ways in which Southeast Asian college students used counterstories and forms of capital to resist racism in educational and social spaces. Personal narratives of study participants were centered as a means of promoting liberating and transforming education. Thus, a critical theoretical approach to the research study was used to explore social structures, norms, and inequities (Winkle-Wagner, Lee-Johnson, & Gaskew, 2019).

### **Data Collection Strategy**

**Sampling goal.** According to Bertaux, the smallest acceptable sample size for qualitative research is 15 participants (Bertaux, 1981). Charmaz suggests that 25 participants are adequate for qualitative sample sizes (Charmaz, 2006). Ritchie et al. (2014) contend that qualitative samples are generally small because the type of information that these studies yield is rich in detail with significant information from each unit of data. Qualitative studies can be highly intensive in regards to time and resources. Thus, conducting and analyzing hundreds of interviews would be unmanageable, and therefore sample sizes need to be kept to a reasonably small scale (Ritchie et al., 2014). As such, I set a recruiting goal of 15-25 participants. The inclusion criteria required that participants identify as undergraduates from Southeast Asian backgrounds (Hmong, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Burmese/Myanmar, Mien, Khmer Krom Lao, mixed race, and mixed ethnicities from Southeast Asian backgrounds) and be between the ages of 18-28 at the time of the interview. The average age of college students is 18-24. For the purpose of this study, I included the age criteria of 18-28 to account for transfer students, student

veterans, and students who did not enroll in college after high school (U.S College Demographics, 2012). The age range allowed for varying levels of educational experiences to be shared by participants. While age was not a primary factor in the data analysis, it was necessary to set an age cut-off for recruitment purposes. Furthermore, purposeful sampling was used to ensure that multiple Southeast Asian identities groups were represented in the research.

**Recruitment strategy.** Recruitment and interview procedures were reviewed and approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division. Recruitment procedures were carried out within the University of Washington's tri-campus: Seattle, Bothell, and Tacoma. Participants were recruited by targeted outreach using UW Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW) and Student Database (SDB) to collect contact information for students who identify as Southeast Asian (Hmong, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Lao, and Burmese/Myanmar). Students who identify as mixed race and mixed ethnicities were included in the recruitment. Recruitment included posting printed flyers in areas targeting students from Southeast Asian ancestry, such as the Ethnic Cultural Center, Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity Education Opportunities Program (EOP), EIP/McNair, the American Ethnic Studies Department. Flyers and recruitment materials were also distributed electronically through email lists and social networking sites of Southeast Asian affinity groups.

Flyers and emails included an outline of the study goals and procedures and provided my contact information. Contact with participants was made via email, which included scheduling individual or group interviews. Each participant was asked for their preferences for an individual or group interview. All forty-five interested individuals were not included and the first 24 individuals who responded to the recruitment materials were selected to participate. Twenty-four participants were recruited from email list serves provided by the Office of

Minority Affairs and Diversity (19), social networks of Southeast Asian affinity groups (2), and word of mouth (3).

**Interview structure.** All interviews were completed between November 2018 and December 2018 and took place in private meeting rooms on two university campuses. I conducted four focus group interviews (one group comprised seven participants and three groups comprised three participants each) and eight individual interviews. After I convened the first focus group with seven participants, the time exceeded one hour, and several participants had to leave to attend their classes. Learning from this experience, I added an additional researcher, who identifies as South Asian and who was trained to conduct one focus group with three participants to allow for more time for respondents to answer the interview questions. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. Interviews began with reviewing and signing the consent forms, which informed participants of the various risks and benefits of the study as well as their rights as a research participant. After participants provided their consent for participation and audio recording, the remainder of the interview was audio recorded.

Interviews followed a semi-structured guide (see Appendix 1) with the purpose of eliciting real life examples as experienced by the participants. Participants were asked 10 questions about their experiences related to how they navigate campus racial climates that lead to their educational success. Interview questions were adapted from Allen and Solorzano's (2001) Racial Climate Protocol Questions. Additionally, open-ended questions were posed in order for participants to raise other topics of interest not addressed by the interview guide. Interviews were recorded on a cell phone with participants' permission. The interview was flexible enough to accommodate follow-up questions unique to each participant. Many participants commented that they wanted to participate in the study because they had never seen a research study focused

on the experiences of Southeast Asian college students. Moreover, they expressed that they have not been asked to share their stories before. Several interviews lasted for more than an hour because participants were eager to share their experiences.

**Data processing.** I sent audio recordings to a transcription service after the focus groups and individual interviews were conducted. Transcription and analysis took place simultaneously as I reviewed notes that I took after each interview was completed. Transcripts for individual interviews ranged in length from 9-21 single-spaced pages (Mean=14.63). Transcripts for focus groups ranged in length from 11-28 single-spaced pages (Mean=18.50). Body language, gestures, emotions, and utterances from participants were recorded in the researcher's journal. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they would be willing to review their transcriptions used in the research study's presentation of the data. All participants agreed to review the transcriptions used. In cases where I identified gaps in an interview, I re-contacted participants to pose follow-up questions or ask for clarification. All participants gave permission for follow-up contact. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts and entered into a code book.

### **Data Analysis Strategy**

**Analytic process.** Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. Immediately following each interview, I documented participant summaries in one or two paragraphs, including key demographic information, highlights and themes from the interview, and reflexive comments regarding my own emotional and reflective reactions to the interviews. I added to these participant summaries if new themes or reflections on my own actions, thoughts, or emotions became apparent while reviewing my notes. Demographic information was compiled into a single table, presented in Table 1 (see page 41). After interviews were



transcribed, I carried out multiple close reads of each interview and began to make analytic notes, not yet engaging in the coding process. I then began to use open coding. According to Corbin and Strauss (2014), open coding is exploratory and leads to concept development. Asking questions helps the researcher make constant comparisons, and answers to these questions as well as the results of the comparisons validate original concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). As such, I looked for what was being said and done by participants, emotions they expressed, and questioning why they said certain words. I examined each interview doing a detailed line-by-line analysis and looked for the problems that participants were dealing with as well as their racial encounters in educational settings. I used a code book to organize excerpts from the transcriptions and began line-by-line coding. Codes were revised multiple times after each reading of the transcripts. I then explored how participants framed success as well as how they identified strategies for navigating in college.

After carrying out these analyses, I began to see themes emerge across certain participants' navigational strategies. These steps were carried out in sequential order, but with the flexibility to return to earlier steps to make additions and clarifications as needed in a hermeneutic process, moving between data as a whole and individual and focus group transcripts or excerpts. The analysis was informed by existing research in Southeast Asian college student experiences in higher education, but also allowed new themes to emerge from the data.

**Positionality.** The researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative research. To this end, the researcher's identity is central to understanding the researcher's role in each stage of the research process (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2015). Positionality and social location are significant components of the researcher's identity. Positionality refers to the "multitude roles and relationships that exist between the researcher and participants within and in relationship to

the research setting, topic, and broader contexts that shape it” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Researchers must also be aware of their internal biases and be cognizant to how those biases might influence the research process to enhance the trustworthiness of the data.

My prior knowledge of Southeast Asian college student populations is informed by my years of academic study, prior research interviews, and my work with a course I developed and taught that explored Southeast Asian history, culture, politics, and ethnic identities. Journaling allowed me to process the influence of this prior knowledge and my own positioning as a Cambodian American and researcher throughout the research process. Thematic insights were shared with my academic supervisors, providing an opportunity for me to learn new perspectives and to have my own assumptions about the data challenged. During the interview process, I openly identified as Cambodian American and shared stories of my family’s immigration to the U.S. with participants when they inquired about my background. Building rapport with participants and finding points of connection with our shared cultural backgrounds may have compelled participants to share more of their experiences with me.

A relevant example is when one participant asked to continue our conversation after the interview ended. She informed me that she had not encountered a Southeast Asian staff member on campus and expressed that our conversation was refreshing. Several participants were eager to talk about their experiences with me because they were generally not asked about them and they didn’t want to talk with their family members about their college experiences. While participants felt a high level of comfort with me and the sense of commonality may have created safety and openness with the interviews, I reminded myself of my privilege as an insider and the proximity of my experiences in relation to the participants and being vigilant in making sure that I wasn’t imposing my thoughts onto participants while they responded to interview questions.

### **Sample Description**

Twenty-four students who identify as Southeast Asian participated in the study. Their racial and ethnic identities are presented from the participants own words in response to asking them how they racially and ethnically identify. Racial and ethnic identities of the participants ranged from Cham American/Asian American (1), Asian/Cambodian/Southeast Asian (1), Cambodian American (1), Vietnamese (7), Vietnamese American/Asian (1), Javanese Cham (1), Vietnamese American (4), Chinese Vietnamese (2), Cambodian (2), Mien/Lao/Thai (1), Vietnamese/Norwegian/Swedish (1), Asian American/Cambodian/Vietnamese/Cham (1), and Filipina (1). Presenting the data in this way does not subsume participants' racial and ethnic identities in the AAPI category allowing for a more accurate picture of how participants view themselves since some listed multiple identities.

Participants' ages ranged from 18-29 (Mean=21). The significance of this age range meant that there was a mentor in the group, Elizabeth, who offered advice to her peers during the first convened focus group. Eighteen were born in the U.S. and six were born in Vietnam. All 18 participants who were born in the U.S. grew up in the area near the public four-year institution. The six participants who were born in Vietnam recently immigrated to the U.S. within the last four years. Participants also primarily came from first generation backgrounds with the exception of two participants, whose parents attended college. Additionally, participants' majors include Undecided (4), Communication (2), Computer Science (2), Sociology (2), Public Health (2), Philosophy (1), Biochemistry (1), Political Science (2), Environmental Engineering (1), Anthropology (1), Business (3), Medical Anthropology and Global Health (1), and Computer Engineering (1). Year in school included three in their first year, three in their second year, 11 in their third year, and seven in their fourth year.

Additional biographical descriptions are provided for the following participants who are quoted more than once at the time of the study:

<sup>1</sup>\***Chanthrea** is an 18 year-old Cham and Muslim female, who was born in the U.S. and her parents immigrated to the U.S. from Vietnam. During the interview, she wore a head scarf. She is also an active member in the Khmer Student Association and works at the Ethnic Cultural Center. This is Chanthrea's first year at the university and she was encouraged by her adviser and her friends to enroll in a FIG (Freshman Interest Group). FIG courses are 2-3 courses taken together by a group of 15-20 students to assist students during their first year with building a strong academic foundation, experiencing a small sense of community within a large university community, and exploring professional pathways (University of Washington, First Year Programs, 2019). She's currently an undecided student who is thinking about Public Health as a possible major.

\***Jacqueline** is a 20 year-old Javanese Cham American Muslim female, whose parents immigrated to the U.S. from Cambodia. Because she grew up in a low-income neighborhood, her father drove her to schools in affluent neighborhoods in order for her to have a better education. She is in her third and last year at the university because she took Running Start courses in high school. Running Start allows 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders to take courses at community colleges where students earn both high school and college credits for these courses (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2019). She is majoring in Public Health and hopes to pursue graduate school but would like to work first to earn money for her parents.

\***Gina** is a 21 year-old Vietnamese female and her parents immigrated from Vietnam. She is currently majoring in Computer Science and finds the departmental environment to be

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<sup>1</sup> Asterisk (\*) indicates individual interviews.

challenging for her as a female of color in a white male dominated field. She has had several mentors in her major who provided support and guidance. Her father works at a sewage plant and her mother is a retired accountant. Neither of her parents attended college. Gina is interested in learning more about her family's history and her cultural identity.

**Derek** is a 24 year-old Asian American and ethnically Vietnamese male. He came to the U.S. 12 years ago. He is a fourth year student majoring in Anthropology. He is also a first-generation college student as neither of his parents attended college. Derek took a gap year and went to Vietnam to learn more about himself and to figure out what he wanted to pursue in college. Derek is interested in understanding a deeper sense of purpose.

**\*Sopheap** is a 19 year-old Cambodian American male and is a second year student who is thinking about pursuing a major in Biology. Sopheap is involved with many on and off-campus activities. He is a part of a cohort-based program that promotes academic success, civic engagement and leadership development for undergraduate males of color. He is also part of a Christian fellowship and an active member of the Khmer Student Association. He lives at home and commutes to school. Sopheap takes advantages of campus resources such as the Instructional Center for tutoring. He meets with his adviser on a regular basis. Both of his parents attended four-year colleges.

**Travis** is a 21 year-old Asian American and Cambodian-Vietnamese male. He is a second year student majoring in Computer Engineering. He is a first-generation college student. He is part of the Asian Pacific Islander Club on campus. He is aware that he is the first in his family to attend college and feels that he is a role model for his cousins and brother to follow in his footsteps. He grew up in a predominantly white community and thought that he would find more peers who shared his cultural identity at the university.

**Howard** is a 21 year-old Vietnamese-American male third year student in Political Science. He is a transfer student from a community college and this is his first quarter at the university. He had a difficult time transitioning from 30 people in his classes to 200. His father was born during the time of the Vietnam War. Howard takes advantage of the resources at the university. He grew up in an upper-middle class white neighborhood. He also belongs to a Vietnamese American FB community.

**Lavin** is a 21 year-old Cambodian male student in his third year in Communication. He has a relaxed disposition, a matter-of-fact attitude, a great sense of curiosity. During the interview, he asked clarifying questions to help him better understand terminology (i.e. first generation) that other participants were using. Lavin is reflective on why he is in college and appreciates the opportunity to be at the university. While he is not as involved in student clubs, he is aware that the university provides cultural spaces for students to gather.

**Matthew** is an 18 year-old male Mien Lao Thai student in his first year and is undecided. He is interested in Human Centered Design & Engineering as a possible major. Matthew appreciates that the university has several cultural clubs. However, he is aware that there is a lack of representation with Mien and Lao students on campus and as a result, he feels isolated. He recognizes that the lack of cultural representation and being first generation has impacted the way he navigates campus.

**\*Pisay** is a 21 year-old Cambodian female student in her fourth year in Communication. Her family immigrated from Cambodia and she was born in the U.S. She is a first generation college student and convinced her parents to let her attend college. She is an active member of the Khmer Student Association. She spends most of her time in the Ethnic Cultural Center and

contributes much of her success to the community that she has there. She also works in an academic department on campus and has a happy disposition.

**Elizabeth** is a 29 year-old Vietnamese female transfer student in her third year in Environmental Engineering. Elizabeth lived in Singapore for 10 years before she moved to the U.S. with her two brothers. She and her brothers are adjusting to the language and culture of the U.S. This is her first quarter on campus and when she arrived she participated in a tribal journey through an academic department on campus. From this experience, she found several connections to Native American people such as the sense of community and family, which are central values of Southeast Asian cultures.

**\*Fina** is a 22 year-old Vietnamese-American female in Sociology. Her parents immigrated from Vietnam and she is first generation. She lives off-campus and commutes to school on the bus for two hours each day. She lives with her partner and two roommates. Fina grew up in a predominantly White neighborhood and was excited to see more Southeast Asian students on campus. She would like to take advantage of the resources and student clubs on campus, but she has to rely on the bus schedule to get her home.

**Monica** is a 20 year-old Vietnamese female and is a third year student majoring in Public Health. Monica uses resources on campus such as the Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity (OMA&D) advising. She is a first-generation college student and has found her community with OMA&D. Monica is involved with Southeast Asian initiatives on campus and is aware of the struggles that Southeast Asian students face when trying to access resources from the university.

Table 1. *Participant Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Major	Year in School
<sup>2</sup> *Chanthrea	F	18	Cham	Undecided	First
*Pisay	F	21	Cambodian	Communication	Fourth
*Sopheap	M	19	Cambodian American	Undecided	Second
*Gina	F	21	Vietnamese	Computer Science	Fourth
*Fina	F	22	Vietnamese American	Sociology	Fourth
*Jacquelyn	F	20	Javanese Cham	Public Health	Third
*Anna	F	18	Vietnamese American	Undecided	First
*Bethany	F	21	Vietnamese	Sociology	Fourth
Candace	F	20	Chinese Vietnamese	Computer Science	Second
Patrick	M	20	Vietnamese	Philosophy	Third
Minh	F	20	Vietnamese	Biochemistry	Fourth
Howard	M	21	Vietnamese American	Political Science	Third
Linh	F	25	Chinese Vietnamese	Physics	Third
Veronica	F	20	Cambodian	Political Science	Third
Elizabeth	F	29	Vietnamese	Environmental Engineering	Third
Monica	F	20	Vietnamese	Public Health	Third
Lavin	M	21	Cambodian	Communication	Third
Derek	M	24	Vietnamese	Anthropology	Third
Matthew	M	18	Mien/Lao/Thai	Undecided	First
Maya	F	26	Norwegian/Swedish/ Vietnamese	Business	Third
Holly	F	21	Vietnamese American	Medical Anthropology and Global Health	Fourth
Travis	M	21	Cambodian/ Vietnamese/Cham	Computer Engineering	Second
Natalie	F	20	Filipina	Business and Global Studies	Third
Vinh	F	20	Vietnamese American	Business	Third

<sup>2</sup> An asterisk indicates individual interview participants. No asterisk indicates focus group participants.



## Findings

Storytelling is a critical race theory method used to deeply think about historical and present-day racism and injustice that shape the experiences of students of color in higher education (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) use counterstories to tell the stories of those experiences that have not been told. The findings of this study revealed some of the challenges faced by Southeast Asian students in higher education settings through their stories as they continued to persist and succeed. The research data showed that participants primarily defined success in relation to performing academically well in school such as earning a good GPA, getting into a good major, and graduating. Moreover, participants experienced hostile campus racial climates in various ways such as being excluded in the classroom, microaggressions, lack of belonging, omission from the curriculum, and racial jokes from their peers. The following were key findings from the data. Two major themes of how students experienced racism were identified from the data. They included the following: (a) academic experiences with racism and (b) peer experiences with racism.

**Academic experiences with racism.** The first theme represented the responses from participants regarding their academic experiences with racism in college spaces and the damaging impacts it has on their learning. Three subcategories were found in the data analysis. These included (a) classroom exclusion and silencing, (b) omission from campus processes and curriculum, and (c) linguistic discrimination in the classroom.

*Classroom exclusion and silencing.* Several participants discussed feelings of exclusion and silencing in the classroom. The following examples were from participants who discussed these feelings in more depth than other participants. Chanthrea experienced exclusion in her Freshman Interest Group (FIG) course. She recalled the following:

I went to a universal high school in Seattle and there was barely any white people there. But, here in my FIG, there's actually white people here. But, I feel like these group of girls, or maybe they were already friends, but they already formed a group and I was like okay. So I'm kinda like the outlier sometimes, but it's okay because I don't need that many friends.

Chanthrea attended a racially diverse high school and when she entered the college environment, she was not used to being in a classroom with more white students. She was aware of the dynamics in the classroom as students grouped themselves according to their social preferences.

Similarly, Jacqueline also expressed exclusion in the classroom. She commented that when the professor in a particular course she took asked students to get into groups, she noticed that several White female students consistently formed groups together. She explained the following:

I feel like being left out of study group, maybe, because they all lived at U-dub, it was a group of white people. They all lived at U-dub where they had more resources to connect with each other and I feel like they would always communicate with each other first before connecting with me. So I feel like being left out of conversations.

She further added that her feelings of discomfort and othering in the classroom impacted her learning. She stated the following:

I feel like being the other, visually, as part of the classroom but not really feeling like it was home or like a safe space, I feel like that was definitely something that distracted me from my learning when it should have been about the learning only.

Chanthrea and Jacqueline both experienced exclusion in the classroom and either dismissed the exclusive practices or were silenced from fully participation for fear of being misunderstood and misinterpreted.

*Omission from campus processes and curriculum.* Other forms of exclusion were present in campus processes. Another participant, Gina, shared this experience:

I applied to like this hackathon and the racial categories they gave or the ethnic categories that they gave, they said for Asian, and underneath was South Asian and East Asian and that's it. And I'm not either of those. And there's more than just South Asian and East Asian. So, I wrote 'Other' and then I put in Southeast to make a point that I'm not either of those. So, I think small instances like that where you're just not recognized.

Gina was aware of not seeing herself represented on the hackathon application form that her department created and she made it a point to alert the selection committee that her ethnic group was not represented. Participants such as Gina saw these forms of exclusion or omission as "small instances," yet they were noticeable and she responded by including her identity on the form. Omission was further expressed when participants discussed the lack of racial and ethnic representation in the curriculum as well as the missed learning opportunities for rich dialogue related to Southeast Asian histories. One participant, Derek expressed the following:

Yeah. In term of awareness in the classroom, Southeast Asian students can make a big contribution in terms of their own personal experience. In terms of being first gen, coming from war, trauma. Those things are not often talked about in the classroom. It's mostly...I don't know, it just seems like people forgot there was a Vietnam War and that's how we're here. In the classroom, I feel like I always have to be the one to bring that up. If we are in a politic class that talked about politics, I would have to connect that to the

current issues we are facing today, which is deportation and war in other countries but similar patterns of what happened to us that created the condition for us to be here.

Despite the silences in the curriculum regarding diverse voices being represented, Derek inserted his voice into the curriculum and connected his personal experiences with the content of the class. He was aware that in order for his racial and ethnic identities to be visible and represented in the classroom, he had to contribute his perspective in the Eurocentric curriculum. By not including diverse voices in the classroom, identities were erased, perpetuating ahistorical curriculum. Derek further explained the benefits of learning about the presence of Southeast Asians in the U.S., which helped him connect to understanding what brought him to college as well.

We are as Southeast Asians students are not as connected to our history, in the sense that we don't really know why we are here. It's because of war and because of genocide, certain policy, that was the reason why we're here in America. I feel like a lot of us don't know that, know why. That makes us feel lost in the sense that we say we're Southeast Asian, but what does that really mean? I feel like knowing, the why, has been helpful for me.

As Derek pointed out, learning about why Southeast Asians came to the U.S. was pivotal in helping him understand his cultural identity. Derek's words were echoed by several of the participants in the study who expressed a desire to learn more about their cultural identities and their families' journey to the U.S. Gina reflected on how much she didn't know about her family's experiences as refugees and how these experiences might have affected how she grew up in the U.S. and the impacts in college. She expressed the following:

So I always knew that both my parents were refugees, but I never knew what that meant until college. I think in the last couple years I've realized how that is so impactful to everything. Like how I've been raised and my time here too. I don't know, I'm still trying to search for more information about all of that. I want to take more - there's this one class that I was really excited to take next quarter because there's a professor in the American ethnic studies department who's in it. And she teaches about all of that stuff and I just thought that was super cool because I don't think I've ever been taught any of that stuff formally.

Similar to Gina, Chanthrea was also searching for more information about her family's history and journey to the U.S. She heard stories about her family through her cousins and noted that her father didn't share as many stories with her. She relayed the following:

Both my parents are from Vietnam. I don't know, he hopped a lot in different countries. He doesn't tell the stories so I wouldn't know. I'm just like, dang. So sometimes I have to hear it from my cousins 'cause they're older so they probably heard it before but then maybe my dad or my aunts got tired of repeating the same story.

Another participant, Sopheap, who identified as Cambodian American and a second year student, who took Khmer language classes, relayed that the Khmer Language class was under threat of being discontinued. He expressed that students fought to get the course listed. He explained the following:

Once you get to high school, you have the ability to learn French, Spanish, American Sign Language, but that's very limited. So, I guess, that's the biggest deterrent for us, is we're under the threat of losing our ability to learn what connects us back to where we came from.

For Sopheap, the value of learning the Khmer language was the ability to connect and maintain his cultural roots as well as bridge generations. He expressed that he wanted to, "...speak to my grandma at some point in time and understand what she's saying." He also wanted his younger cousins to learn the Khmer language because they were third generation Khmers. Like Sopheap, most participants were aware of their racial and ethnic identities being omitted in educational practices, and nonetheless made themselves visible on campus.

*Linguistic discrimination in the classroom.*

"To me, being American is, at least from our society, is you're white and you speak English." -Howard

Howard's words illustrated the notion of being American as assimilating into the dominant culture and speaking the dominant language. Moreover, Bethany, who was a fourth year Vietnamese student noted that,

Being born here and growing up in the United States. I think I had a lot of American ideals pushed onto me. I definitely had more experience speaking English than I do Vietnamese just 'cause of the...being immersed in American schooling.

For participants who recently immigrated to the U.S., several experienced language discrimination in the classroom from peers. Linh, who identified as a 25 year-old Chinese Vietnamese female and was a third year student in Physics, felt as if she didn't belong in her classes as a result of being the only one raised in Vietnam in most of her classes. She explained the following:

Most of my class, I'm the only one raised Asian over there. Yeah. Sometimes I have the feeling like I don't want to be there. It's really weird. And especially when I have to give a presentation or something, yeah. It's terrible. Especially when right before or after the

class, they maybe discuss, or talking about a joke or something, I totally don't know what they're talking about, because I'm not grow up there.

Not growing up in the U.S. added an additional layer of isolation for Linh and a diminished sense of belonging in the classroom. Additionally, Elizabeth described a lack of engagement on campus when she experienced language discrimination and bullying in the classroom. She described the following:

... a lot times, when I do presentations or anything like that, I kind of have some mispronunciations and I kind of shy away from speaking in class because there was a point in time that people made were making fun of me for the way I speak...Also, because I didn't really feel equipped to be in college in terms of reading, writing. I don't know, and that's just in my second language. I just didn't really feel like I have a foundation to actually engage on campus.

The impact of a hostile classroom environment that devalues the diverse languages that students bring to college campuses can push students, such as Linh and Elizabeth, to disengage in academic settings. Another participant, Vinh, who identified as a 25 year-old Vietnamese American and was a fourth year student in Business, pushed herself to learn English to become a better speaker. She also experienced people making fun of her while speaking in class. This experience pushed her to further assimilate. She explained the following:

English was not my first language, so when I came to United States, I start from scratch. So I didn't know English at all, and so I had to go to ESL classes to learn English. And so a lot of times, when I do presentations or anything like that, I kind of have some mispronunciation and I kind of shy away from speaking in class because there was a point in time that people were making fun of me for the way I speak and so ... but then I

had this mentality that I had to overcome this so that I can speak better and assimilate in the American culture. So I have no one other than myself to depend on, and yeah.

Moreover, language discrimination caused participants to feel ashamed of their culture. Howard stated the following:

I'm starting to accept my culture, like this is who I am, I'm Vietnamese-American, but I used to be ashamed, especially speaking Vietnamese in public. I used to be ashamed, because people would be like, "Oh, why do you sound like cat?"

### **Peer experiences with racism**

The second theme represented peer experiences with racism, including the following four categories of responses: (a) racial stereotypes, (b) racial microaggressions, (c) racial jokes and slurs, and (d) racial and ethnic group dynamics.

*Racial Stereotypes.* Approximately half of the participants discussed the invisibility they experienced and lack of resources as a result of being aggregated within the Asian American & Pacific Islander racial category. Monica noted that as a result of being aggregated in the AAPI category, resources such as scholarships are limited:

I think another challenge is that since we're under the umbrella of Asian, that we're often not considered an unrepresented minority. The resources are more limited because we are considered a majority sometimes. That makes it harder if you wanted to apply for other scholarships or apply for an opportunity. You won't be able to be qualified because of that little statement. That makes you feel like they don't recognize the fact that you may be first gen or that you're low-income, or that you are first time going to school at all type-of-thing. That gives an obstacle, especially when your parents don't know what you're really doing sometimes.



Monica highlighted the barriers to accessing important resources when Southeast Asian populations are rendered invisible from being lumped into one category. She further pointed out that Southeast Asian stories are neglected because of the AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) categorization and that this makes it difficult for university administrators to understand this population. She stated that,

It's not fair to expect that we're going to do well just because we're Asian, no, Southeast Asian, which is a totally different experience and mind set and family dynamic that isn't the same for different types of Asians and different ethnicities. It makes it very difficult to do super well. Also, the fact that I'm not a minority and all those types of issues that we face because of that type of stereotype that we have to face every day.

Lavin agreed with Monica and stated the following:

Yeah, I'm going to say the same thing or similar. Trying to hold Southeast Asians to the same standard of model minority is a little unfair. Not all Asians, just physically, like Southeast Asians, we don't come from technology or money or comfort. We come from war, violence and poverty and all that. To hold all of us to the same standards kind of discourages a lot of us.

Lavin's point highlights some characteristics unique to refugee populations. As previously mentioned, Southeast Asians have low postsecondary attainment (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2011). Many of the participants in the study were from first-generation, low-income backgrounds. The disaggregation of data was that much more important in accurately identifying which students were in high need of services and resources. For Matthew, being first-generation created gaps in his academic exploration. He expressed the following:

One of my biggest obstacles was definitely the fact that I was the first person in my family to attend this kind of prestigious school and the fact that none of my other family has experience in higher education. It was a big gap to start exploring academics by myself because I had no other people I was close to, to really get advice from.

Pisay expressed that her parents didn't want her to go to college. Unlike most of the participants in the study who encouraged their children to go to college and provided moral support for them, Pisay had to convince her parents to attend. She conveyed the following:

I'd have to say being first generation in my family to go to a university or secondary education because my parents didn't know the process of applying to college or just going to college or the stress that I'm going through while I'm here, or my siblings don't really know because they also didn't go to school. My parents actually told me not to go to college after high school. They didn't see the benefits of it or the point of me going or why I would want to spend money to stay in school when I could just go straight to work and make money.

Additionally, Travis expressed his experiences with the fictional myth that all Asians are high academic achievers from his peers:

And now that I'm going into a STEM field, they're like, "Oh, of course you are." And there's no two ways about it. It's like I do well in school, because you're Asian. If I do bad, they're like, "Why are you doing bad? I thought you're Asian." And that's really big because the peers can be a support system, but I think they're also I think my biggest obstacle because of how they perceive me and how they just project this image of myself that I know is false.

Matthew also noted the stereotype of Asian Americans primarily pursuing STEM majors and made the following comment:

I would like to say as an individual who's pursuing more of the, who wishes to pursue more of the English and Humanities, there will be some stereotypes going against me, is that Asians aren't good at English, they should stick to STEM fields and stuff like that.

Holly, who identified as a 21 year-old Vietnamese American female and was a fourth year student who was originally in a STEM major and is switched to a Medical Anthropology and Global Health major. She noted the following experience of the harmful impact the stereotype had on her decision to switch her major:

You're Asian, why aren't you doing well? In some instances, just solely because of your race you're not considered a minority...During my first two years I was always so stressed out, so anxious, so depressed and I decided I couldn't do this anymore for the sake of my mental health so I switched majors to medical anthropology and so I had to have a talk with some of my scholarship organizations because you have to let them know that you're not doing a science major anymore.

Howard echoed other participants' sentiments regarding the model minority stereotype and the greater pressure to perform well academically. He realized that his experience was not isolated and that other participants experienced higher expectations that were placed on them as well by peers and professors. He described the following in reference to the higher academic expectations from his professors:

I noticed that when my peers ask for extension, they usually get it. But I had an emergency. It wasn't too bad, but like, most teachers I had, especially when they're white, I notice I would get a higher expectation from them. I get less excuse, less passes

to go through. And I always thought my experience was isolated, but it seems like you guys experience that extra higher standards, extra expectation that they set on us, too.

There was a sense from participants that they were tired of hearing the same messages and perceptions about high achieving AAPI groups and felt greater pressure to perform at higher academic levels. Additionally, when discussing stereotypes in the focus group, Minh, who identified as a 20 year-old female Vietnamese student in her fourth year in Biochemistry, offered a strategy of responding sarcastically to stereotypical comments. She expressed that her strategy was to accept the stereotype. For example, she recalled an experience she had while on the bus: “Like one person comes up to me on the bus and say, “Ah, Asians are really good at math.” And I tell them that, Yes, yes we are. We are taking over the world.” Minh’s approach of dealing with stereotypes is with sarcasm. Additionally, Natalie, who identified as Filipina and was a third year student in Business and Global Studies commented that, “I know people make fun of Asians saying, “Oh, you always get straight As, oh, you have to do this. There's an expectation.”

The prevailing myth of Asian Americans as a high achieving group permeates this society and puts harmful pressure on students, such as Travis, to exceed and meet the expectations of being a “model minority.” The “success propaganda” emerged in the 1960’s and was a departure from the previous stereotypes depicting Asians as foreign contaminants and yellow hordes that threatened to invade the U.S. (Yonemura Wing, 2007). The model minority myth has been used as a racial wedge between Whites and People of Color and has served as a tool for anti-black campaigns (Poon et al., 2015; Sue et al., 2007; Yonemura Wing 2007). Asians are presumed to be White when convenient (Martinez, 2017). As Travis noted, peers can provide a supportive network in college and conversely, they can contribute to a hostile campus climate with their beliefs in the model minority myth.

*Racial Microaggressions.* Racial microaggressions are subtle verbal and non-verbal insults or assaults directed toward People of Color and are often carried out unconsciously (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). Many participants also experienced microaggressions and were asked questions such as *what are you? And where are you from?* When asked if participants had experienced racism, most of them paused before answering the question. Several participants expressed that they haven't experienced blatant racism and used terms such as "not outright," "not explicit," and "not in your face" racism. Several participants responded that they haven't experienced any racism. One participant, Derek, couldn't remember and stated, "I can't remember. There are, but I'm just not remembering."

Overt and obvious racist acts are more easily identifiable than microaggressions that seem vague (Sue et al., 2007). When I probed further with some examples, participants immediately affirmed that they had experienced subtle forms of racism in the context of microaggressions. Veronica, who identified as a 20 year-old Cambodian female and was a third year student in Political Science, expressed the following:

I didn't even think about like people asking me that, because it's so like something I'm used to. It's like a norm to me, to expect...like I met my conservative white friend's family and they were like, "So where are you from?" And I was like, "I'm from Seattle. I was born in Seattle. My family is from Cambodia. I am Cambodian." But it totally glossed over me.

Patrick, who identified as a 20 year-old Vietnamese male and was a third year student in Philosophy responded to Veronica by stating the following, "I've never gotten like, 'Where are you from?' I've never gotten that, but like, 'Oh wow, your English is really good.' I'm like, 'Yeah, okay.'"

Several participants further described moments of essentialism. For instance, Maya, who identified as a 26 year-old Norwegian Swedish Vietnamese female student and was in her third year in Business, explained the following:

I feel like the 21st century person is not just one race and I think that's starting to be more celebrated and embraced and it's a really interesting topic to discuss with other people and now when I mention, if I mention Vietnamese, they're like, oh my God, I love the food there, or like, that's on my destination list.

Matthew chimed in after Maya's comment and sarcastically added, "Pho? I love pho."

Several participants further discussed being mistaken with their Asian American friends, when teachers misnamed them. These participants noted that this was common practice in the classroom and one participant, Anna, who identified as a first year Vietnamese American female student and was in her first year, shared the following: "All my life I've been mixed up with Asians. Constantly. I just accept it now. Now my name is Mackenzie, now my name is Iris. Yeah. All the time." Being mistaken for another student was a common experience among Southeast Asian participants and perpetuates the notion of Asian Americans as a monolithic group.

In addition to the perception that all Asian Americans look the same, participants discussed having their names mispronounced. Pisay commented that "Sometimes, people don't even try, I guess, to say my name." She stated that she is brushed aside after she tells people how to pronounce her name. Chanthrea further noted that when teachers mispronounced her name, she gave them a "pass" to make it easier for them.

*Racial jokes and racial slurs.* Several participants encountered racial jokes and racial slurs by their peers. Fina said that she was made fun of at her dorm for being Asian.

When I was living at the dorm, I would have friends over and they would make fun of me for being Asian. Yeah. And I'd be like, "No, leave my dorm. At least I live here and I can just kick you out." I don't know. It's just like things that they would say you're being too sensitive about silly jokes. Like, "Ha ha, you're Asian," and just repeating that over and over. It just doesn't mean anything. But also, it's why are they doing it.

She confronted the people who made the racist joke by kicking them out of her dorm room.

Additionally, Lavin experienced racial slurs and his strategy was to confront the people who said them.

Last spring, towards the end of the quarter I was going with a friend, going to look for a room just to stay. I was going from room to room, and there was this one room I peeked my head in. There was just two people in there, a guy and a girl, and I was like, "Oh, so this is obviously not available." I headed out, kept walking and then I hear the door open behind me. I don't remember exactly what he did, but he made a sound, like a racially charged noise. I don't know, it could have been like, "Ching, Chong." I just stopped and walked back to him and confronted him.

Lavin's opposition to derogatory language positioned him to transform the environment that he was in by disrupting and resisting the racist slur that dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during a time of anti-Chinese sentiment and the "yellow peril" (Chow, 2014). Furthermore, this mocking contributed to the perpetual foreigner and messaging of being an outsider.

*Racial and ethnic group dynamics.* Nine participants in the study reported that they didn't participate in cultural clubs. Fina explained why the clubs were not a good fit for her:

It's hard to find people that are like me I guess. Most of the classes are just White and with the RSO's that are racial, it's still hard to fit in. Because I tried visiting the

Vietnamese RSO last quarter and they were doing a Christmas event and they were basically just a Christian group of Vietnamese people and I just didn't know what to do. Because they were reciting a bunch of Bible things that I didn't know how to participate with. There wasn't really a place to belong.

The intersection of religion in the cultural RSOs (Registered Student Organizations) made it difficult for Fina to fully participate in clubs that she otherwise would have liked to join. Additionally, when participants discussed how they didn't fit into various racial and ethnic affinity groups on campus in the first convened focus group, Elizabeth, who was the oldest participant, a transfer student, gave fellow participants advice before she left the interview early to attend one of her classes. She advised them on the following:

I feel like all of you are unique in your own, so you don't have to feel like you have to fit in any of those categories, or any boxes, because you are an individual, and then we have different experience.

Another participant, Candace, who identified as a Chinese Vietnamese female and was a fourth year student in Computer Science, described the following,

I think something specifically I struggle with is also that I'm not solely Chinese, I'm not solely Vietnamese, I'm not solely American, I guess. And so, it's been difficult for me to like want to go to like [clubs], or any of those clubs, because they seem so exclusive and cliquy.

Contrary to the literature regarding cultural spaces and affinity groups that promote students' cultural identity development, several participants with various intersecting identities in the study felt as if they did not belong in the cultural affinity groups, while other participants reported



feeling a sense of community in these groups. Participants further noted dynamics among racial and ethnic groups. Lavin commented that,

In my personal experience, most of the discrimination or prejudice that I get isn't from non-Asians, it's actually from Asians, just not Southeast Asians. For example, I'm not pale enough to Asians, or I'm not high-class enough, and just stuff like that.

Lavin's experiences highlights colorism beliefs and practices that operate within and across racial groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). "Colorism is the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness and darkness of one's skin" (as cited in Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Freeman, 2010). The legacy of colonialism in Southeast Asian countries has an impact within race and ethnic socialization practices, specifically with how it shapes these countries' color-conscious hierarchies.

The aggression across racialized Asian communities was also evident. Travis explained the following:

And even, between other Asian groups, just because of how Cambodians are viewed. It's always been different for me because of my mix and specifically among other Cambodians, because my dad's side of the family is what you call Khmer Krom, which means they were on Vietnamese land, they were born of lesser blood. They were different because these aren't true Cambodians or they're mixed. So it's very hard when I connect to another Cambodian person because if I tell them that, they're like, "Oh." And that's almost very similar to the mindset that happened during the genocide, and so it's very hard for me to connect with other Cambodians.

Participant experiences such as these suggested that finding community within racial and ethnic groups can be challenging and complicated.

In sum, the comments shared from the interviews revealed that Southeast Asian participants' sense of belonging in educational spaces was questioned in different and harmful ways from their academic and peer experiences with racism. Participants were disappointed with the aggregate APIA category, which masked their identities as Southeast Asians. They were also frustrated by being viewed as model minorities from their peers, which devalued their right to learn in safe spaces at the institution. Furthermore, participants experienced microaggressions that led to disengagement, silencing, and isolation. Additionally, participants expressed being omitted from a Eurocentric curriculum that did not affirm their cultural identities. The hostile campus racial climate posed many challenges for Southeast Asian participants as they navigated through the institution. However, they faced these challenges with various forms of cultural capital. This next section discusses the ways in which Southeast Asian participants used different forms of capital to help them navigate these racially hostile college environments.

### **Discussion**

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) contend that counterstories can provide several beneficial pedagogical functions such as building community among those in the margins, challenging the perceived wisdom of the dominant society's narratives, showing possibilities to marginalized communities beyond the ones they live and showing that they are not alone, constructing another world by combining stories and the current reality, and providing a context to transform established belief systems (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 156). The findings from this study indicate some of the challenges participants experienced related to racism and other forms of marginalization as well as how participants used various forms of community cultural wealth to navigate these challenges. The most salient types of capital in the research data include the following: social capital, navigational capital, and a dimension of community cultural wealth I

am adding, called journey capital. These types of capital operated in dynamic ways and often overlapped with one another. Findings highlighted the positive cultural assets Southeast Asian students enacted within higher education.

### **Social capital**

Yosso (2005) contends that peers, families, and social contacts are instrumental in providing emotional support in navigating society's institutions (Yosso, 2005). These social networks can also assist students in identifying job opportunities, scholarships, mental health counseling, legal counseling, and many more campus and community resources. The data from participants' interviews showed that they used social capital in different ways with different networks. All 24 participants responded that they had a support network consisting of family, religious communities, friends, roommates, mentors, as well as staff and faculty. Many participants reported that they had prior friends before entering college who they could turn to for support. Participants who transferred from the community college (Elizabeth and Maya) said that they kept in touch with their friends from the community college. Family was also a source of support for participants as many participants mentioned the stories of their families as motivating them to academically succeed in school. Sopheap, who lived at home and commuted to school, relied heavily on his family for emotional, financial, and inspirational support. He heard positive messages of encouragement from his parents to do his best in school.

Participants were often the only Southeast Asian students in their classrooms and used their social networks to mitigate their hostile classroom experiences. One participant, Chanthrea, the only Cham student in a classroom comprised of majority White and international students, described feeling like an "outlier" at times and quickly tempered her feelings of exclusion by focusing on other friendships she had, which she expressed in her interview. While recognizing

the exclusive social interactions in the classroom, she found ways to mitigate this experience and noted that she had a support network outside of the classroom. Chanthrea entered the university with some of her friends from high school and had an established support system. While she didn't have classes with her friends, she noted that she and her friends made time for lunch and studied together in the evenings. She also had a support network with her co-workers at the Ethnic Cultural Center. Chanthrea chose to focus on the people around her who provided her with moral and emotional support. Chanthrea's strategy was to brush off exclusionary class dynamics in the classroom so they would not interfere with other aspects of her learning. While participants' networks of family and friends provided emotional and sometimes financial support, they may not have been able to provide guidance and support for students navigating college systems since many of them were first-generation.

However, despite the challenges that participants faced in higher educational spaces, particularly in the classroom, many of them talked about kind and supportive mentors, faculty, and advisers who assisted them with navigating campus resources. Gina, a Vietnamese American and Computer Science major, also experienced an added layer of oppression by being a female of color in a White male-dominated major. Fortunately, Gina had some positive mentors who provided her with encouragement and affirmation. Gina found a mentor in her major who she could relate to and who encouraged her to pursue Computer Science in a White male-dominated major. Gina expressed wanting to drop the Computer Science major and go back to her original plan of majoring in Sociology. Her mentors and role models were critical in Gina's persistence and engagement in her major.

Furthermore, there were similar challenges that U.S. born and non-U.S. born participants (Patrick, Linh, Elizabeth, Vinh, Derek, and Minh) described. Many experienced similar

pervasive stereotypes about Asian academic achievement as well as the quiet and submissive stereotypes. However, immigrant participants experienced linguistic discrimination to a greater extent than U.S. born participants. They reported disengaging in classroom activities.

Participants drew upon their families and peers as sources of support and inspiration. Vinh reflected on her mom's encouragement of working hard to achieve her dreams. Elizabeth stayed in touch with her friends from her community college and called them whenever she needed to vent. Given the important benefits of language as a way of constructing knowledge and meaning, educators can affirm the multiple ways in which students communicate and the ways in which they bring different kinds of linguistic knowledge to the classroom. Peers in the classroom can also learn about the diverse linguistic knowledge that English Language Learners contribute.

### **Navigational capital**

Navigational capital acknowledges the resiliency and ability to sustain high levels of achievement despite stressful encounters in racially hostile campus environments (Yosso, 2005). Along the same assets-based framework as the Community Cultural Wealth model (Yosso, 2005), according to Rutter (2012), researchers, clinicians, and policy makers have shifted their focus from risk (negative or deficit framing) to resiliency (positive framing) in the past two decades. The value in this movement was the recognition that socioemotional well-being (including a sense of purpose and direction) was equally important to economic success (Rutter, 2012). Rutter (2012) defines resiliency as "reduced vulnerability to environmental risk experiences, the overcoming of a stress or adversity, or a relatively good outcome despite risk experiences" (Rutter 2012, p. 336). Participants' families, from refugee backgrounds, endured a colossal sense of loss when they left their native homelands. The majority of Southeast Asians

lost family members, friends, material belongings, their country, and their familiar way of life (Hsu, Davies, & Hansen, 2003). Grounded in the resilience literature, the findings from the study showed that the majority of the participants were inspired by what they knew of their families' struggles. They endured and overcame racial microaggressions, racial slurs and jokes, exclusion and silencing in the classroom, linguistic discrimination, racial stereotypes, horizontal racism, and omission from campus processes and curriculum. The costs of overcoming these harmful experiences, for several participants, was the inability to fully participate in educational spaces such as the classroom. Participants such as Jacqueline, did not feel comfortable sharing her ideas in her Public Health class because she did not want to project her social justice values onto her classmates in a class that didn't discuss these values. She didn't want to be misinterpreted and labeled as the person who always talked about social justice.

Additionally, both Jacqueline and Chanthrea experienced exclusion in the classroom from White female students who consistently formed their own groups. In their study, Harwood, Mendenhall, Lee, Riopelle, & Browne Hunt (2018) conceptualized racial microaggressions as spacialized practices. They found that classroom spaces were one of the most cited locations where students in their study felt uncomfortable because of racist acts (Harwood et al., 2018). Furthermore, omission from campus processes and the curriculum created a sense of exclusion for participants and their needs as Southeast Asians were seen as insignificant from the university community. Derek reported having to be the one to bring up the Vietnam War in his political science classes and felt as if this war never happened because it was not brought up in classroom lectures or discussions. The silencing of People of Color in the curriculum invalidates the diverse cultural experiences of Students of Color; denying them equitable access to many

different forms of knowledge. Like Derek, several study participants similarly were aware of, spoke up, and resisted racism.

Megan saw that her ethnic identity was omitted from an application form and instead of accepting this omission, she wrote her ethnic identity on the form to include herself in the boxes on the application. Another female participant confronted racial jokes by speaking out against them. Moreover, Lavin's choice to confront and counter racism also signified the courage to resist stereotypes that depict Asian Americans as submissive. Participants showed resistant behavior by pushing back against their peers when confronted with the model minority stereotype and racial slurs. Participants also navigated through exclusionary educational spaces by using social networks (friends, mentors, family) to mitigate exclusionary and isolating experiences.

### **Journey capital**

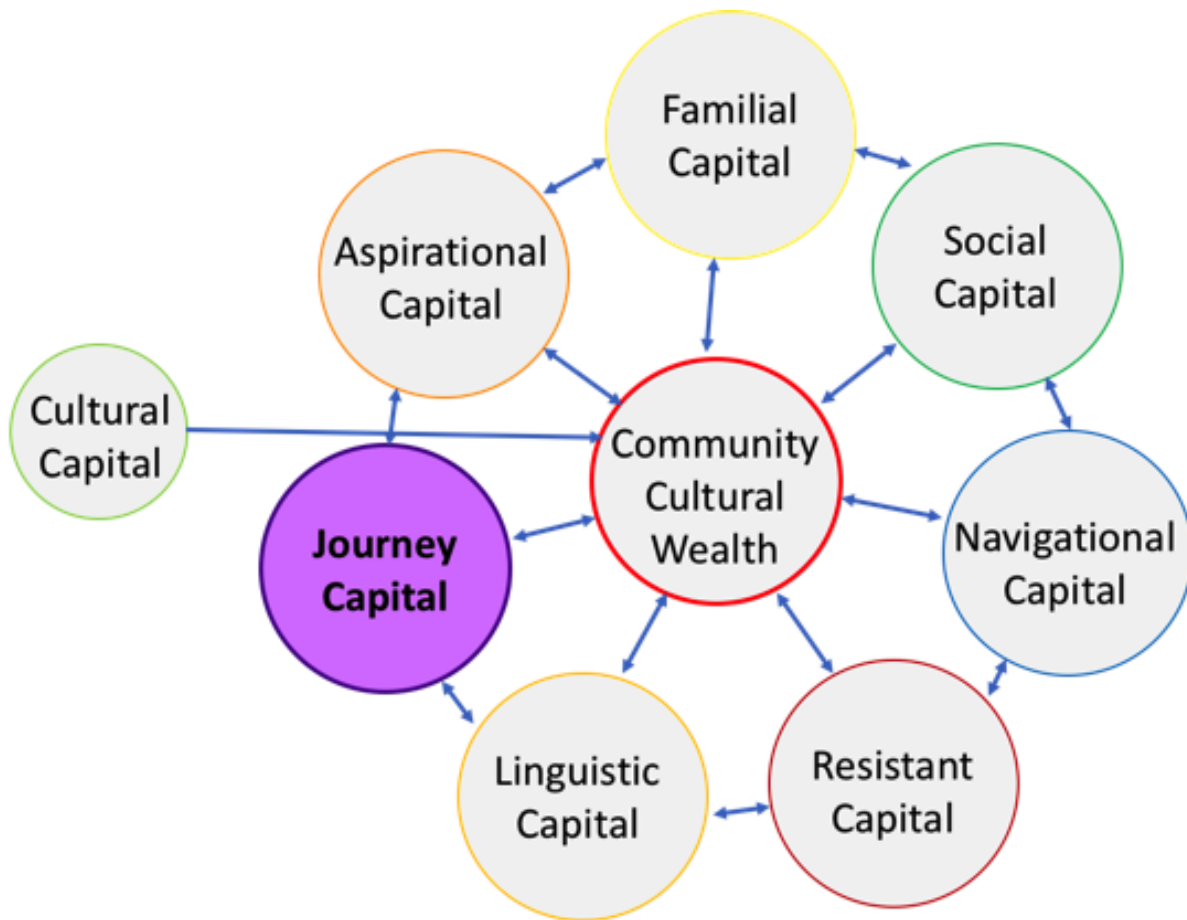
An additional form of capital emerged from the research participants' stories. Sixteen out of the 24 participants shared their families' journeys from their countries as a result of the wars in Southeast Asia. I named this new seventh dimension of community cultural wealth, Journey Capital, to highlight the nuances of Southeast Asian communities' stories. In particular, the research data indicates that Southeast Asian students desired to learn and understand their families' stories to inform their own identity development. While journey capital resembles familial capital with stories and knowledge passed down from family members, the difference with Southeast Asian college students' family stories is that they are partial stories shared by participants' parents as a result of the overwhelming trauma they experienced from forced migration. Family members shared their physical journeys of getting to the U.S. and their mental (emotional) journeys were often locked away. The physical journeys often involved stories of

hardships in the refugee camps in Thailand and the separation of their families during this tumultuous time. The mental or emotional journeys of the pain and trauma experienced by students' parents were often not discussed with their children. One participant noted that some of her cousins shared her families' stories with her instead of learning about them from parents.

As a result of the fragmented stories that participants heard from their families, they found a few courses that helped them fill in some of the gaps of what knew about their cultural identities. U.S. born participants found these courses to be helpful in connecting them to their families' histories as well as their countries that some of them have not visited before. In the focus groups and individual interviews, participants recommended a few courses to take in Asian American Studies as well as courses they found in the College of Education and the History Department. Four out of the seven participants in the first focus group recommended various courses related to Southeast Asian history and culture for other participants to take. A participant from this group shared an article with the other participants about identity development after the focus group ended. Another participant informed me that she was excited to take a course from a new professor in the American Ethnic Studies Department who identifies as Southeast Asian. Participants' eagerness and excitement to not only learn about their cultural identity through culturally relevant courses, but to talk about their experiences in this study was evident from the initial outreach with a high response level of interested participants.



Figure 2.1 illustrates the journey capital dimension of Community Cultural Wealth.



*Figure 2.1.* Journey capital as a new dimension of Community Cultural Wealth. Adapted from Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth by Yosso, T., 2005, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.

In addition to the fragmented immigration stories that were heard from family members, the majority of the participants were first-generation college students. The majority of their parents, with the exception of one participant (Sopheap), did not attend college and had limited understanding of the process of education institutions, which created situations where they could not fully participate in their children's education (such as help with prepping for standardized tests, college applications, completing financial aid forms, or helping them navigate resources on campus). Similar to trying to piece together their families' stories, they were also trying to make sense of the various components of college as well as the services that were available to them,

sometimes by themselves. Despite not being able to help their children navigate education institutions, parents instilled in them the value of education for economic stability and upward mobility. Encouraging their children to pursue higher education was the primary thing that most Southeast Asian parents or guardians could do for their children (Ngo, 2006).

Journeys are about much more than getting from one place to the other. Inner journeys are about self-discovery and growth because of challenging or inspiring experiences. The study participants experienced challenge and growth, which led them to explore knowledge about themselves, about others, and the world. Throughout their journeys, participants discovered many qualities about themselves that helped them get through challenging situations. Inner journeys can help individuals explore identities, search for more information about their heritage, or by experiencing traumatic experiences such as war and death. Because participants heard partial stories of their histories as a result of a Eurocentric curriculum and the trauma that their families endured and shared only bits and pieces of their journeys to the U.S., they yearned to learn more about who they are and where they came from. Participants did not feel complete and desired to fill in the gaps of their cultural histories.

In sum, community cultural wealth pushes against deficit thinking theory by centering the skills, knowledge, and abilities of Communities of Color. Southeast Asian participants used social, navigational, and journey capital to navigate hostile educational spaces that led them to question their sense of belonging. While participants encountered racism in academic spaces and from their peers, they drew upon knowledge from their peers, inspiration from their families' journey to the U.S., and their own inner journeys to gain a deeper understanding of their cultural identities.

### **Recommendations**

Understanding the histories of Southeast Asian students' as well as their experiences in higher education institutions can have implications for more effective training and programming for educational leaders that seeks to support the well-being of Southeast Asian college students and focuses on a holistic approach to educational services. The findings from the research data shows that Southeast Asian students have a strong desire to learn more about themselves and their families' histories. Participants shared snippets of their families' experiences and their journeys to the U.S. Gina, a computer science major, was interested in creating an interactive software program to interview her parents in order to connect more to her cultural identities. While Southeast Asian community organizations (such as community centers and religious temples) can no doubt play a critical role in educating Southeast Asian students about culture and identity, participants were also seeking more knowledge about their histories from their higher education institution. Educational leaders who desire to improve the educational experiences of Southeast Asian students should consider offering in-depth courses in Southeast Asian studies as well as integrate Southeast Asian content across the curriculum. Students who take these courses become more critical and confident by developing their identities. The research data also showed that taking courses related to Southeast Asian histories and languages was critical for Southeast Asian students to connect with and build bridges across generations in their families. Moreover, research shows that these courses provide Southeast Asian students with a better understanding of themselves as well as motivation to succeed and to persist (Museus & Kiang, 2009).

A further recommendation for educational leaders is to strengthen and prepare students for advocacy when Southeast Asian and language courses are not offered or funded. One of the

participants, Sopheap, described the Khmer language class being under threat of elimination from the curriculum. Educational mentors and advisers can assist students in understanding higher education systems to maximize strategies for advocacy and help students build resistance capital and a resistance toolkit to challenge inequities in higher education institutions. As such, connecting Southeast Asian students with mentors is critical for navigating social and academic spaces. A recommendation for students is to connect with Southeast Asian cultural community centers and religious temples that offer language courses as well as culturally relevant curriculum that contributes to cultural identity development.

Additionally, higher education institutions have a responsibility for student learning and growth. The implications for faculty is the importance of understanding why some students may not participate as much or at all in classroom activities because they may feel silenced and not affirmed. Creating and modeling a classroom climate that is respectful and inclusive of all language abilities can contribute to more participation from all students. This modeling can also help peers in the classroom engage in inclusive and respectful behavior, which cultivates a sense of belonging for all students. Furthermore, university members should make a concerted effort to pronounce and call students by their preferred names, unless otherwise instructed by students. Downplaying or overlooking the significance of getting a name right is a microaggression that can seriously undermine learning. Mispronouncing or changing a name negates students' identities as well as disregards their families and cultures (McLaughlin, 2016). In their 2012 study, Kohli and Solorzano found that the failure to pronounce a name correctly impacts the social and emotional well-being of students, which is linked to learning. Efforts by university members to pronounce students' names and call them by their preferred names correctly affirms

students' identities as well as contributes to a welcoming and respectful educational environment for Southeast Asian students.

In addition to disaggregating the AAPI category to understand the various experiences of people subsumed in this group, Elizabeth's advice to her peers further acknowledges the diverse experiences within Southeast Asian populations. She asked her fellow participants for their contact information and sent them an article about identity that she recently read that connected with the focus group conversations about identity. Additionally, at the end of the focus group, Veronica asked participants if they would like to join her for bubble tea. Several participants took her up on her offer. Thus, this study recommends students to expand and build peer supports and networks that align with their values. Many participants described having peer networks from high school, yet they were also looking to connect with like-minded peers in college. The focus group was an unintentional space where participants built community in a short time frame.

Peer programming in some contexts has proven to provide positive cross-cultural support and learning opportunities (Geelhoed, Abe, & Talbot, 2003). For students of color, peer support is likely to offer a relatedness component that would enhance a sense of belonging (Geelhoed, Abe, & Talbot, 2003). With structured peer-to-peer programming specific for these students, they could support one another with: mutual self-assessments of goals, motivations of educational pathways, communication and relationship building, and networking (Geelhoed, Abe, & Talbot, 2003). Higher education institutions should commit to having this group as a consistent space of support for enrolled students of color on an ongoing basis. Creating spaces that allow for Southeast Asian students to come together supports their engagement in higher education.

Recruiting, hiring, and retaining Southeast Asian American faculty, staff, and administrators will contribute to diversifying the field of education allowing Southeast Asian students to see themselves reflected in the changing educational landscape. Moreover, the disaggregation of data will provide deeper analysis of the complex issues facing Southeast Asian student populations in the K-12 pipeline through college. Finally, while this study focuses on the experiences of Southeast Asian college students, higher education institutions need to take into consideration the context of each student's cultural background to meet their needs and ensure that they thrive.

### **Limitations**

Although this study contributes a significant theoretical perspective to the research literature regarding Southeast Asian college students' lives and identities, it is important to note limitations related to the study sample, analysis, and my own positioning. For the sample, while efforts were made to produce an ethnically diverse sample, all participants were chosen to participate in the study by a first-come-first-served process if participants met the study criteria. The participants were a representative sample of the campus' Southeast Asian student population. Students from Vietnamese backgrounds made up the largest number of participants (provide number), followed by Cambodian, Cham, Lao, and Mien. Several students were mixed raced and mixed identities from Southeast Asian ancestry. The sample was predominantly female (70%) and a more balanced gender sample may have revealed different experiences and interpretations. All of the participants identified as male or female. Southeast Asian students who may have other fluid gender identities could have different insights into their college experiences. I did not examine the intersections of other identities such as skin tone, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, disability and more that could have illuminated

richer experiences for how these identities can shape Southeast Asian student experiences in college. Additionally, this study was conducted on two campuses. Having a sample from multiple campuses nationwide would likely gain further insights from a larger diverse sample group in different institutions. The recruitment of participants relied on purposeful sampling. The sampling methods limits representativeness and generalizability of the study. Furthermore, self-reported data only represents one perspective. This study uses a small sample size, which decreases the power. A larger sample size would improve generalizability.

In terms of methods and data analysis, while interviews offer a unique source of text for thematic analysis, they are also limited in some ways. Interpretation is also subjective, suggesting what a person might feel or think, which cannot possibly be known to the researcher, but are only indicated in language. Moreover, participants were interviewed once, which did not allow for further insights after the interviews were completed, with the exception of a few follow-up questions to clarify responses. My own analysis relies on an interpretation of what language can mean as well a possible messages beyond language, such as interpreting the possible emotional content.

I acknowledged my own positioning as an older Cambodian American woman, which also likely influenced the ways in which participants presented their narratives giving rise to certain emergent themes. For instance, participants may not have been as open in sharing their experiences with racism if the interviewer was not from a Southeast Asian background. My positionality shaped my access to and interactions with participants during the interview process and data analysis. I self-disclosed my identity as a female of color in academia because self-disclosure “when carefully and appropriately offered, initiates authentic dialogue” (Lichtman, 2007, 112). As an “insider,” I also used cultural insight to make sense of “linguistic, cognitive,

and emotional of participants” (Chavez, 2008, p. 479). Therefore, my own positioning may have contributed to the emergence of findings that would not be replicated with an interviewer in a different social position. Lastly, variations in experiences based on gender and U.S. born can be explored in future research.

### **Conclusion**

During the research process, I was amazed at the level of interest from students from Southeast Asian backgrounds who responded to the study outreach. Southeast Asian students were excited to participate in this study because they expressed that they had not been asked to share their stories before my outreach to them. Many participants lingered after the interviews were completed, turning the table on me to ask about my experiences as a Southeast Asian woman in higher education. They longed for role models and to find Southeast Asian people on campus who understood and could connect with their lived experiences. Several students contacted me after the study to ask when they could read the final manuscript and inquired about the findings, suggesting an eagerness to learn more about the topic.

My motivation to pursue the study stemmed from reflections of my personal and educational experiences of growing up in an isolated community in Oregon where my family and I were the only Cambodians. The concept of community is based on feelings, relationships, and common ground. We certainly did not feel that we belonged in our new community and my parents struggled to make our lives work in the U.S. because we no longer had a home in Cambodia. While both of my parents did not attend college, they had aspirations for all four of their children to pursue higher education. Reflecting on my educational journey in college more than two decades ago, I’m disheartened to see that little progress has been made to support and nurture the development of Southeast Asian college students. While some progress has been



made to enrich the educational experiences of Southeast Asian students (such as offering one or two classes centering Southeast Asian people in ethnic studies departments and creating cultural spaces for student affinity groups in ethnic cultural centers – all situated in ethnic-related spaces), depending on the college campus, students are still fighting to maintain language classes as part of the school curriculum, funding for recruitment events to increase the number of Southeast Asian students on college campuses, and struggling to be seen (and heard) by educational administrators who don't see the need for targeted support for Southeast Asian students.

The research process also provided moments of frustration and hope. I was frustrated to hear students' stories about being excluded in the classroom, being made fun of for mispronouncing words because English is not the student's first language, peers using racial slurs, and students silencing themselves for fear of being misunderstood in class discussions. I was hopeful to hear stories about faculty mentors and academic advisers who nurtured and supported students' growth, peer networks that encouraged participants to seek mental health counseling, and participants' courage to confront racist behaviors. I was also moved by a particular participant who expressed aspirations of wanting to see change in the future. Jacqueline acknowledged that she hopes her children don't have the same experiences as she did and that the classroom environment will be more affirming. She expressed the following:

If more people could feel like they could open up, then that would be so enriching and enlightening and the conversation would be richer. I hope that my kids, wherever they choose to go to school, can feel not what I feel, can feel like they are valued and their opinion is cherished, not just tolerated, but appreciated and celebrated.

The imperative is greater than ever for higher education institutions to eliminate systemic practices that perpetuate the invisibility of Southeast Asian students, their families, and

communities. Future generations of Southeast Asian students depend on this change.

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## Appendix A

## Moderator Guide

Research Study Title: Understanding the Impacts of Campus Climate on Southeast Asian College Students' Experiences

Date:

Location:

Time:

## I. BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTIONS

### *Moderator will:*

#### **1. Introduce yourself and thank participants for agreeing to come. (1 minute)**

● *Thank you for volunteering your time and coming today. My name is Chanira Reang Sperry and I'm a doctoral student in the Ed.D. in Educational Leadership Program at the University of Washington Tacoma. I'll be moderating our discussion today.*

#### **2. Explain group guidelines and tell how long the focus group or individual interview will last. (3 minutes)**

● *We have the discussion scheduled for one 45 – 60 minutes today. During the group discussion I would like to get your thoughts on your academic experiences as they relate to navigating campus racial climates and the strategies you use that help you succeed personally and academically.*

● *The purpose of this study focuses on how Southeast Asian undergraduate students' experiences campus racial climates and the navigational strategies used to achieve educational success. I am interested in hearing your point of view even if it is different from what others have expressed.*

● *I'm going to make every effort to keep the discussion focused and within our time frame. If too much time is being spent on one question or topic, I may move the conversation along so we can cover all of the questions.*

#### **3. Address confidentiality (1 minute)**

● *I will be audio-taping the discussion because I don't want to miss any comments. But, I will only be using first names today and there will not be any names attached to the comments on the final report. You may be assured complete confidentiality. May I get your permission to audio-record this discussion?*

#### **4. Explain Ground rules and expectations of behavior: (2 minutes)**

- Please don't interrupt
- Be respectful

- Please take turns when speaking
- Please allow opportunity for others to speak
- This is a safe space to disagree

**Ask participants if they would like to add or amend anything to this list.** *Would you like to add anything to this list or make any changes?*

## II. DISCUSSION TOPICS

### **EXPLAIN PROCESS:**

*Our topic of discussion today is about campus racial climate. The campus racial climate is a very important part of the student experience. The purpose of the focus group is to better understand how you have experienced racial climate here at the University of Washington (UW). Be assured that your responses will be held in the strictest professional confidence. We want to thank you in advance for your assistance.*

1. *Please tell us your name, the year you're in at UW, your major, how you racially and ethnically identify, and your age.*

*Now let's talk about your specific experiences on the UW campus.*

2. *What are key factors that you perceive as contributing to your academic success?*
3. *What were obstacles to your academic success?*
4. *How did you overcome those issues?*
5. *What has become your greatest challenge as a Southeast Asian American at this institution?*
6. *Have you experienced racial discrimination at UW? Please give me a specific example.*
7. *In what ways do these racial incidents affect your ability to perform academically?  
Please explain?*
8. *In what ways do you believe that campus is welcoming and affirming?*
9. *What are the advantages of having a significant number of Southeast Asian students on campus? Please explain?*

*10. Do you think the racial climate for Southeast Asian students has gotten better or worse in the last few years? Please explain?*

*This is a study on campus racial climate and its influence on Southeast Asian undergraduate students. Have we missed anything? Do you have any advice for us?*

### **III. CLOSING**

1. Offer an opportunity for any short final comments participants would like to make.
  - *Thank you very much for your input today. We are just about out of time. Are there any last comments that anyone would like to make? The information you provided will help us inform the university to improve their programming for Southeast Asian students. Chanira Reang Sperry may contact you after the interview to follow-up on your responses. If anyone is interested in learning more about the study, please contact Chanira.*