

The Vernacular of Whiteness: The Racial Position of Asian and Asian Americans in Upholding  
the U.S. as a White Supremacist Empire

Joong Won Kim

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David L. Brunsmas, Chair

Suchitra Samanta

Anthony K. Harrison

Anthony Peguero

Jae Kyun Kim

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ABSTRACT

Given the extensive literature and findings on contemporary racial dynamics, analysts have yet to fully theorize a critical perspective on the role that Asian and Asian Americans play as transnational racial actors in upholding the dominant racial ideology today; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). This is central to the global, transnational racial order that structures a racially affective economy of language use. Such racially affective economy extends to other facets culture, particularly the reception of Hallyu. This dissertation is a qualitative study spanning approximately three (3) years of participant observation across multiple sites incorporating open-ended interviews with Asian and Asian Americans at a historically and predominantly white university in the Southeastern United States. This study also utilizes autoethnographic reflections and archival materials in conjunction with participant observation and interview data. Through approaching every aspect of the qualitative design in this study as a participant myself, such as ethnographic participant observation, open-ended interviews, autoethnography, and archival materials, I locate and explore how Asian and Asian Americans reproduce their racial position in the hierarchy by the reification of the racial category, “honorary white” (i.e., wedge between Black and white). The racial apathy intertwined with the imperial modality observed in this dissertation is indispensable to the global construction of race. This

dissertation critically engages and interrogates how DEI initiative aimed at Asian Americans at Southern University (pseudonym) works in tandem with the nation-state, effectively producing and matriculating bicultural and transnational racial actors while taking advantage of the racialized laborers in DEI. This dissertation brings together three (3) analytic points of exploratory findings from Asian and Asian American students, staff, and faculty at SU in illustrating some of the key reasons why white supremacy reigns despite the higher visibility of Asian popular culture (i.e., Hallyu) and institutional emphasis on DEI.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of Asian and Asian American student communities at a historically and predominantly white university located in the Southeastern United States. This dissertation deals with how Asian and Asian American communities are unable to come to ethnic solidarity in various exchanges in language, pop-culture, and nationalistic viewpoints. From analyzing data deriving from three years of observing and interviewing members of Korean and Korean American student organizations, the university library, and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion administration, this dissertation identifies the case of the United States as a white supremacist empire.

*Thank you, mother, for sacrificing everything you have to make a better life for me. And my brilliant and strong spouse, thank you all. This is for you two.*

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## **CHAPTER 1 : Introduction**

A study driven by a seemingly complicated, and at times, contradictory, idea that Asian and Asian Americans uphold global white supremacy based on their racial position is not a welcomed observation in both generalist Sociology and Asian American Studies. Because both view Asian Americans' assimilation as a racial uplift, it fails to acknowledge the ways that an intermediary racial position is part and parcel of the construction of a white supremacist empire built by the United States (U.S.). Asian and Asian Americans, and their experiences, are heterogenous but centrally diasporic. In this dissertation, I illustrate various inner-workings and, essentially, crevices, often unturned by uncritical analysts of race - that the celebration of diversity comes with insidious forms of whites' racial domination. Another is the definitional subject and topic - the U.S. as an empire. It should come as no surprise to the readers of this dissertation that the U.S. is an empire. However, it is an empire that is interdependent on transnational economic transactions, which also facilitates the exchanges of racial ideology through U.S. imperialism. This dissertation explores the U.S.-Korean relationship that is central to building foundational evidence as to why whites need Asian and Asian Americans to accomplish white supremacy; and in doing so, promulgate anti-Blackness.

Building on Bonilla-Silva's (2012, 2019) notion of the grammar of whiteness and racial economy of emotions, this study develops a conceptual framework around how various racial actors socially enact vernaculars to accomplish whiteness. Here, I position myself in terms of Nadia Y. Kim's (2008) notion that analytic points of entry when examining the U.S. - Korea relations must expand to cover the transnational promulgation of the dominant racial ideology. Suzuki (2017) also argues a similar point by suggesting that analyses of race should move away from a U.S.-based racial ideology and look outside of the U.S. context. While comparative

analysis of racialization processes captures the rich nuances of how race is understood in a nation-state level context (Suzuki 2016), it does not connect the global and transnational connections, rendering invisible the history of the African diaspora, transatlantic slave trade, and the making of the West - and particularly in this study, U.S. as a white supremacist empire. Therefore, this dissertation begins from Mills's (1997) premise that global race relations are shaped by the global project of white supremacy. Therefore, the race relations between the U.S. and Korea, particularly in the academic context, are shaped by global white supremacy. In the U.S. academic context, and especially for HWCUs, any analysis of race is incomplete without consideration of whiteness (Brunsmas, Brown, Placier 2013). Any analysis that omits how whiteness becomes a credential is also an incomplete analysis of race as an organizing principle (Ray 2019), especially in an organizational setting that is quintessential to HWCUs. Perception of English proficiency and the English education industry in Korea caters to the U.S. academia (Lee and Zhou 2014). One can observe this in the English education industry in Korea, where the organizational logic of the industry is structured to value white teachers from select countries including the U.S. (Ruecker and Ives 2015). This implicates what Bhaba (1985) articulates as postcolonial hybridity, which I fully explicate in the first analytic chapter (chapter 2) of this dissertation.

Given that U.S.-based racial ideology was transposed to Korea through colonial contact with the U.S. (N. Y. Kim 2008; Kwon 2017), the accurate perspective to situate Korea's postcoloniality is through viewing Western modernity salient in Eastern colonialism (Lee and Cho 2012). From this perspective, I emphasize how racial realities for Koreans are intertwined with the colonial contact of Western modernity as they become racial actors invested in the U.S. empire. A fixed geographical boundary of physical space is, for social processes, arbitrary

(Harvey 2004; Massey 1994). This is why it is important to understand how race unfolds at various scales of social dynamics, from interactional (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015; Rosino 2017), institutional (Ray 2019), to the global and transnational level (Christian 2019). This involves and calls into question the roles that Asian and Asian Americans play as institutional actors on behalf of the U.S. empire serving as bicultural brokers. Treating this situation as racially imperative - and as one of the main sites of white supremacy - is also central to this dissertation.

Relativistic analysis of hierarchy and normative formation is also incomplete without the analysis of race. For example, laws are constituted with active social agents as a collectivity (Weinberg 2016). However, the collectivity is constituted by whites (Mills 1997) and laws are in favor of them (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Moore 2007). Juridico-political explanations of race using cases only deriving from the U.S. contexts also obscures the transnational race relations as structured by the U.S. as a modern-day empire (Go 2011, 2017; Kim 2008). In the current era where xenophobic sentiments are erupting throughout the globe, critical, global sociology of whiteness is paramount. As a parallel focus, the theoretical contribution of this study will help us to better understand how whiteness is maintained through affect. The findings from this study also contribute to providing a critical race perspective in assimilation and immigration studies. Another contribution this study makes is building a bridge between the canon of Sociology of culture and the canon of Sociology of race and ethnicity, which have not worked together in tandem (for canonical disagreements in the sociology of race and ethnicity and Sociology of culture, see Emirbayer and Desmond 2015: 1; Golash-Boza 2016: 130). This dissertation takes a pragmatic approach in using them in tandem in order to further advance the analysis of race that accounts for both culture and structure.

In particular, I draw from the literature on global race and racialized meaning-making to explore the intraethnic divide in the first analytic chapter (chapter 2). Focusing critically on the reception of Hallyu - a word to describe all Korean Pop-culture - the second analytic chapter (chapter 3) explores the racialization of Hallyu. Drawing from critiques of DEI through my own employment and experiences working as a DEI worker, I highlight the racial ineptitude of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives and Asian Americans (chapter 4). All of the data derives from three (3) years of participant-observation, autoethnographic reflection (I am a participant of this study myself in all of the proceeding chapters), open-ended interviews (n=11), and publicity materials (i.e., flyers for events, study abroad programs, and other transnational internship opportunities between U.S. and East Asia) at Southern University (pseudonym). The first analytic chapter (chapter 2) of this dissertation employs the initial 500 hours of participant observation data collected from three different sites within SU; Korean Student Organization, Korean American Student Organization, and the university library. The second analytic (chapter 3) chapter employs open-ended interviews Korean and Korean American students (n=11) as well as the data collected through my participant observation in a K-Pop music dance troupe. The remaining portion of the participant observation was spent as an employee that assisted administration of Asian American DEI initiative. The final analytic chapter (chapter 4) draws on this experience through autoethnography as well as various publicity materials to contextualize the personal matters and work dynamics to the structural, cultural, and imperial modes of normalizing practices.

Theoretically, this study bridges the gap between existing scholarship by distinguishing race as a structural phenomenon comprised of (1) social, (2) political, (3) economic, (4) ideological, and (5) affective components (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2019). Racial subjecthood is

experienced through emotions, through affective aspects of everyday practices- particularly in academic spaces. This study fully acknowledges that gender, sexuality, and class are indeed organizing principles of social life. At the same time, it is also important to focus on the racial component which separates the experience of whites from the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). For example, women of color experience marginalization by way of race *intersecting* with gender (Collins 2020 [1999]; Crenshaw 1995). In serious consideration of the deployment of white cultural theorists in this dissertation, every analytic chapter is a work that attempts to decolonize the entrenched knowledge. My methods are precisely built upon this foundation. As embodied knowledge and positionality as an epistemological source undergird this dissertation, I fully acknowledge my own journey of decolonization that is characteristic of this dissertation as a whole - it is a process captured at the time of this writing.

Language and race are intertwined (Alim et al. 2016). Language shapes one's racial imagination- it shapes one's perceived position in the racial hierarchy. This study implicates existing research on Koreans and language (Chun 2001, 2009, 2016) which does not undertake a deeper analysis of the foundation of modernity as a white supremacist construct (Mills 1997). By analyzing perceptions around English proficiency as racialized emotions (Bonilla-Silva 2019), I argue that white supremacy is the driving social force that shapes racial imaginaries and performances (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Feagin 2006; Mills 1997). Whiteness and Blackness, as Nadine Ehlers (2012) argues, are constructs that consolidate impressions of racial authenticity through performances. It is with the consideration of colonial contact and the postcolonial reality of the U.S. as an empire (Go 2011, 2017; Kwon 2017; Lee and Cho 2012), that the sole focus on the state as the arbiter of race fails to adequately provide a comprehensive framework. It fails precisely by obscuring how whites frame and institutionalize laws through socio-political

processes that benefit whites (Moore 2007; Mills 1997). Overall, Ehlers's (2012) general theoretical architecture is useful in demonstrating how discourse shapes action. However, Ehlers does more to further a Foucauldian understanding of race-as-performativity. Instead, I extend Butler's (1990) theoretical architecture that encompasses the speech-act (i.e., perceived English proficiency). Doing so enhances Ehlers's theory by incorporating aspects of social life that are *felt*, through *emotions*, which are mutually constitutive of logic (Gould 2009). Here, I defer to the following definition given by Butler (1990) on performativity:

The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects (P. 198).

If the performative aspect of the speech act (i.e., parole) creates what is essentialized to be "white," then race-as-essential-categories become fallacious, only to be made real by the accumulation of performances. Following this line of argument, Ehlers (2012) finds that Blackness and whiteness in the U.S. are constructed and reproduced through disciplinary mechanisms (i.e., law) that orients performativity. Because "the subject" (race) is "not a founding act," (Butler 1990; 198), it is important to consider but go beyond the orthodox Foucauldian formulation which limits Ehlers's theoretical formulation. This allows one to conceptualize power and subjecthood beyond the relativistic logic often found in Foucault's works. Foucault's notion of the subject is problematic because it generalizes subjecthood as Western (Spivak 1988). Such generalization of subjectification renders the non-Western personhood invisible (Spivak 1988). I also suggest conceptualizing the state, or the normative order of racism, as *both* deep and surface structures driven and maintained by white supremacy

(Jung 2015). By taking language beyond its everyday contexts, Ehlers only takes into account the legal-oriented use of language functioning as a deep structure of racism. However, whether it would be considered as deep structure or surface structure<sup>1</sup>, everyday use of language, culture, operates through white supremacy. If culture works as a repertoire through retrievability (Schudson 1989; Swidler 1986), then it is important to consider how retrievability is structured by a historical logic (Sewell 2005). If the historical logic as we know it is shaped by a global project of white supremacy (Mills 1997; Smedley 2007), then the logic of culture cannot simply be presumed to work or operate at face value. This extends to the ways that I engage with culture and ideology - pragmatic operationalization is prioritized in this dissertation because it is an exploratory study. This is both the limitation and the strength of this dissertation - it provides a model for a thorough qualitative analysis, but it is very time-consuming and the subject matter is seemingly abstract. My best effort is to communicate the insidiousness of what is abstracted; global race and the glimpse found in Asian and Asian Americans as racial actors invested in it. This is the key endeavor of this dissertation.

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<sup>1</sup> Debate between Swidler (2001) and Sewell (1992, 2005) on the relativity of what constitutes as deep and surface structures.

## **CHAPTER 2 : The Possessive Investment in Honorary Whiteness?: How Asian and Asian Americans Reify a Transnational Racial Order Through Language<sup>2</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

Considering the call for a global approach to analysing race, this study develops a theoretical framework of how racial ideology becomes structured at a global, transnational level. Drawing from approximately 500 hours of ethnographic participant observation at a predominantly white university located in the Southern United States, this study illustrates how Koreans and Korean Americans reproduce a transnational racial hierarchy at a predominantly white university. My findings show how Korean and Korean Americans normalize the imperial U.S.-Korea relations through a racially affective economy of language use in social interactions. The imperial standpoint observed in Koreans and Korean Americans calls into question the role that honorary whiteness plays in the United States' triracial order. I further discuss the implication of Asian and Asian Americans' possessive investment in honorary whiteness, which is central to the maintenance of a transnational triracial order with Korea as an extension of the U.S. empire.

**Keywords:** language, whiteness, Asia and Asian America, racial affect, racial ideology, transnational racism

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## INTRODUCTION

As honorary whites, Asian and Asian Americans are racially triangulated (C. J. Kim 1999) between Blackness and whiteness (Chun 2001) dating back to the 19th century. In the context of the United States (U.S.), Asian Americans have historically aligned with whites by adopting anglicized names, attending white churches, and expressing anti-Black sentiments (C. J. Kim 1999). Asian Americans, as honorary whites (Bonilla-Silva 2017), are racially triangulated through relative valorization (i.e., racialization) and civic ostracism (i.e., barriers to political agency) (C. J. Kim 1999, 2000). Therefore, Asian Americans become victims of white racism (Chou and Feagin 2015) while simultaneously harboring anti-Black racism (C. J. Kim 1999, 2000; J. Kim 2015). The racial formation of Koreans has been deeply intertwined with the history of U.S. imperialism (Kwon 2017). The U.S. racial hierarchy depends on the imagery of honorary whites deployed as a “model minority.” In a white-dominant society, the model minority trope - a given racial and ethnic minority group portrayed as hard-working and obedient, therefore “exemplary” - has been historically juxtaposed to Blackness by whites to claim racial superiority (C. J. Kim 1999). Following the logic and the development in the study of race and ethnicity in regard to Asian Americans and Asians in the U.S. (Chou and Feagin 2015; C. J. Kim 2000; N. Y. Kim 2007), the U.S. racial hierarchy is reciprocated through the racial position assigned to and occupied by honorary whites. Asian and Asian Americans, as honorary whites, and particularly Korean and Korean Americans, are possessively invested in racialized emotionality and belonging in ways that uphold white supremacy. I argue that this is an integral part of the matrix that structures the racial hierarchy in the U.S.

Incorporating recent theoretical interventions that call for a global approach (Christian 2019) and national identity (Zhou and Bankston 2020) to analyse race, I explore how language

becomes central to the production of a transnational racial order. I show how racial ideology is shaped by a social process - a racially affective economy of language use - facilitated by a global, transnational, and imperial discourse that arranges Korean and Korean Americans as racial actors invested in subservience to whiteness. Broadly, I draw upon Charles W. Mills's (1997) analysis of how the historical construction of culture - and therefore language and everyday customs - has been shaped by white supremacy as a global project. Although Asian and Asian Americans are becoming similar in class proximity to their white counterparts, scholars have also highlighted the endurance of anti-Asian racism (Chou and Feagin 2015; C. J. Kim 1999; N. Y. Kim 2008). While existing research demonstrates Asian and Asian Americans' educational success (Zhou and J. Lee 2017) to marrying across the colorline (J. Lee 2015), Asian and Asian Americans continue to face racial domination in the U.S. (Chou and Feagin 2015; N. Y. Kim 2008). Asian and Asian Americans are culturally, and therefore racially, positioned as "forever foreigners" unassimilable in a white-dominant society (Chou and Feagin 2015; C. J. Kim 1999; Lo 2016).

Informed by my positionality as a 1.5 generation Korean American, I ask the following overarching questions in this study: (1) how are intraethnic boundaries maintained through language by Korean and Korean Americans at a predominantly white university (PWI)?; (2) How does national identity and language (Korean and English) (re)produce a transnational racial hierarchy?; and (3) what are the racial implications of the transnational racial order with Korea as an extension of the U.S. empire? Drawing from approximately 500 hours of ethnographic participant observation at a predominantly white university, I analyse how language structures the implicit and unspoken rules in daily social interactions that position Koreans and Korean Americans as racial actors (re)producing a transnational racial hierarchy.

### ***Language and the production of affective racialized meaning***

Existing research on the sociology of language largely situates language in the scope of class reproduction (Bernstein 2003; Bourdieu 1991; Lareau 2011), reducing racial matters to a consequence of class inequality. However, as highlighted by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), the politics of language, competing racial identities, and Eurocentric white supremacy are mutually constitutive. Such politics proliferate into daily racial life, where Eurocentric white supremacy haunts the seemingly mundane - language. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2012) emphasized the importance of the relationship between language and racial matters in his analysis of *racial grammar*. As a “...*distillate* of racial ideology and, hence of white supremacy” (Bonilla-Silva 2012: 174), racial grammar assigns seemingly innocuous meanings to everyday language as a consequence of racial domination. Hence, racial grammar is integral to examining how white supremacy structures “common-sense” ideas about race. Language is deeply rooted in racial domination *because* it exists as an extension of the existing racial arrangements in everyday life (Bonilla-Silva 2012; Anzaldúa 1987).

Sara Ahmed (2004) stresses the importance of decentralizing the body in its relation to racial identity while privileging the analytic focus on affect. Highlighting the ways that affect - matters involving emotions and feelings - changes social dynamics, Ahmed (2004) argues “... emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” (P. 119). In other words, language acts as a reservoir for racialized emotions (Ahmed 2004). In accordance with Stuart Hall’s (1994) enduring work on meaning and racial identity, language is deployed as a vehicle of meaning interwoven with the affective economy of race. This is especially the case for the types of racism that Asian and Asian Americans endure in the U.S. For example, whites interacting with signs

written in Chinese lead them to conjure up images of “Yellow Peril” (Lo 2016). Elaine Chun’s (2016) analysis of the racial epithet “Ching-Chong” further clarifies the connections between language and racial meanings. Chun observes that “Ching-Chong” gains racial meaning through its cultural availability, and without it, “Ching-Chong” is merely an arbitrary onomatopoeia. Yet another example is the expression of displeasure and anger at the use of “foreign” language by whites in the U.S. (e.g., “why don’t you speak English! This is America”). It is for these reasons that whites’ emotions are often validated whereas People of Color’s emotions are often invalidated (Matias 2016).

### ***Racial structure and language***

The contemporary U.S. racial hierarchy is a tri-racial order, where whites occupy the top, honorary whites beneath, and the collective black at the bottom of the hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva 2017). Racial ideology in the U.S., which has transformed into colorblindness, remains an enduring relic of white supremacist European colonialism (Omi and Winant 2015; Feagin 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2017). Recent theoretical developments articulate how racial structure endures as: (1) a supposedly value-neutral organizational dynamics that treat whiteness as a credential (Ray 2019); and (2) racial ignorance as white agency (Mueller 2020). Existing research points to the proximity between race and language, where language exists as an extension of the racial structure (Bonilla-Silva 2012) and as a manifestation of racial ideology (Hill 2009). Moreover, sociolinguistic anthropology has uncovered how racial identity becomes intertwined with language (Chun 2001; 2011; 2016; Lo 2016).

With the history of white supremacy that also haunts the history of immigration, Stephen Steinberg (2007) and Aldon Morris’s (2015) important analyses are crucial to contextualizing

what assimilating to a “host” culture means for immigrants in the U.S. society. Indeed, assimilation theory, which is derived from Park and the Chicago School, has been scrutinized for its lack of critical engagement with how “host” and “migrant” culture is operationalized. The ambiguity in Parks’s definition of the “dominant” and “host” culture point to Eurocentric whiteness (Morris 2015), failing to account for race as a social structure (Steinberg 2007). Park’s definitional ambiguity in his famous race-relations cycle was ultimately in service of whiteness (Morris 2015; Steinberg 2007). Here, the dominant culture is Eurocentric white supremacy as a global project (Christian 2019; Mills 1997) tied to the agenda of the U.S. empire in service of the metropole (Go 2017; Steinmetz 2005). Within this framework of race, then, the cultural assimilation of Korean Americans in the U.S. is analogous to adopting the imperial standpoint, where Korea exists as an extension of the U.S. empire. While the notion of race, nationhood, and the empire-state is a complex matter, the connection between American exceptionalism and Eurocentric white supremacy remains salient in contemporary U.S. society (Go 2011).

The transnational racial hierarchy I wish to highlight in this study is what I term as, much as what George Lipsitz (1998) saw in whites and whiteness, *the possessive investment in honorary whiteness*. Language is intertwined with the possessive investment in honorary whiteness, which is complicit in maintaining white supremacy as a global project. First, the racialization of language allows whites - and whiteness - to reap ideological, political, cultural, and economic benefits (Bonilla-Silva 2012). Second, the connections between signification processes that involve the politics of emotions and belonging involve language use. Language intertwines with race, racism, and racial identities constituted by Koreans and Korean Americans - honorary whites – shaping their everyday social interactions (Chun 2009; Rosino 2017). Finally, language is a generative and interpretive reservoir of racial cues and signifiers (H. S.

Alim, Rickford, and Ball 2016). Considering these connections between race and language, this study explores how the U.S. racial order is mediated by transnational racial actors through language. My analysis of the on-the-ground observations of intra-ethnic othering between Korean Americans, and broadly Asian and Asian Americans, capture the everyday interactions where the racial order is reified by the creation of divisionary lines - that is, the investment in the racial category honorary white. The possessive investment in honorary whiteness is undergirded by the imperial modality that divides the racial and ethnic solidarity of Asian and Asian Americans.

## **METHODS**

Before I proceed further with the methodological design of this study, I wish to communicate my position as an ethnographer of Color. The power dynamics that exist between the ethnographer and the community one studies are oftentimes asymmetrical, and this was often the case for my position across the field sites. As a 1.5 generation Korean immigrant who grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods in various parts of the U.S., I have endured and witnessed racism throughout my life. I recall memories as a high school student who was often subject to crude racial humor. I simply had to grin through it. This everyday racism continues today. The indignation that I experienced and witnessed in the field sites was no exception.

The methodological principle of this study draws upon my own indignation and the anger that followed participant observation. Oftentimes, I had to engage with racist viewpoints while attempting to maintain my integrity as a participant-observer. I experienced an “outsider within” status as a 1.5 generation Korean interacting with the majority-white staff (i.e., the library), international Korean graduate students (i.e., KSO), and majority-second generation Asian

American undergraduate students (i.e., KASO) across the field sites. Here, it is important to note that KSO and KASO members sometimes overlap as there are members who attend both organizations' events. From a semi-ostracized position, I draw from Black Feminist methodology and epistemology which gives analytic focus to knowledge produced from the margins and indignation (Collins 1986; Judd 2019). I would also like to make clear that this scholarship is in service of dismantling white supremacy and for the racial uplift of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

This study draws from approximately 500 hours of participant observation at a historically white university in the Southern U.S. Southern University (SU) is located in a rural setting in the Southeastern U.S. surrounded by an otherwise mostly white, working-class population. However, within the university town is where the racial demographic within and outside of the university is overwhelmingly white with a striking exception - Asian students are the second-highest racial demographic from a total student population of 30,000. The research design of the study utilizes relational ethnography (Desmond 2014), which entails the ethnographer engaging in participant observation at seemingly unrelated, different field sites to show how they are mutually constitutive (Desmond 2014). During the duration of my observations, I collected field notes from three different sites located all within and affiliated with SU: (1) Korean Student Organization (KSO); and (2) the Korean American Student Organization (KASO); (3) SU's library. All participants and sites in this study have been assigned pseudonyms.

Using a critical ethnographic approach (Denzin and Lincoln 2011), my position as an ethnographer is one as a participant as well as the researcher (Harrison 2009). I actively engaged with my positionality and remained transparent to all of my informants across my ethnographic

field sites. I often refrained from impression management to genuinely engage with all the participants in this study. The methodological design of this study was focused on the participation and practice of my given role across the field sites (Harrison 2018). I also had convenient access to materials for jotting observations in the field - such as a personal computer for use at the library or a notepad application in other sites. The act of typing on a smartphone made such note-taking quick and accessible. Because of these conveniences, I was able to generate rich observations laden with “thick” descriptions (Geertz 1973).

My positionality allowed me to better understand power by subjecting myself to its various forms of indignation across field sites (Freire 2004). My ethnographic approach focused on observing failed social interactions rather than successful ones. Extending what Emerson (2009) suggested as “ordinary trouble” in interactions with racial matters, I often engaged with the racial viewpoints of participants in this study, which was largely characteristic of the hegemonic racial discourse in the U.S. (i.e., racial colorblindness). I define failed interaction as events where I intervened in response to the racially charged moments in my field sites.

My observations, which kept track of time, date, and location, ultimately were transcribed into multiple transcripts. The transcripts were then analysed using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013). From this analytic approach, I analysed obscured patterns in failed social interactions across all sites. I then selected interactional moments where I or the participants in this study broke social norms, such as engaging and challenging hegemonic views on racial matters, and analysed the events in sequence. For example, I would select sequences of events that started with a racially charged incident, whether it occurred in a one-to-one or group interactions, and how I interacted in response to the racially charged topics or discussions. Here, I engaged in racially charged moments from the data because that is the basic theoretical insight



driving this study - the possessive investment in honorary whiteness as a racial category. The systematic process of coding for racially charged incidents is derived from this principle, and thus an analysis of the degrading racially charged moments I witnessed and experienced. As an exploratory study, the methodological principle necessitates all, if not most of my approach through phenomenology (i.e., there is no point for my scholarship as strictly analyzing incidents of harmony as someone who is approaching race and ethnic solidarity from a critical standpoint). With all of this in mind, Instances of failed interactions were selected and analysed to see how hegemonic racial meanings were communicated, performed, felt, and obscured by the participants in this study.

### ***Field sites***

All of the field sites were geographically and temporally close in proximity to each other. For example, there would be campus events organized and held by student organizations in close proximity to the library. The members of the registered student organizations also frequented the library and I interacted with them as a front desk worker. Because of my positionality as a bilingual, 1.5-generation Korean-American socialized in a predominantly white neighborhood, I was often positioned as an “outsider-within” (Collins 1986) in varying ways across the field sites. Although I frequently changed roles, I interacted with members across the field sites. The spatial boundaries of the ethnographic field itself were further stretched when communication in all three field sites used chat rooms and emails, especially for registered student organizations. I engaged in deep participant observation in order to be accepted by the community while I tested the limits of my ethnographic intent (Wolcott 1987). This would entail occasionally engaging directly with racist viewpoints which elicited a negative reaction - that I was violating the

informal rules of racial “harmony.” In this way, I was an active participant that sometimes broke the boundaries of social norms that curtailed racetalk entirely.

I was directly involved as an officer for the Korean Student Organization (KSO). KSO was exclusive to Korean members who could speak Korean fluently, with all of the communication facilitated in Korean. My task in the organization involved translating English materials into Korean, such as car insurance information, for it to be disseminated to the Korean community members at SU. After my service, I attended campus events that were held by KSO, such as bowling. I had participated in a book club affiliated with KSO in which the discussion took place exclusively in Korean. Members of KSO moved on from SU and most were graduate students with very little time for social matters.

The Korean American Student Organization (KASO) had more racially diverse members, consisting of not just Korean Americans (or Koreans), but a Pan-Asian demographic with Black, Latinx, and white members. KASO facilitated all of its communication in English. I was an outsider in this group due to my age differences in comparison to the average age of a given member in KASO - most members were in their early twenties. I attended campus events and participated in KASO’s “big/little” program, which facilitates social networking similar to a greek organization on college campuses. My age impacted how I was perceived at these events as I was often mistaken for an undergraduate student. As I participated in the big/little program, age was an interesting factor as I had signed up to be a “little” as someone in his early thirties - with my “big” being a senior undergraduate student in his early twenties. My age often elicited reactions - both positive and negative - that questioned my belonging to KASO. Most interactions approved of my presence, however, a sizable portion of interactions involved myself being an oddity as an “old” newcomer. I was basically very obvious to all of the members of my

age in a sea of eighteen to twenty-year-olds. For example, conversations surrounding “VSCO girl,” which is a form of an aesthetic trend for young women, clearly marked me as a “boomer with a wife.” It was even more apparent at events where I had to move my body, such as K-Pop workshops, as I would often complain incessantly about the twists and turns of my hardened ligaments, which now is used to the typing posture, could not handle. “Stop complaining so much you boomer!” said fishy (pseudonym), which continued to be remarked as comic relief when I found out that dances were often performed at 75 percent of the actual speed of the music. In regards to racial and ethnic heterogeneity and homogeneity, KASO consisted of undergraduate students who spoke English with a more racially diverse membership - there was more in attendance at KASO’s events in comparison to the events held by KSO.

The final site, where students from both KASO and KSO frequented, was SU’s library. I had worked as a wage student worker at first to gain entry. I initially worked a smorgasbord of different tasks, basically performing odd jobs for the staff prior to getting hired as a wage employee. Sitting at the circulation desk was one of the tasks I was paid to do previously to me entering the field with the permission of the owners of the space. I also became an employee under one condition - that I would prioritize customer service over research. In this particular space, I performed the role of a circulation desk clerk interacting with students, staff, faculty, and patron members, of whom were mostly white and Asian. Here, the majority of communication took place in English, although I would occasionally speak in Korean for Korean patrons who visibly felt discomfort with communicating in English. Overall, the library as a public space facilitated interactions between the staff, myself, and Korean and Korean American students.

## RESULTS

### *The possessive investment in honorary whiteness: KSO*

Members and officers of KSO were exclusively Korean. KSO's meetings, events, and outreach were facilitated almost exclusively through the Korean language. Therefore, it was not surprising to find that the organization, in essence, practices racial exclusivity on the basis of language. Especially in the U.S. academic context, the language barrier - such as having great difficulty in speaking, hearing, and responding in English - prevents Koreans from interacting outside of their ethnic enclave (Jeong 2004). Of course, this is not a generalizing claim, but rather an explanation provided by Jeong (2004), which seems to be consistent with the first portion of the research of this study. KSO tended to be made up of mostly international graduate students that were socialized in Korea until either undergraduate or graduate degrees. It is for this reason that my observations line up with previous findings by Jeong (2004) in establishing the context of this research.

My position as an officer in the organization for a brief period also confirms this. In informal gatherings, I was often communicating in Korean in an ethnoracially homogenous environment of mostly Korean graduate students. Members and officers of KSO refrained and avoided any interactions that involved using English - which was the medium in which the most frequent form of racial microaggression was experienced. This was with the exception of being in the academic context, such as interactions involving course work or using the library services for research.

My interactions with members of KSO involved communicating strictly in Korean. I also never interacted with members of other racial and ethnic groups at KSO meetings, events, or activities. This exclusivity and limited English that prevents interaction have been

conceptualized as dissimilation (Jeong 2004), where Korean students interact only within the parameters of an ethnic enclave. Dissimilation, otherwise a form of boundary work in cultural membership (Lamont and Molnár 2002), became a source of intraethnic animosity between Korean and Korean American students. Racialized ignorance surfaced in homosocial environments where only Korean was spoken, differing from out-group interactions speaking in English. Oftentimes it became very different from in-group interactions such as avoiding expletives and racial epithets casually remarked in Korean. Racialized depiction of women of Color - “남미누나,” referring to Latinas, would be often cited by Seung Hyo, in racially and misogynistic flaunting of his sexual advances in settings when it was all KSO members who were men. This was especially the case when there were newcomers: “You gotta pick up 남미누나 here in Blacksburg. That’s where the real fun is at” said Seung Hyo. As disgusted as I was about this, my confrontation of this matter was met with the following remark by Seung Hyo: “we’re just here to have fun, stop talking so much about what you do with your major.” By way of avoidance in discussing racial matters, KSO members possessively invested in honorary whiteness, where racism outside anti-Korean sentiments was treated in a laissez-faire manner. In doing so, the possessive investment in honorary whiteness - accomplished through racial ignorance - reifies the existing racial order in creating and essentializing the racial category of honorary whiteness. In this way, Asian and Asian Americans are not merely whitening and assimilating (N. Y. Kim 2008). Rather, the triracial order is galvanized by the practice of investing in honorary whiteness, which in turn produces a transnational racial order between Korea and the U.S.

In KSO meetings behind doors, anti-Black racism was a common occurrence. Matters involving race and ethnicity were laden with blatant ethnocentrism and anti-Black racism.

Jinhoon, an officer who had served the organization for a few years, freely used racial epithets towards members of other ethnicities- for example, the racial epithet “짱깨; jjang-ggae,” which implies both Chinese food and Chinese people. Anti-Black racism would often be articulated casually as well. Akin to Picca and Feagin’s (2007) findings on whites’ normalizations of racial epithets in the backstage socio-spatial settings, KSO members openly vocalized racial matters backdoors. This is especially the case as communicating in Korean allowed KSO members to enter a backstage setting much more readily (e.g., restaurants). The following excerpt, which demonstrates this particular context, shows how a KSO member rhetorically frames Blackness with imminent urban danger:

After a welcome event for the academic year of 2019-2020, I invited all of the new incoming graduate students to a nearby local burger joint, who were basically seated at the table I was assigned to at the event. I ended up chatting with them for a good length of time over light refreshments at the local burger joint to get to know each other.

Because there were hardly any mentions at the event discussing matters of race and white supremacy that has shaped SU as a place, I initiated a discussion on the growing negative sentiments towards racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. We began to talk about gun violence and the resurgence of white supremacy in the U.S., all conversations being exchanged in Korean. A newly incoming graduate student named Hyungsoo, oldest in the room and male, casually remarked, “I lived in Northeastern City for my undergraduate degree, and you don’t want to be out there. Black people<sup>3</sup> have guns and it is very dangerous. If you’re in the wrong neighborhood, you run a risk of getting shot.”

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<sup>3</sup> 흑인; hūgin, a Black person

As my field notes illustrate, the incoming Korean graduate student imagined an imminent threat that conjured up Black men with guns in an urban setting. The maneuvering of topics from white people with guns to Black people with guns become almost synonymous with the transition of topics from a rural to an urban environment. For the incoming members, there was no interest in traversing across the colorline nor interacting genuinely with East Asian student organizations or with members of other racial and ethnic groups. Often, members of KSO invoked racial sentiments and an ethnocentric worldview that saw themselves as above Black inferiority. Junsun, a graduate student KSO member who was always keen on discussing political matters - both Korean and U.S. politics - often invoked the U.S. as a land of opportunity economically superior to Korea, where everyone could pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Junsun often remarked to me, “you should be grateful that you have a blue passport (implying U.S. citizenship).” For Junsun, it was trivial for Korean Americans, such as myself, to be preoccupied with Korean politics, expressing that there was no need for a U.S. citizen to be concerned. In doing so, he implicitly communicated the perceived superiority of the U.S. as an empire-state. The perceived superiority – American exceptionalism (Go 2011) - invoked by Junsun demonstrates the importance of national identity in the making of an intraethnic cultural boundary and membership (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Pyke and Dang 2003; Zhou and Bankston 2020). In this way, the possessive investment in honorary whiteness Junsun saw was steeped in the imperial modality in a similar trajectory observed in members of KASO.

Racial epithets and invocation of Black pathology were discussed so casually in Korean, which made Korean Americans uncomfortable - this was a sentiment echoed by a Korean-American multiracial member at a KASO event. There would often be complaints during the book club meetings, where Ahyoung, a Korean graduate student in her twenties, expressed

discontent and anger towards “미국애들; miguk-aedül, American kids” and how terrible of a service she received from a white, male employee at the local ice cream shop. She complained that she felt more and more embarrassed because of her accented English which elicited clarifying questions such as “excuse me?” and “what was that again?” While having experiences as victims of white racism themselves, members of KSO continued to invoke ethnocentrism; and most importantly, anti-Blackness, a colonial relic from the U.S. and Japanese imperialisms (Kwon 2017; J. Kim 2015). The anti-Asian racism in the U.S. is also equally as important to consider as a part of whites’ racial domination (Chou and Feagin 2015). However, what I wish to highlight is the highly understudied aspect of what precisely motivates Koreans’ anti-Black racism despite their various experiences of race-based discrimination in the U.S.

### ***The imperial standpoint of Korean Americans: KASO***

While tolerant of members of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, Korean Americans invoked the imperial, Eurocentric ideology as evidenced by their use and preference of anglicized first names and racial framing of “FOB.” The politics of belonging for Korean Americans facilitate the imperial standpoint by casting international Koreans as “FOBs” (Fresh Off the Boat). Pyke and Dang (2003) identify intraethnic othering- as well as acting “too white”- by biculturally assimilated Korean Americans as a form of internalized racism. As the notion of assimilation involves the politics of nationhood (Jung 2009), I suggest that it is rather a site of internalized colonialism (Fanon 1967; Memmi 1967) based on the imperial standpoint (Go 2017). In a global framework of race, biculturally assimilated identities of Korean Americans become enmeshed with the imperial standpoint of the U.S. empire (C. J. Kim 2000; N.Y. Kim



2008). Here, my analysis particularly focused on the linguistic dimension akin to the racial grammar discussed by Bonilla-Silva (2012).

Transnational ties with Korea, and broadly East Asia, were salient in KASO meetings. I observed how state-sanctioned grants funded the transnational business ties between the U.S. and Korea through study-abroad programs were presented at weekly meetings. As a site of brokering language, culture, and racial ideology, these programs groomed cultural brokers in service of the U.S. as an empire-state:

A white professor in the School of Business presented study abroad programs to Korea and China. Before she started the presentation, folks, including myself, were questioning why she was here. There was a packet she handed out which started to make sense by the time she began her presentation. “Do you guys love Kpop? Kdrama? BTS?” Funded by a federal organization based in the U.S. and sponsored by major Korean corporations, the faculty who was presenting marketed the study abroad programs as opportunities on a more popular cultural level. She presented SM town- a tourist destination of the major conglomerates churning out Kpop groups- as one of the destinations in the Korean study-abroad program.

The federal grants for these programs were, in a global framework, just one of the various justifications for the U.S. operating as an empire-state. The study-abroad programs socialize college bilingual undergraduates as cultural brokers. The faculty who gave this presentation valued the “market,” and “learning to do business with each other.” It is important to note here that “we” (i.e., the depiction of harmony between Korea and the U.S. as business partners by the professor promoting the study abroad program) was framed with an ideological presumption that there was not an asymmetry of power between the U.S. and Korea. The transnational

connections that structure Korea as an extension of the U.S. empire go beyond economic transactions (e.g., popular culture). They are also sites of how U.S. based racial ideology gets disseminated (N.Y. Kim 2008).

Some members of KASO, who identified as 1.5 generation and bilingual, distanced themselves from organizations such as KSO. This is consistent with existing research that points to the pressure experienced by Asian American students in higher education to racially and ethnically segregate (Museus and Park 2015). In these spaces, I was often called upon by Stephen, a 1.5 generation Korean American, in Korean. He purposefully chose to converse in Korean although he is fluently bilingual in both Korean and English:

At the informal gathering, I interacted with the multiracial members, one of which was a white-passing female -a student in sociology, who claimed she was “half-Chinese. Interactions with multiracial members who passed as white almost always involved disclosing this information in order to convey that although they passed as white, they identified as People of Color. Another white-passing fellow, who was half-Korean, interacted with me and a Korean fellow named Stephen. The multi-racial student, Adam, spoke to Stephen and me in Korean, who was conversing in Korean “I am also Korean. I am mixed blood.” He followed up with a remark that his mother is Korean, and that he was “half-Korean.”

At SU, Stephen chose to be in KASO because he *could*- he is both very fluent in Korean and English. Just as the Korean language works as a signifier of “Koreanness” (or Yellowness via various languages racialized as Asian) in this setting, which is racially embodied by the use of language itself- much in the same way it is with whiteness and English. Here, the definition of passing is grounded in Rockquemore and Brunnsma’s (2008) study that complicates the picture of

multiracial identity. Because identity and identification are not consistent, Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2008) point to the site of one's socialization and peer network influence self-perception and racial identity formation in multiracial individuals particularly if they are perceived by others as "white." The protean multiracial identity (Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2008), was performed by the white-passing multi-racial Korean American was done through the performance of speaking Korean. Passing as white, Adam's ethnoracial identity, "Korean" and "Asian" comes into play to signify "more than" white. Most importantly, this showcases the presumed default and normality of whiteness (Lewis 2004).

The unidirectional reading of racial cues was much more apparent at sites such as KSO in comparison to KASO *because* there are other People of Color at KASO events. While similar, the ways in which KASO members interacted with notions of race was very much in service of whiteness. The study-abroad program that was presented in KASO meetings is hardly innocuous and designed to benefit and uphold the U.S. empire. Deeply rooted in U.S. imperialism, the historical construction of "notions of Koreanness... stem from their histories as colonized subjects whose essences cannot be captured within the parameters of a territorially bound nation" (Kwon 2017: 278). As I have shown with my interaction with Junsun who designated my national identity as "American," similar intraethnic animosity was salient between KASO and KSO members. My observations also reaffirm Pyke and Dang's (2003) findings. Albeit being aware of white racism growing up in the U.S. society, second plus generation Korean Americans maintained a cultural boundary on the basis of language and national identity (e.g., the often-used FOB designations for newly-arrived Korean students). This finding suggests the internalization of white racism as Asian Americans most frequently experience racial microaggression regarding English (Wong-Padoongpatt et al. 2017). These moments of

intraethnic disconnect between KASO and KSO members are just one of many illustrative examples of the complexities of Asian Americans' racial identity in relation to their national identity.

### ***The white space: SU's library***

The majority of the staff and faculty at the library in SU's were white. In this archetypical white space (Anderson 2015), I would often experience racially charged interactions that involved having to maintain "civility" as a front-desk worker. Although there were diversity training events for the library staff and faculty. In part by the order of the DEI initiatives from SU, there were multiple training events held and set up by the library's upper administrative faculty. However, the training events were superficial lip-service, consistent with the existing research findings on diversity (Prashad 2001). It even went so far as a white male faculty beginning the discussion with a remark, "let's get this clear- there is no such thing as a utopia." There was nothing much to follow after his statement as it would challenge his view that is apriori claiming that racial democracy is not possible, and therefore insinuation of the notion that "there is no utopia" gives insight to the racial inaction desired by this particular white male faculty.

I was often greeted by members from both KSO and KASO- a welcome interaction outside ones where I had to remain professional. I continued to see even more members from both organizations during the exam periods in the academic semester. What was most notable is that KSO and KASO members did not sit together at the same table or area in the study space with the exception of those who crossed the boundaries as biculturally assimilated Korean. This is because of the linguistic barriers - and thus cultural barriers. In the second analytic chapter, I

discuss more in detail the individual experiences KSO and KASO members that illuminate precisely why such intraethnic divide persists on the basis of language and culture. Some KSO members who recognized me from the events and activities were relieved to see a Korean person at the front desk. This moment of relief was especially relevant when I began to speak Korean as the following fieldnote excerpt shows:

I was approached by A Korean student who was having trouble communicating his inquiries in English- he wanted a charging brick for his laptop computer. After a series of ineffective communication in English trying to figure out if the library carried the laptop charger, he asked me if I was Korean, to which I said “yes.” When I began to speak in Korean, he breathed a big sigh of relief.

My interaction with this Korean student patron who was relieved to see me is exemplary of the ways that KSO members relied on the ethnic enclave - a diasporic practice. The seemingly mundane interaction I had at the library became a frequently occurring interaction throughout my participant observation working as a front desk clerk. There was a clear cultural boundary (Lamont and Molnár 2002) at work - English. This moment of relief I observed also briefly captures the discomfort and the lack of feeling like one belongs. People of Color who lacked English proficiency, in general, had to navigate the white space of SU’s library as a “non-American,” “outsider,” and as racialized bodies “out of place” (Harrison 2013). While it is certainly true that whites who are French, Swedish, etc., can experience similar forms of ostracism, racial power does not apply due to the ways that the West has constructed the very notion of culture (Said 1978). My frequent interactions with Korean students who had difficulty communicating in English, which entailed a similar scenario as the excerpt above, speak volumes about racial domination and language in relation to belonging.

This did not seem to be the case based on my interactions with KASO members, who went to the library for more than just cramming for an upcoming exam - they would often use these spaces to socialize and meet with each other as well as to study. This was applicable for both undergraduate and graduate student members of KSO, for example, Jonathan, who attended the university and decided to continue in the graduate program. This support system was non-existent for KSO members, who usually sat alone or with few people who they knew very well. In contrast, KASO members would freely traverse the various tables and socially interact with each other beyond the purposes of purely studying as the following excerpt shows:

I walked in five minutes late to my afternoon shift at the library. As I hurried in, I saw John, Ben, Daphne, and Grace - all officers of KASO except Ben - sitting all in a group huddled together at the library. The library at SU, especially the first and second floor where students are abundant during midterms and finals, are designed to be a study space. Since where I clock in for my shift is nearby the table they are sitting, Ben starts to wave and I am seen by the group. "Dude, I saw you all the way over (entrance to the library) there anyways!" John remarked. "What are you guys all doing here? Studying?" I asked. "Sort of. But we're just hanging out for now, watching YouTube videos" John responded with a laugh. Oftentimes I would receive group text messages from KASO if anyone wanted to meet at the library for the dual purposes of socializing while catching up on exam reviews.

Throughout my participant observation at the library, I interacted with fifteen members and officers from KASO, including those who came up to strike up a chat with me informally. Grace would often come to the front desk to say hello to me, even asking me on one occasion if I wanted to try her home-baked cookies. Beyond just studying, KASO members utilized the

library as a socializing place where one could meet and have fun all under the guise of cramming for an exam or socializing in-between classes. This was not the case for KSO members who felt isolated navigating the white space of the library. While I did not specifically observe instances of anti-Asian racism experienced by KASO members in the library, I was subjected to various forms of racial microaggression from the patrons as well as the staff. Given these nuances observed that highlight the global construction of race – and racial identities in service of whiteness – I further discuss the importance of my overarching findings in the following section.

### *Dismantling the possessive investment in (honorary)whiteness*

Stuart Hall (1990) stated that identity is an on-going social process in contrast to being fixed and accomplished. Racial belonging is never a completed process for Koreans and Korean Americans. Rather, racial identity is discursively legitimized through performance (Ehlers 2012; Rosino 2017). For my participants, the use of language was at the center of their performance of racial identities in relation to the racial ideology of the U.S. empire. As a force of global whiteness, the imperial standpoint holds whites at the top of the racial hierarchy. Following the work of Lipsitz's (1998) critical analysis of whiteness, I illustrated the racialized linguistic social process- the signification of racial essence and racial ideology through uses of Korean and English - central to the making of the possessive investment in honorary whiteness. Korean internationals possessively invest in honorary whiteness by pathologizing Blackness (e.g., Jinhoon's racial comment), seeing themselves above Black inferiority. Korean Americans articulated both their Korean and American identities which upheld U.S. imperialism and hegemony.

The possessive investment in honorary whiteness chooses complicity over the critical confrontation of everyday racial ignorance, and, it does so, in the service of global whiteness. The findings of this study suggest that language is inextricably intertwined with transnational racial ideology facilitated by the global relations between Korea and the U.S. (N.Y. Kim 2008). I highlight this theoretical framework as a lens to capture how racial ideology is constituted and essentialized transnationally. Language, a central locus of affective racialized meaning, structures the everyday racial interactions in service of white supremacy as a global project. While this study examined Korea – and Korean and Korean Americans - as racial actors invested in upholding the racial order, I invite future studies to further critique, build, and test other imperial relations that structure racial domination globally and transnationally in different nation-states.

The insights from this exploratory study open up theorizing race in the U.S. with Korea as an extension of the U.S. empire. Increasing the unit of analysis from a single nation-state to the level of the global delineates the patterns of imperial modality (Go 2011). The imperial standpoint is promulgated through American exceptionalism (Go 2011), which is legible by its forensic evidence signified in language. The birth of the U.S. as a nation has been founded upon white supremacy (Feagin 2006) rooted in Eurocentrism (Mills 1997). The social processes embedded within the structure of Eurocentrism, assimilation, is deeply rooted in whiteness and culture (Jung 2009; Withers 2017), resulting in the colonization of the mind (Fanon 1967). I argue that the justification for the tri-racial order in the U.S. is made possible *because* the possessive investment in honorary whiteness works to shield whiteness. Decolonizing the sources of knowledge in this study is also through the inspiration from Black Feminist epistemology. Collins (1993) has acknowledged that U.S. universities are structured much in the way that



plantations are. Judd's (2019) epistemological break from white and male logic of "rationality" is echoed as a backbone - and as a driving force - in how I applied and attempted to decolonize what is traditionally considered as white sociological canon. This study is in part an effort to contribute to the greater project of expanding the canon of Sociology through decolonizing its white supremacist and male epistemological roots.

Studies conceptualizing how racial ideology is communicated, promulgated, and structured globally should also consider the emancipatory potential of critical self-examination by Asian and Asian Americans. As observed in Trieu and H. Lee's (2018) findings, a critical reading of history has the potential to awaken Asian and Asian Americans' racial consciousness. Korean Americans, and more broadly Asian Americans, are also gifted with the "second sight" to see through the veil (DuBois 2007; Chou and Feagin 2015). As Brunson and colleagues (2013) argue, it is imperative, especially in a predominantly white academic space, that the walls of whiteness must be pierced and penetrated. I believe this is also applicable here to the possessive investment in honorary whiteness. In order to disrupt white supremacy as a global project, we must disrupt the legitimization of the racial order on a global scale. The possessive investment in honorary whiteness must be critically interrogated, challenged, and further understood in reshaping and awakening critical racial consciousness. Asians and Asian Americans must remember the Civil Rights Movement, which propelled the political agency of People of Color through Black protests, social movement mobilization, and eventual legislative, structural changes including, but certainly not limited to, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

## **CHAPTER 3 : The Racialization of Cultural-Tool Kit and the Racial Positions of Asia and Asian Americans**

### **ABSTRACT**

Drawing from eleven (11) in-depth interviews with Korean and Korean American students at a predominantly white university (PWI) coupled with ethnographic participant observation of registered Korean American and Korean student organizations, this study develops how “Hallyu”- a nomenclature to refer to the Korean cultural wave - is received and interpreted by Asian and Asian American students. Borrowing from Swidler’s metaphor of a cultural toolkit, this study shows a broader understanding of the immigrant experience of Asian Americans while simultaneously highlighting the dominant frame in which Asian Americans see themselves within the racial order vis-a-vis Hallyu. Furthermore, this study captures the racial dynamics of Asian American college students as they express 1) racial apathy, 2) racial and ethnic identity crises, and 3.) experience of hyper-racialization. In complicating these nuances, this study illustrates the limitations of diversity, inclusion, and efforts at “multiculturalism,” suggesting analysts of race start from a global, transnational framework to examine the racialization of Asian and Asian Americans.

Keywords: Asia and Asian America, Racialization, Transnational Racism, Racial and Ethnic Minorities, Culture and Consumption

## INTRODUCTION

Given Korea's economic development in the past decade, there has been an emergence of the Korean culture industry, "Hallyu." Hallyu, otherwise dubbed "the Korean Wave," refers to the positive reception of Korean popular culture outside of Korea. Existing scholarship has extensively analyzed the visibility of Hallyu on a global scale (Jung 2015; Y. Kim 2013; Lee and Nornes 2015; Oh 2015), where the geographical location does not restrict the flow of information. An archetypical instance of Hallyu's expansion to the West is exemplified by the popular YouTube music video by Psy, "Gangnam Style," in 2012. This music video propelled Korean culture to a global audience. Hallyu's global phenomenon was made possible by the digitalized terrain of social life (Jin 2016; Lee and Nornes 2015). For example, Jung (2015) posits that global recognition was possible *because* of development in technologies such as social media that made Hallyu much more porous and accessible.

Hallyu is a product of a deeply embedded and calculated state-sanctioned project to penetrate the Pan Asian and Western markets (Jin 2016; Lee and Nornes 2015). Hallyu has succeeded in the global marketing of Korean popular culture for mass-consumption (Y. Kim 2013; Lee and Nornes 2015). As an assemblage of state-sanctioned projects, Hallyu appeals to a global audience. Hallyu has been identified by the existing scholarship as a source of diasporic cultural identity (Oh 2015), as cultural diplomacy (Jang and Paik 2012), and as implicated in the history of Western colonialism (Jin and Ryoo 2014). One place where these factors can be observed is the localization of communication in social media. For example, the K-Pop group BTS uses English on social media to communicate to the Western audience. This is a purposeful strategy employed by the industry and is directly attributed to Hallyu's growth globally (Jung 2015). It is important to note the significance of the intentional strategy whereby the Hallyu

industry purposefully employs biculturally assimilated Koreans to become cultural brokers (Jin 2016). In addition, Hallyu also becomes a site where racial representation becomes intertwined with the politics of belonging - assimilation. Assimilation is an important aspect of racial domination. Eng and Han (2018) have described the process of assimilation for Asian Americans as psychically dealing with the material conditions of whiteness. They state that “[t]o the extent that ideals of whiteness for Asian Americans and other people of color remain unattainable, processes of assimilation are suspended, conflicted, and unresolved” (Eng and Han 2018: 36).

It is imperative to better understand the racial position of Asian Americans and the consequences of racial trauma shaping the racial discourse in the United States. For example, while the culture of Hallyu has garnered attention in the U.S., anti-Asian hate crime has been on the rise since the COVID-19 pandemic (Russell, Horse, and Cayanan 2021). While not a direct correlation, it is hard not to see this as a reinvocation of the anti-Asian racism dating back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Given the persistence of racial tensions in the United States, it is important to map how racial representations are manipulated by white supremacy. Simultaneously, analysts of race must better situate how agency is sought, enacted, and achieved through everyday racial representations. For some analysts of culture, everyday life becomes an important analytic entry point to better capture the nuances of resistance. In this way, theories of culture (de Certeau 1984; Swidler 1986, 2001) have the potential to expand upon racial dynamics in the U.S. As a *racialized* cultural medium, Hallyu becomes an important analytic entry point for understanding how the racial order is culturally mediated. Given the existing scholarly focus on the class stratification (Jin 2016), globalization (Y. Kim 2013), and diasporic cultural identity (Oh 2015) of Hallyu, the cultural mediums of Hallyu (i.e., K-Pop and K-Drama) and its reception in the U.S implicate racial matters. In order to delineate the *racial and cultural* threads

that structure the *terms of representation*, this study asks the following questions that reposition race within the scope of Hallyu: 1) How do Korean American students reconcile and process their racial and national identity?; 2) How does Hallyu provide a space of belonging in the making of Korean American diasporic experience?; And, 3) what are the limits of Hallyu as a diasporic practice constrained by the lack of control in defining the terms of representation?

This study bridges the epistemological divide between sociological theories of culture and sociological theories of race in an attempt to pragmatically understand the racialization of Asian Americans in U.S. society. In the U.S. racial discourse, diversity, inclusion, and equity has become the dominant ideological viewpoint on racial matters across major social institutions (Thomas 2019). This discourse is particularly troublesome and as a continuation of colorblind racial ideology (Bonilla Silva 2018) and racial ignorance (Mueller 2020), diversity and inclusion efforts celebrate racial representation at a superficial level. Doing so creates a problem of representation through the macrostructural forces that shape the *terms* of representation. This is a crucial factor that reinforces race as a social structure (Omi and Winant 2015). Racial representations *are* social facts (Magubane 2001), a set of taken-for-granted assumptions that structure social reality. Considering these factors, I draw from aspects of Ann Swidler's (1986, 2001) toolkit model of culture to draw out the ways that social interactions become racialized through the use of culture. Furthermore, I integrate Eng and Han's (2018) findings on the unresolved racial trauma of Asian Americans to show the process of hyper-racialization of Asian Americans, and that Hallyu becomes pervasive in the mediation of the racialization process. Because for Hallyu, as with many other popular cultures, having control of representations are outside the agentic possibilities in Swidler's toolkit model of culture. Hence, I argue that such hyper-racialization masked by diversity, equity, and inclusion ideology poses a critical set of

challenges for confronting contemporary racial domination. The “inclusivity” and “multiculturalism” frame that is the dominant viewpoint on racial matters make racial domination opaque (Thomas 2019) and provides whites a status distinction (Underhill 2019). This is dangerous because, as with racial colorblindness, it is hard to pinpoint racism in the backdrop of diversity and inclusion narratives and frames. Not only does this frame of racial ideology render racism opaque, but it also claims to recognize the existence and persistence of racial inequality as lip service. Additionally, existing studies on assimilation fail to capture the ways that nationality and imperial modality within Asian and Asian Americans. This is important because there is a racial implication for under analyzing the transnational connections that constitute racial ideology which is especially salient around Hallyu. Hallyu is a Korean nomenclature to refer to the Korean popular culture industry as a whole. With consideration of Hallyu, this study considers its impact in various racial contexts and as a main overarching topic.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Culture as an Everyday Practice*

Ann Swidler (1986, 2001) gives primacy to the agency side of the culture and society debate, situating culture as a non-elitist, pragmatic social practice that anyone can acquire and put into action. For Swidler, culture works as a “tool kit,” drawing from a “repertoire,” and through the use of “strategies of action” (Swidler 1986: 273). Swidler (1986, 2001) identifies “settled lives” and “unsettled lives.” Swidler sees these two different social climates as either opening up or inhibiting new possibilities of gaining cultural repertoires and developing different strategies of action. While Swidler’s formulation does not include examples of racial matters, it can certainly extend to racialized contexts. Swidler’s (2001) own application of the tool kit

model applies to something as mundane as a divorcee (unsettled lives) attempting to learn new hobbies (repertoire) in order to self-cultivate or better one's life (strategies of action). Swidler's theory holds potential for analyzing symbolic aspects of racism found in culture. Swidler (2001) shows the structural side of culture that guides action in the form of codes, context, and institutions. We symbolically navigate meanings through practices utilizing codes. Context unifies culture, which organizes or reorganizes its existing modalities. Finally, institutions "...provide templates for the organization of particular cultural packages" (Swidler 2001: 179). Taken together, Swidler's model of culture explicates how culture works at the level of the individual in relation to social structures.

What Swidler emphasized as "strategies of action" is culture operating at the level of everyday practices with possibilities for social agency. For de Certeau (1984), culture is a "... cleavage which organizes modernity" which "... has constituted the *whole* as its *remainder*; this remainder has become what... [de Certeau calls] ... culture" (P. 6). Therefore, de Certeau finds that culture is ubiquitously practiced in everyday life, where "strategies" and "tactics" make it possible for culture to work as a source of creativity to circumnavigate planned discourses. The "strategy" is akin to that of seeing the city from the above, in a birds-eye view; whereas "tactics" are the lived realities that consist of deviations that the "strategy" cannot account for (de Certeau 1984: 97). His work can also be applied to racial matters, however with limitations. For example, Beyonce's "Lemonade" is a "strategy" of resistance and performance against white supremacist and patriarchal norms in music (Miles 2017). Popular culture, in this way, plays a representative role where the acquisition of such a "strategy" inspires everyday "tactics" - encouraging listeners to consider the insidiousness of the historical marginalization of Black women.

Schudson (1989) maintains a middle-ground position between the dichotomized debate on the effects and processes of culture. This polarity is demonstrated by the Marxist approach (ideology/hegemony) and the tool kit model by Swidler (1986, 2001). In order to show the grey area in which structure and agency operate as mutually constitutive to each other, Schudson emphasizes conditions where agency becomes possible in culture (thus the effect of culture). Indeed, “[t]here are a variety of more subtle questions concerning the role of culture in social life, but these questions of whether ‘exposure’ to certain symbols or messages in various media actually lead people to change how they think about the world or act in it are powerful and central” (Schudson 1989:159). As Schudson’s contributions help ground culture within both structure and agency, when theorizing race through his theoretical architecture, the toolkit model of culture becomes a viable point of analysis to illustrate *both* racial domination and agency. Here, it is important to note that in conjunction with the notion of modernity *as* existing in whiteness (Jung and Vargas 2021), Schudson’s focus on structure allows for an understanding of culture as derivative of the racial structure in the United States - which has been founded on white supremacy (Christian 2019; Bonilla-Silva 2018; Mills 1997; Chou and Feagin 2015). While race is a transhistorical and global construction (Mills 1997), it is absent in de Certeau’s (1984) analysis of history and social domination. With this acknowledgment, critically restructuring Swidler’s toolkit theory to hostile racial climate (unsettled lives) allows for a possibility to understand how Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) circumnavigate racism (repertoire) with potential for agency (strategies of action). Albeit with limitations, racializing the toolkit theory of culture to the increasingly hostile racial climate in the U.S. helps to elucidate the unsettled lives of BIPOC.



### *Surviving Whiteness Through the Diasporic Cultural Toolkit*

Since the paradigm of defining race as a shared cultural practice (Omi and Winant 2015), analysts of race have focused on the structural dimensions (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2018) as well as incorporating global approaches (Christian 2019) to analyzing race. Race is an organizing principle of society used to legitimize the very foundation of society. As a relic of history, race has been devised by white European settler-colonialists to legitimize their colonial history and render BIPOC as subhuman and barbaric in comparison to whites (Mills 1997). In this way, the construction of Asians' racial position in the U.S. was created upon the image of whiteness (Eng and Han 2018). It is with this understanding that I attempt to use Swidler's aracial toolkit perspective of culture to better unpack the nuanced racialization of Asian Americans that occurs through culturally mediated racism. Here, Hallyu provides a common cultural practice that facilitates and provides belonging for Asian Americans in the U.S seeking refuge from the goal of unachievable whiteness.

The racial stratification system in the U.S. is a culmination of a transhistorical and global construct (J. K. Kim 2015). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the ways that culture is always changing in the context of the "now," the history-in-the-making. As a prominent cultural medium, Hallyu provides a way to analyze the global interconnection of the everyday practice of culture and the racial discourse in the U.S. Here, the tool-kit conceptualization of culture is particularly useful in illustrating the process of how people acquire new cultural repertoires, and therefore adjust and respond to their particular social conditions. In this way, the tool-kit theory of culture allows an analysis of how seemingly innocuous and mundane practices are pragmatic tools used to subvert or adhere to the changing landscape of the racial discourse in the U.S. As Stuart Hall (2018) sees it:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. It is only from this second position that we can properly understand the traumatic character of 'the colonial experience' (P. 225).

In this way, the success of Hallyu in the West cannot be reduced to merely a position of cultural diplomacy. It is a resource that facilitates bonding and belonging in the making of the Korean diaspora (Oh 2015). Racial identity is not monolithic and fixed. This is evidenced by Omi and Winant's (2015) notion of racial projects. Racial projects "connect what race means in a particular discursive or ideological practice and how both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning" (Omi and Winant 2015: 125). Additionally, analysis of race grounds theories of culture to understand the links between meaning-making and racial representation. While aracial, the toolkit theory of culture can capture the distinct connection between representation and individual action within racial contexts and situations. Swidler's notion of the "strategies of action" is crucial as BIPOC navigates white spaces. DuBois's (2007) main conceptual tools, the "second sight" and "double consciousness," help to direct Swidler's aracial toolkit theory of culture to engage racial power dynamics. Double-consciousness serves to metaphorize the conflictual relations between racial identity and racial identification (DuBois 2007), in other words, the unsettled lives of BIPOC.

Second sight insinuates insight into how BIPOC can identify strategies to circumnavigate racialized interactions (DuBois 2007).

If put in conversation with a DuBoisian conceptualization of racial meaning, projection, and affect (Chou and Feagin 2015; DuBois 1999, 2007), Swidler's (1986) conceptual tool provides a way to *understand* how hostile racial climates (unsettled lives) influence and intertwine with diasporic cultural practices of racial agency. Furthermore, Swidler's framework must also consider that BIPOC are always living unsettled lives under the current arrangement of racial order in the U.S. Indeed, theorists of culture have noted the ways that structural determinism disregards the conditions (Schudson 1989; Sewell 1992) and practice (Bourdieu 1977; de Certeau 1984) of agency. Bridging interactional conceptualizations by W.E.B. DuBois (Dubois 1999, 2007; Itzigsohn and Brown 2015; Morris 2015) with the aracial theoretical framework of structure and agency allows a cultural analysis of racial power and how BIPOC - and particularly for this study, Korean Americans - circumnavigate around white racial meanings embedded in cultural hegemony (Hebdige 1979). Additionally, these seemingly two divergent theoretical frameworks allow an analysis of race within the context of both the practice of agency within the given structural constraints.

## METHODS

The research design of this study employs critical qualitative methodology (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Madison 2011) using semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann 2014). These interviews are supplemented by my participant observation as a dance student at the KrAD K-Pop dance troupe workshops that took place through KASO. Due to the reflexive nature of the research design, the analytic procedures in this study relied heavily on the iterative process

between data analysis and theory development based on abductive logic (Maclure 2013) as well as my position as a participant in the workshop. As a part of a larger ethnographic project, this study primarily draws from the eleven (11) semi-structured interviews with respondents with whom I built rapport during my ethnographic fieldwork at KrAD workshops as well as KSO events with other participating members - the Korean and Korean-American undergraduate and graduate students at SU. A self-reported demographic form was concurrently collected after consent for the interview. Respondents were asked to self-identify whether they identify as Korean or Korean-American in addition to their generational status.

[Table 1 here]

Table 1 outlines the respondents' age, gender, nationality, university affiliation, and if applicable, generational status. Overall, the majority of respondents were in their 20s, with an approximately equal distribution of gender, and undergraduate and graduate university students. However, the gender distribution for first-generation Koreans - and particularly international Korean graduate students - were exclusively men. With the exception of two interviews with Taehoon and Dongguk, all interviews were conducted in English. Interviews conducted in Korean were transcribed in Korean and analyzed prior to being translated to English. I translated these interviews in order to keep the context exclusive to the Korean language as well as having conducted the interviews myself in Korean.

Respondents were given a consent form that allowed them to acknowledge their consent and permission to participate in the interview. All participants in this study were given time to reconsider if they wanted to participate in this study - from the process of obtaining consent to even after the interview. Before the interview, respondents were asked for their preferred language of choice - two male Korean respondents chose to proceed with the interview in

Korean. The interview was recorded with participants' permission, transcribed, then coded subsequently using the abductive approach (MacLure 2013). All interview respondents were assigned pseudonyms upon transcription of the audio-recorded interview.

Influenced by the larger project and my understanding of the context of KSO, KASO, and the KrAD workshops, respondents were asked a host of questions related to incidents or events involving them. All of the respondents were asked about their biography, race and socialization, and linguistic matters on race. All Korean and Korean American respondents were asked to weigh in on their feelings, thoughts, and overall perceptions of Hallyu (referenced as K-Pop, etc.). Through this process, the axial codes (Strauss and Corbin 1990) were initially derived. Additionally, they were augmented by my findings from my ethnographic field notes and further refined by referencing Eng and Han's (2018) findings on Asian American students coping with racism in the U.S. Doing so allowed me to contextualize questions unanswered that helped to shape the scope of this study.

I was able to recruit respondents during my time conducting ethnographic participant observation for a larger project. Therefore, the participation and solicitation of participants were strictly voluntary with no monetary compensation. My positionality and familiarity with the respondents were indispensable to the analytic lens of this study. This was also evident in the conversations that were captured in the interviews.

## FINDINGS

My overall findings show how second-generation Korean-American university students signify racial and ethnic solidarity among intraethnic group interactions. This is consistent with the empirical findings of Oh's (2015) study of Korean American, Hallyu, and diasporic cultural

identity. However, my findings extend the practice as not just merely “diasporic” but with real, material, and most importantly, racial, consequences for Asian and Asian Americans. This is important because the dominant racial views that Asian and Asian Americans hold reify the racial order globally. My findings extend to the common thread of racial trauma and solidarity building among the Korean-American respondents surrounding their perceptions of Hallyu. At the same time, Hallyu became a racialized cultural medium that made the Korean-American respondents feel hypervisible about their racial and ethnic identity. For Korean international students, Hallyu *was* the popular culture that they were accustomed to. Below, I capture the complexities of the dynamics between Korean, Korean Americans, and Hallyu.

#### *Hallyu, Racial Dissociation, and Belonging*

The participants described their use of Hallyu in varying ways. This depended heavily on their racial and ethnic identity, generational status, and age, which is consistent with existing empirical findings (Oh 2015). Christine, a second-generation Korean American undergraduate student in her twenties narrated a story of coping with institutional tokenism by SU. While narrating her memory of the annual culture program that showcases various traditional performances by Asian student organizations at SU, Christine narrated the following incident:

JWK: So you haven't really experienced anything that you would think of as racist in your time here at Southern University in the past few years?

Christine: So the [redacted] student organizations held a culture show just like we did this year. And usually different Asian student organizations participate. Filipino, Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. And then, of course, different multicultural, Greek organizations, right? And then FSO (Filipino Student Organization) just recently

participated last year. And they did a traditional Filipino dance. I can't pronounce it for the life of me. So I don't want to butcher it on audio, but FSO performed a traditional Filipino dance. One of our members (in the Korean Student Organization) even choreographed it. *And they took a group photo afterward and SU used that group photo of the dance to promote to reach out to international students.* They're all Filipino American students. So... they (SU) didn't even verify their sources...

Here, while having remarked that she had “not felt any discrimination that she could recall,” Christine’s narrative about institutional tokenism invokes Eng and Han’s (2018) analyses of Asian American college students’ racial trauma and dissociation. Defined as a psychological state where racial matters are repressed (Eng and Han 2018), racial dissociation is crucial to understanding the experience of generation Y (those in their 20s at the time of this writing). While seen as “un-Sociological,” psychoanalysis combined with behavioral analysis offers a more comprehensive understanding of social action (Hancock and Garner 2015). In so doing, the above racist experience observed by Christine also contextualizes the limits of her involvement in the K-Pop dance troupe as “a place to have fun and feel like you aren’t being judged.” She further remarked, “I can say the only time I was taken aback was when [a white rideshare driver] asked me how my English was really good, and how he thought I spoke English very well.” Growing up in a neighborhood that she described as “diverse,” Christine’s racial encounter was not at the forefront of the discussion in the initial interview. After being visibly (and audibly) upset after narrating the story of institutional tokenism, Christine remembered the racially dissociated memory of herself being cast as a “perpetual foreigner” (i.e., the rideshare driver’s “surprise” at her command of the English language). The racial situation which Christine remarked and “swept under the rug,” was a common thread that runs in the narratives of second-

generation Korean Americans' mechanism of survival to racially dissociate. This is especially pertinent given her existence in the current racial climate in the U.S. Indeed, reports have demonstrated the increased racially based hate crime towards Asians and Pacific Islanders (Jeung, Horse, and Cayanan 2021), which makes Christine's story palpable in the current U.S. racial climate hostile towards Asian women.

For second-generation Korean Americans, Hallyu also worked as a cultural medium to foster a sense of connection and belonging. As Oh (2015) finds, Hallyu becomes a resource for identity in shaping the preference for intraethnic peer relationships among second-generation Korean Americans. Going beyond this are the ways that Hallyu works as a racialized toolkit, leaving the "K" in the "K-Pop" hypervisible, phonetically signifying its Korean-ness while simultaneously invoking it visually. Participants often came in and acknowledged that the racism they experienced was tacit. The same went for the racialization of Hallyu and K-Pop. In the following excerpt, Ashley, who is a second-generation Korean American describes her experiences of simultaneously finding a common ground, but at the same time, articulating contexts where she felt hypervisible about her race in relation to Hallyu. Ashley had initially grown up in a predominantly white neighborhood and moved to a Korean ethnic enclave throughout her K-12 education. The following excerpt highlights these nuances from her experience:

Ashley: Now that I think about it, it was kind of pretty racist of them (friends in high school) because they were like "I just don't want to see peace signs and only Koreans." ... They want me to be not whitewashed, but just in between. I think they were just joking around about it. Yeah, but then, you know, moving to [a town in the Eastern United States], I was surrounded by Korean people and it couldn't be helped. I just got



used to being around Koreans all the time... I'm not someone who hates K-Pop or anything like that. I listen to Korean music *every day* (emphasized). But it's just like, it's so *interesting* to me when someone who isn't Korean will come up to me like "oh my god, did you hear BTS's new song?" I tell them, "I didn't even hear (the song)... How do you hear about it?"... It gets to a certain point where it kind of feels uncomfortable when [I am] expected... to know everything about Korean culture because they're interested.

Here, Ashley describes her experiences of transitioning from a predominantly white town to a Korean ethnic enclave. Consistent with previous findings (J. W. Kim 2021; Pyke and Dang 2003), biculturally assimilated expectations arose within the context of her encounters with her new Korean peers. At the same time, she also found solace and belonging through Hallyu in intraethnic peer relations. However, Ashley also vented frustration about her non-Korean peers' fervent line of questioning on her command of the latest K-Pop songs, which made her feel hypervisible about her own racial and ethnic identity. Ashley's narrative shows how identity is reduced to racial and ethnic dimensions as evident in her interactions with non-Korean K-Pop fans. Overall, the way that Ashley feels about Hallyu implicates belonging and racialization. In Ashley's words: "I feel uncomfortable." This was the common theme that echoed throughout my conversations with Ashley. Unironically, I felt the same way.

*"I don't really care about Hallyu": An Extension of Intraethnic Othering*

Oftentimes, second-generation respondents either enjoyed Hallyu culture, as a mechanism of bonding, or distanced themselves from it. Additionally, the intra-ethnic othering within the Asian American community is also a driving factor (J. W. Kim 2021; Pyke and Dang 2003). The volatility and overt rejection of "home" culture while valorizing "host" culture is a

sign of internalizing whiteness (Eng and Han 2018). It is important to distinguish this example from a white person distancing their own “whiteness” because whites can insert and exit from their “ethnicity” without having to suffer the consequences of racialization (Lewis 2003). Not only does culture, as broadly defined, operate on the basis of whiteness (Brunsma et al. 2021), it is one of the primary ways in which Asian Americans internalize whiteness in assimilating into the U.S. society (Eng and Han 2018). This was a theme that was voiced by some of the Korean American respondents, especially given that some of these respondents explicitly stated that they are racially conscious. The notion of “Fresh Off the Boat” (FOB) is important to examine in Jinhee’s response. FOB is often a derogatory label designated to those who recently immigrated and are not biculturally assimilated (Pyke and Dang 2003). In fact, this became the center of the discussion when I asked Jinhee, a Korean-American undergraduate student in her early 20s, about her feelings on Hallyu. She immediately responded without hesitation: “I don’t really listen too much to K-Pop or watch K-Drama.” Jinhee’s story elucidates some insight into the complexities of coalition and community building barricaded by intraethnic othering:

JWK: So you said you mostly hang out with diverse people, but when it comes to Korean people, do you not like to hang out with people who are “just” Korean?

Jinhee: Yeah, so I don't hang out with FOBS, because first of all, I'm not really used to speaking Korean, I guess. I mean, I am like I can read and write and speak Korean, but it's kind of awkward to me and to have... [fake] conversations in Korean. That's why I don't really do it. But for me and my friends who are like American Korean, like those who also know Korean, would sometimes just say random words in Korean in an English sentence... Or like, this is bad, but if you want to talk about someone will just say like, in Korean or something and be like, Oh, “옆에 있는 여자” (translation – the woman next to

us), just say the rest of it in English or something like that. It's really bad. Yeah, I don't speak to them fully in Korean. That's why I don't hang out with people who only speak Korean. Also, like, I don't think I'm used to their culture.

It is imperative to parse out the conundrum of assimilation itself. The way in which Jinhee went about articulating the use of Korean to escape the white space draws a parallel with Ashley, who also invoked a similar sentiment on not fitting in with Koreans who did not speak English.

Again, consistent with previous findings (Pyke and Dang 2003; J. W. Kim 2021), the rejection of Korean cultural identity by Jinhee signifies racial dissociation as observed in case studies of Asian American students (Eng and Han 2018). In this case, the micro-interactional moment where Jinhee expressed “I just don’t hang out with FOBs” is not just a mere status distinction (Pyke and Dang 2003; J. W. Kim 2021). As Jinhee considers the loss of her command of the Korean language, “I'm not really used to speaking Korean, I guess,” illuminates the reasons behind her intraethnic distancing. This is important to consider as the external, social behavior can be explored further through a psychoanalytic lens to further explicate the motivations of the interaction (Hancock and Garner 2015). Then, it also becomes important to privilege the analysis of internalized trauma and loss. These nuances are under-analyzed in the study of race and ethnicity. Rather, the juridical-political structures have been an analytical focus in the field of critical race theory (Ehlers 2012; Eng and Han 2018). This limits the ways that, for example, Jinhee’s own identity crisis can be interpreted in terms of racial and ethnic matters. She is unable to reconcile her Korean identity with American, and therefore, her motivation in intraethnic othering (and being felt othered). From this perspective, her introductory statements on Hallyu allude to it: “I don’t really listen too much to K-Pop or watch K-Drama.”

Korean university affiliates who were international students also felt the need to establish a sense of belonging and cultural connections exclusive to their own community. However, none of the participants in this category (i.e., international Korean students) explicitly or implicitly discussed Hallyu when asked about what “hobbies” or “activities” they enjoyed. Instead, the U.S. cultural references *are* precisely what is “foreign”; and what is considered “American” *is* unfamiliar for international Korean graduate students<sup>4</sup>. This is also the reason why there are differing perspectives from international Korean graduate student regarding Hallyu and U.S. popular culture in comparison to second-generation Korean Americans. This makes logical sense from the standpoint of international Korean respondents in this study. When asked whether he feels a sense of belonging at SU, Taehoon, an international Korean graduate student in his thirties, expressed a sentiment that illustrates the intraethnic boundaries between him and the Korean American community on campus:

Taehoon: Well, it’s not only just having more experience and seniority in the swimming club. If you just go for that activity, there is really no socializing taking place. So, the Korean student organization here matches newcomers with people who have been here for three to four years. They selected me because they needed to have information. So rather than belonging, I see this as a responsibility...

JWK: So, do you feel like you have to reach outside of the Korean community?

Taehoon: I like being everywhere, belonging to as many different clubs as much as possible, so I can learn from different cultures. I don’t want to isolate myself. It all depends.

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<sup>4</sup> This was observed as a colorblind rhetoric to defend the use of “my nigga” by a KASO member to refer to his “homies” (friends and acquaintances).

Here, Taehoon identified many facets of the swimming club (mostly participated by KSO students, an intramural league team) as most important to him. Much more so that my initial question, which was aimed at his thoughts about popular culture in general, was dismissed. “I don’t really care about how Americans think about (Korean culture)” Taehoon remarked. “We (Koreans) are content being third, fourth, even fifth place.” Here, Taehoon is addressing my follow-up on why he doesn’t care about the rising prominence of Hallyu. As an international student who arrived in the U.S. with a clear goal in mind, Taehoon saw that his survival was imperative by having ties to “Americans.” He desired to build a network of peers outside of the Korean community at SU. For him, Hallyu was not on the radar nor impacted his life in any meaningful way. Rather, he saw that going to various student organizations and club events such as kendo, swimming, and many others to be much more fulfilling towards his goal of building a network of non-Korean peers.

Both of the communal aspects began with my questions about their perception of whether Hallyu’s predominance makes them feel they belong in the space (SU) as one’s “true” self. In a predominantly white space where cultural barriers existed for international Korean students, Taehoon felt that it was not only to socialize but also to take it upon himself to disseminate information - a pragmatic practice that has been found in the study of information gathering for international Korean students (Jeong 2004). Consistent with Swidler’s (1984, 2001) model of culture, users of culture widen their repertoire towards new strategies of action (e.g., swimming clubs over K-Pop dance workshops) in unsettled lives (predominantly English-speaking university population).

Hallyu became a point of interest for second-generation Korean Americans who found belonging through cultural membership in K-Pop dance troupes because it fostered a sense of

connection visible as Korean. This is consistent with Oh's (2015) empirical findings on second-generation Korean Americans' diasporic cultural identity, preferences toward intraethnic peer relations, and Hallyu. Given the extent of international Korean participants in the study avoiding the discussion of Hallyu, I discuss why Hallyu is an important cultural medium with agentic possibilities for racial and ethnic solidarity for Korean and Korean Americans.

### *Hallyu and Racial Agency*

As a 1.5-generation Korean-American, I often asked myself the following questions - how do I retain my cultural identity as a Korean in a culturally white-dominant society? Do I really belong in my racial and ethnic community? And lastly, how do you "do" culture as BIPOC within a predominantly white society? These questions motivated this study to critically examine the three main research questions surrounding Hallyu and Asian and Asian Americans: 1) How do Korean American students reconcile and process their racial and national identity?; 2) How does Hallyu provide a space of belonging in the making of Korean American diasporic experience?; And, 3) what are the limits of Hallyu as a diasporic practice constrained by the lack of control in defining the terms of representation? Overall, the findings of this study are exploratory but have implications for pragmatic dimensions of cultural identity and practice. More than just a diasporic practice, Hallyu provides a space for both resistance and domination. Rather than precluding the critical and pressing issues surrounding transnational racism (Christian 2019), the majority of the Korean-American respondents were aware and conscious of racism and the history of racial domination to an extent. We ourselves have experienced racism. Historically, Asian Americans have sided with whiteness as Claire Jean Kim finds (1999). Asians have historically attended white churches, used anglicized names, and held anti-Black

sentiments in order to ally with whiteness so as to be validated by “relative valorization” (Kim 1999). As Eng and Han (2018) find, racism against Asian Americans goes often unspoken because we ourselves repress the trauma of white racism.

In particular, my conversations with Shawn, a second-generation Korean American undergraduate student actively engaged in a Korean American student organization on campus, capture why students find solace in Hallyu. While racialized, culture still functions as a toolkit distinguished from the white cultural repertoire and operates as a diasporic meaning-making strategy of action. Shawn’s response to my inquiry on whether Korean popular culture is currently on the cusp of becoming culturally appropriated illustrates the ways that culture is not a fixed entity, but a process that is continuously transformative:

Shawn: I think it really depends on this, that this person is interested in the Korean culture, like you said, like the white person, they just like K-pop. They just like K-pop. And that's enough to show that you like Korean culture, but I guess... Korean culture itself is history (too).

JWK: Yes, but what about the current events? Japan’s use of the “Rising Sun” flag? I mean, that’s also history too...

Shawn: I don't want to say that even though it's hard to know this kind of stuff, like the (Korean) Independence Day and all that stuff. But it's like, I think if I were to (hold events) based on the history of Korea, or something like that, I don't know. Okay, if you think about it, as a social (organization), you don't really talk about histories... You don't want to take a class... you just be a social group where we talk and have fun, just share an interest in becoming long-lasting friends. So I think that's what my viewpoint is in this situation.

Popular culture should not be ahistoricized. Rather, it should be contextualized to the history of racial domination. At the same time, highlighting the everyday creative practices embedded within structural constraints (de Certeau 1984; Swidler 2001) alludes to the possibility of subverting racialized meanings. Here, there are two ways that Shawn has responded to being a product of his history. From a macro-social lens, Hallyu is implicated in the global racial order, reaping the racial benefits of being subservient to the white supremacist U.S. society. However, the pragmatic creativity through popular culture becomes retooled and reappropriated as a symbolic act of defiance against cultural hegemony (Hebdige 1979). The second way that Shawn responded is out of a pragmatic necessity. In a university setting where undergraduate and graduate students are exhausted from schoolwork, Hallyu culture provides a means of social cohesion through which Asian and Asian American students can come together to celebrate their heritage rather than lament the inheritance of diaspora. Hallyu represents Korea being recognized. Representation in this sense - and most importantly, the terms by which representations are determined, is crucial to the individual. As racial representation takes on an important symbolic racial meaning that translates to material terms (Magubane 2001), it is also important to acknowledge the context and situational matters that shaped differing perceptions of Hallyu for Shawn, Ashley, and Jinhee. Hallyu provides a framework for everyday resistance. This reality speaks to the ways that while providing racial agency, it amounts to achieving a glass-ceiling agency. I further discuss more precisely the problem and potential of the racialization of cultural toolkit such as Hallyu below.

## THE RACIALIZATION OF CULTURAL TOOL-KIT



As a study in search of cultural meaning intertwined with the global racial order, I contextualized the lived experiences of Korean American undergraduate and graduate students and their relationship to Hallyu. By doing so, I illustrated how Hallyu is used (or not used?) by Korean Americans as a way to connect as a diasporic cultural repertoire and toolkit. However, it is to be noted that there is a limit to Hallyu as a form of racial agency. This is evidenced by my respondents' discomfort with the hypervisibilization of their racial and ethnic identity. In this way, Hallyu is a racialized toolkit operating within the constraints of the U.S. racial order consistent with existing findings (Chou and Feagin 2015) on racism faced by Asian and Asian Americans in the U.S. The ambiguity of my respondents' hesitation toward racial matters is further complicated by the inheritance of diaspora and the trauma of racism (Eng and Han 2018).

Hallyu allows Korean Americans to negotiate their biculturally assimilated identities - a gift and a curse, the double-consciousness and the second sight (Chou and Feagin 2012; DuBois 2007). My findings suggest popular culture can be used to break down symbolic boundaries that prevent social cohesion and ethnic and racial solidarity among Korean and Korean Americans and broadly, Asian and Asian Americans. As Swidler (1989) states, culture "... as a 'tool kit' of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems" (P. 273). As such, it is imperative to take into account the agentic possibilities that exist within the nuances in the everyday use of culture.

This study is also a beginning of a conversation to bridge the gap between studies of culture and race and ethnicity. While this study's focus was on race, the respondents interviewed from KSO were mostly men, and hence gender may have played a key role that this study is unable to capture. This is a methodological limitation of this study. Furthermore, the possessive investment in the white sociological canon has only compounded this issue (Brunnsma and Wyse

2019; Morris 2015). Sociological theories necessarily must divest from the aracial, white epistemological center. With this acknowledgment, Sociological theories of culture may hold the key to revitalizing and reanalyzing the importance of cultural dimensions of race and ethnicity. Contextualized with Eng and Han's conceptualization of Asian and Asian Americans' racial meanings and projection, Swidler's (1986, 2001) toolkit model of culture provides a framework to situate culturally mediated forms of racism. However, it remains to be seen that Hallyu - as a global enterprise, a state-sanctioned project, and the center of transnational capitalism between Korea and the U.S. - is truly recognized without the terms and conditions of racial representation that haunts the United States; the legacy of human trafficking and dehumanization of BIPOC.

## **CHAPTER 4 : The Subservient Role of Diversity and Inclusion in the Making of White Academia: An Analysis of a Diversity and Inclusion Center at a Flagship University**

### ABSTRACT

Using ethnographic, autoethnographic, and archival data from working within the Diversity and Inclusion Center at a predominantly and historically white university in the Southeast United States, this chapter examines the ways that Diversity and Inclusion sectors in premier universities do more harm than good in serving the racial and ethnic minority campus population. In particular, I separate and parse out the ways that institutional complicity works as a component of what Omi and Winant (2015) identified as a racial project, where the ideological work of race is accomplished through both cultural and structural means. Drawing from my participant observation, autoethnographic reflection, and analysis of statements and publicity materials by the Diversity and Inclusion Center for Asian Americans (DICAA), this study reveals illustrative insights into some of the roles that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) ideology plays in legitimizing racial ignorance, tokenism, and careerism, effectively functioning as the dominant racial ideology in service of white supremacy. At the university level, careerism and tokenism are rewarded and measured as an outcome. At the level of individual organizations housed within the university's DEI sector, the DEI initiatives themselves are failing the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) it purports to serve. This study also explores the role of the center workers as racialized subjects who effectively work against themselves in obscuring racial domination. In doing so, I call into question my own experience as a Korean American

within the Diversity and Inclusion Center and the racialized labor I performed, where events and panels would be organized and presented performatively without the institutional effort put forth to realize the lofty plans and ideals. Ultimately, this study reconsiders the DEI sector as a panacea for racism and rather as a site where contemporary racial domination is accomplished. Overall, I turn to the literature on critical perspectives on DEI as a whole in pondering ways to subvert the symbolic forms of racial domination in an era of “performative” activism.

*Recalling my middle and high school education that took place in a predominantly white town, my trip back in the 2020s as an adult differentiates makes it salient just how much whites tread racial conversations. “James... I mean Joong Won!” This was a “not a racist” remark I have to endure for the rest of my life. I changed my first name back to my birthname after leaving my hometown because it made my life easier. Made the white people feel comfortable - I was a “James” and not an entity and body out of place from the far East. All of this didn’t have the veracity and the deeply offensive remark that an old college bandmate, an Irish man born and raised in the Southside of Chicago, that his new workplace was “treating me like a losing nigger.” Maybe that is why I did not react to my racial denigration for so many years (“Joon-wong? Joong? Sorry, I am not used to foreign names, said my middle school English teacher Ms. Wallenstein. Under a Black President, these conversations shaped my understanding of race from K-12 education to college. I do recall race becoming visible in a classroom in college. “Here, look,” said the professor. On the podium, the PowerPoint slides that were shown from the projector displayed two images of advertisements. A car was shown in two different contexts. The same car with whites in an outdoor setting in a mountainous area; and Blacks in a basketball court during the nighttime in an urban area. This moment made me realize race, yet the racially offensive conversations continued to be swept under the rug - over coffee, meals, and even in classrooms. Never was I asked the significance of the work of W.E.B. DuBois more than I was asked of Michel Foucault. Yet, the notion of equity and “diversity” echoed throughout every college campus I visited, attended, and graduated from. In order to properly highlight the structural forces that shaped my own experiences, I inquire the following: Who benefits from diversity and inclusion initiatives? The very people it is supposed to “serve” and “protect?” I had learned to “disregard” race well into my college years. If I, a 1.5-generation Korean American, had learned to “disregard” race, what are the consequences? Who*

*and what am I possessively investing in - what structure of domination is enabled because of the racial inaction by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color?*

## INTRODUCTION

Bringing forth a critical perspective on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, Ahmed (2012) has discussed the importance of critically evaluating their efforts. The notion that DEI have the best interest of racial justice is often obscured in the delivery of the message. Insidiously, this is done in order to fulfill the true mission of DEI in its current promulgated, ubiquitous form - to assert white racial dominance. Institutions often stitch together abstract and ambiguous differentiation and definition of diversity to obfuscate whiteness (Thomas 2021). By obscuring and defining differences as the only metric by which diversity is understood at large, the DEI initiatives themselves obscure legitimate goals toward racial justice by relying on superficial notions of difference (Thomas 2021). Furthermore, as Ahmed (2012: 58) observed, “when diversity becomes a conventional form of speech, what is being named as diverse becomes less significant than the name ‘diversity.’” In this way, diversity becomes a means to an end without a precise definition, goals, or radical mobilization towards racial justice. Moreover, it is an industry that profits off of tokenism” (Ahmed 2012), extracting the labors of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to justify the existence of DEI. Here, it is important to note that obscuring and making ambiguous the notions of diversity make it difficult to conceptualize and discuss diversity itself seriously (Bell and Hartmann 2007). For example, Title XI states that discrimination based on political affiliation is deemed as an offense. Yet, the political farce that elected Trump and the consequent stoking of white supremacist tension

directly derives from the political usurpation of a racist practice and embodiment at the foundation of the history of the United States (U.S.): White supremacy.

In conceptualizing my own experience with the context provided by Ahmed's and Thomas's critical perspectives, I illustrate the ways that DEI initiatives, no matter how well-intentioned, create the very problems they purport to solve. In this way, the DEI initiatives and efforts create the problem it needs to solve *because* it fails to define diversity beyond merely "differences" (Thomas 2021). Simply put, this has dire implications for the minoritized populations in the U.S. Because DEI initiatives express and co-opt the language of social justice, DEI as a dominant racial ideology is increasingly harder to combat and calls into question the role it plays in protecting whiteness. In this study, I draw upon my participant observation at the Diversity and Inclusion Center for Asian Americans (DICAA), publicity materials that include statements of solidarity from DICAA, and my autoethnographic reflections as a worker at DICAA. Spanning over ten (10) months of ethnographic participant observation, I draw on my experience as both a DEI worker at the Diversity and Inclusion Center for Asian Americans (DICAA) (pseudonym) at Southern University (SU) (pseudonym) and through my identity of being a 1.5-generation Korean American. Here, I draw from the autoethnographic principles behind critical reflexivity (Sierschynski 2019). Autoethnography allowed me to fully explicate the internal turmoil that I experienced as a DEI worker, despite being aware of the problems it had. As for the publicity materials, they reflect the part and parcel of what DEI demands of their racialized laborers - to churn out numbers and warm bodies in a room without meaningful social change. Publicity materials, ranging from flyers and email newsletters, were used in this study to decipher the discourse of what DEI strives for as a *modus operandi*. The following central question drives this study: How does DEI as a dominant form of racial ideology structure the

racial order? This overarching question illuminates the various auxiliary roles that DEI workers play in shielding whiteness and creating justification for - and obscuring - racial domination in service of white supremacy.

Overall, DICA at SU implicates the process of how careerism thrives and ultimately fails to serve the people it claims to ally and support. It is simply not enough to “fix” racism from a technocratic, institutional perspective (e.g., various DEI initiatives), rather, it needs to account for how various hierarchies are interconnected. DEI is a regime that connects organizational dynamics involving racial actors, in which they all actively participate without any clear definition of DEI (Thomas 2021). DEI is often favored by various institutions because it is not feasible to mobilize a movement beyond face value. Here, then, the question of “how does DEI function as the dominant and prevailing racial ideology?” is better suited to address the urgent questions on racial dynamics DEI holds ideologically. This, in turn, DEI as the dominant racial ideology - a continuation of colorblind racial ideology – helps us to better understand how DEI initiatives essentially give a pass for whites to enact racism while simultaneously feigning progressive racial views. In this way, I am not overstepping my boundaries, or in the common phrase at my former workplace, theorizing or working “above my paygrade” to peddle “solutions” as if it were a universal panacea to racism. Rather, the central question raised by the study asks whether institutional life in the DEI sector does more to cater to white comfort, the driving force behind the twenty-first century colorline, that “divides and conquers” through faux inter-racial and ethnic solidarity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW



Given this study's focus on an exploratory analysis of how DEI, as a dominant racial ideology, functions in a university setting, I draw on the literature on racial representation and BIPOC's institutional life at DEI sectors at flagship universities. Doing so allows me to situate the study's exploratory focus that deals with the contemporary narrative on racial matters, DEI, that has come to increasingly dominate all facets of progressive racial politics in 2022. From popular cultural transformation through connectivity and visibility, U.S. society has reckoned with the ubiquity of racial discrimination. There have been many racialized reactions and emotions in response to the current political right's characterization of the political left as the "postmodern Marxist social justice warriors." It is also clear that racial tensions have not only risen but have taken new forms of ideological underpinning beyond colorblindness. The main subject of interrogation here is precisely the normalization and control enacted through racial ideology (Ehlers 2012). This is a notion that is directly applicable to the ways that whites imagine a racial utopia in spite of the persisting racial inequality in the U.S. (Bonilla Silva 2018). Further troublesome is the ways in which DEI historically have developed from and matriculated by whiteness in the academia (Ferguson 2012). As a central consideration, this study centers on the DEI racial ideology as the dominant form of racial ideology by whites that is in service of upholding academia as white space (Brunsma et al. 2020). DEI is the means by which whites can see themselves as saviors and as the "arbiter of cultural taste" (Brunsma et al. 2020:14). This effectively makes DEI a status distinction for whites, becoming a racial norm in a public setting where social competence is tested. Whites, therefore, engage in racial impression management to avoid being seen as crude and unfit for the posh language of DEI. In exploring this line of ideological domination at a university level case, this study critically reconsiders the racial implication of DEI as a source of racial domination. This, as I elaborate below, is a critical

component being contemplated in the literature as one of the key components that structure faux racial solidarity efforts in DEI initiatives, making matters worse for BIPOC DEI workers.

### *Race Making and (Re)presentation*

Omi and Winant's (2015) theory capture a comprehensive understanding of race as a social and political construct. By broadening the understanding of race in the socio-political history of the U.S., such as the U.S. census and racial categories, Omi and Winant's racial formation framework helps to situate how DEI has come to dominate contemporary racial matters. Omi and Winant suggest that the racial formation framework accounts for the sociopolitical forces shaping race in concert with cultural practices that change over the course of history. Omi and Winant (2015) define racial formation "... as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (P. 109). Here it is important to take the conceptual definition that advances the idea which puts primacy upon structural forces involved in racecraft that are transhistorically? transformative (Omi and Winant 2015). This is consistent with the transformation from Jim Crow to colorblind racism in the transformation of dominant racial ideology in U.S. society (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Omi and Winant 2015). Moreover, Omi and Winant (1994) contend that "... racial formation is a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized... [for it is]... the way in which society is ruled" (Omi and Winant 1994: 55-6). This definition is important as it captures the ways that the racial order is structured through representational matters and through the transformation of culture on racial matters.

DEI has changed the cultural depiction of race - for both better and worse. Racecraft necessarily depends upon culturally represented depictions of race (Ehlers 2012). Therefore,

cultural representations of race are an important aspect that pervades racial ideology. More importantly, it is white supremacy that controls the terms of racial representation (Magubane 2001). Cultural representation of race, in this sense, has serious implications. It structures common-sense ideas about race in service of whiteness (i.e., the dominant racial ideology of DEI) while simultaneously being able to escape any critical interrogation (i.e., DEI ideology that abstracts and promulgates faux racial and ethnic solidarity). The DEI sector presents problems by defining race as a mere difference abstracting the historical implication and motivation in the construction of race (i.e., slavery and slave economy), which also erases the persistence of racial domination.

As Omi and Winant (2015) argued, the state is central to understanding racial projects as well as racial subjectivity, which gives way to racial formation. More importantly, a site in which racial subjectivity in the service of whites is fostered - the education system (Lewis and Diamond 2015) - is important to discuss in the scope of the state control and maintenance of racial subjectivity. As a state-sanctioned project aimed at matriculating its citizens, educational institutions cannot be value-neutral (Bourdieu 1999). Education more broadly functions as a moral-producing institution that teaches students to normalize and identify racial others (Ahmed 2012; Lewis and Diamond 2015). Here, it is crucial to contextualize existing research that has demonstrated that people who are born blind retain and communicate the dominant racial imagery despite being unable to visually interpret race (Obasogie 2010). Obasogie's study shows the social forces that shape race are so powerful that visually disabled people begin to identify with them, and eventually, galvanize their racial outlook and ideologies (Obasogie 2010). Ideas about race run deep and transform throughout time, this is an established set of principles observed by various scholars (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Omi and Winant 2015). What is important is

that race scholarship is tuned to better capture the dominant ideology that is housed by various DEI efforts - including the ones held by the DEI sector itself. Claiming allyship on face value, DEI initiatives, organizations, and motives are difficult to confront. This poses the question that is central to the transformation and changing shifts toward the DEI framework. DEI efforts allow whites to absolve their racial guilt while housing racialized laborers on precarious and contingent terms. With the ability to function as a white supremacist ideological apparatus that evades critical introspections, DEI has come to dominate the ways that contemporary racial domination justifies its existence. As racial colorblindness manifests, we are witnessing a transformation of white elites that adopt the DEI perspective as the dominant racial ideology. This adoption of increasingly abstract and difficult principles then necessitates an interrogation of the institutional and organizational dynamics that characterize DEI initiatives.

### *Institutional Life in the Diversity and Inclusion Sector*

Racial matters in U.S. flagship universities with historically and predominantly white contexts are jumping at diversity initiatives. As stated, drawing from the established observations by Ahmed (2012), Ferguson (2012), and Thomas (2021), the invocation of diversity does not necessarily call for a policy aimed at ameliorating racial inequalities. Rather, the initiatives themselves are highly institutionalized because of the abstraction of DEI as a meaningful statement. Inclusivity, for example, is not a harmful goal to strive for on paper. However, if there is little to no effort in defining diversity, DEI initiatives are nothing but an illusion of inclusion. Additionally, given that attendance numbers are the metric of impact and success of the initiative without taking into account the qualitatively evaluated successes, many red flags are raised in the institutional success of diversity initiatives. Carrillo Arciniega (2021) illuminates that the

economic rationale within the DEI sector is a key factor that shapes the conditions of its racialized laborers. Considering these findings in existing research on the institutional life in the DEI sector as racialized labor, BIPOC working in DEI are racialized subjects that uphold institutional whiteness.

In the DEI sector, languages and nomenclature play a crucial role in standardizing each employee as an institutional actor. The language that is normalized in the diversity and inclusion sector does not necessarily reflect the goals they are purported to achieve. Rather, diversity is used as a justification for the brand of the university as an equitable place of education. As an adjective to describe their institutional identity as a whole, “[d]iversity becomes something to be managed and valued as a human resource” (Ahmed 2012: 53). Diversity is used as a marker of status with an object value institutionally (Petts and Garza 2021). In this way, it can be ascertained that flagship universities such as SU prioritize these objectives. Diversity simply denotes “differences and heterogeneity” without the recognition of white supremacy, patriarchy, hetero-normativity, homo-normativity, and so on. Considering the ways that normality has played in the historical construction of racial oppression (Mills 1997; Jung 2015; Smedley 2007), it is imperative to account for the normalization of heterogeneity that is deployed by the DEI sector. This mode of normalizing differences is the driving force of what Thomas (2021) has outlined as the “diversity regime,” where various racial actors, institutions, and organizational dynamics shape the DEI ideology.

The metric that SU deployed to gauge the success of the DEI initiatives is upheld by the institution’s protocol to decouple and decentralize race in formal organizational processes (Ray 2019; Thomas 2021). This calls into question the structure of DEI workers as well in the DEI sector - who exactly is performing the racialized labor in the DEI sector? Lerma, Hamilton, and

Nielsen (2020) observed the ways in which the DEI initiatives employ BIPOC and appropriate them to protect the brand image of the university. Indeed, “[t]he ways in which organizations respond to racialized equity labor offers insight into the reproduction of racial inequities, despite the hard work of people of color to create meaningful racial change” (Lerma et al. 2020: 286). What is more troubling is “hiring a [Chief Diversity Officer] CDO does not positively impact racial diversity at student, faculty, or administrative levels” (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021: 153). In answering some of the facets of DEI that come to dominate - and the metrics it deploys to measure its own success - this study critically interrogates and explores my participant observation and autoethnographic self-reflection as an employee at the DICAA at SU. I elaborate further in the following section on my methodological approach.

## METHODS

I conducted ten (10) months of participant observation as an employee assisting administrators at a Diversity and Inclusion Center with a focus on expanding Asian American culture at SU. I was hired as a temporary employee with the explicit intention of incorporating my experience working at the center to expand upon my larger ethnographic project that spanned across Korean Student Organization (KSO), Korean American Student Organization (KASO), and the library at SU. Here, it is important to note that the Korean American Student Organization was funded in part by DICAA. One of the ways in which I approached this study was the analysis of my own dissonance and disgust towards having to perform racialized tokenized roles and being bound by a contract that was fiscally oppressive with obscure duties. This is a context that is somewhat peripheral, however, it situates the settings I encountered while performing this task. My gross pay was considered high for a wage laborer - twenty dollars

per hour. To put this into context, my monthly expense was spent all just on housing during the duration of this employment (one-thousand dollars per month). Following the fiscal hardships, the emotional and racialized labor that was detrimental to my personal life is put on stage as an autoethnographic methodological site for this study. Therefore, this study draws on my observations of public events hosted by the DICAA, autoethnographic observation based on my positionality as a 1.5 generation Korean American man working at the Diversity and Inclusion center, and publicity such as flyers and statements of solidarity, etc. These threads of data become a touchstone that dovetails me - a first-generation academic of Color - as an institutional and racial actor in the DEI industry.

I worked with exclusively all-Asian American, mostly second-generation students and staff at DICAA. This meant that my identity as a 1.5 generation was not so alienating but at the same time, I encountered expectations I was not able to fulfill for someone considered “Americanized<sup>5</sup>.” All participants’ and organizations’ identities such as gender, ethnicity, and names, excluding myself, are anonymized and assigned pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of my ethnographic participant observation. This was also done to analyze the racial component and to delineate it. With the acknowledgment that racism is intrinsically intertwined with, but not limited to, class, gender, and sexuality, the research design of this study explicates complexity surrounding differences in terms of how DEI ideology fails to grapple with the most basic historical nuances of race.

This study utilizes Apoifis’s (2017) approach to “militant ethnography” that centers on activist positionality as the main mode of reference in the field. Militant ethnography

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<sup>5</sup> I was often asked about Korean culture in ways that would be considered immediately ignorant if the asker was not of Asian descent - and particularly Korean. For example, at a food tasting session involving Korean style fried chicken, I was assumed by Terry that I would know the best and most authentic flavor. I have not resided in South Korea since 2014.

“deliberately blurs the distinction between research and political activism” (Apoifis 2017: 5). Given that the tenets of militant ethnography apply the scholar-activist tradition in situating the positionality of the ethnographer’s intent, this study does not claim “value-neutrality.” Instead, I begin with the premise that race - and racialization, racial project, and racial domination - is always in service of white supremacy. Therefore, diversity and inclusion initiatives should be interrogated as part and parcel of the operation of white supremacy as a part of the institution of higher education. To do this, I situate my interactions and directives given by my former employer and the director of DICA, Terry (pseudonym, they/them). Doing so allows me to bridge interactions that occurred over time with my employment as it relates to Terry’s role as a director of DICA. This also meant working under SU’s Chief Diversity Officer (CDO). Furthermore, I employ the critical reflexivity drawing from Sierschynski’s (2019) autoethnographic processes in drawing out the personal experiences of working in the DEI industry. As I have noted in the introductory vignette, this study also takes into account the importance of reflexivity as a site of knowledge (Sierschynski 2019). Doing so allows me to glean into and cross-reference other sources of data in this study. The experiences of those in the DEI sector who are white drastically differ from mine - my white counterparts are not asked to speak on racial matters during Asian, Pacific Islander, and Desi American Heritage Month, and only for the month. My white counterparts can “escape” their racialized encounters while simultaneously invoking ethnicity when convenient (Lewis 2003). For these reasons, I emphasize the use of autoethnography in this study as a legitimate methodological enterprise and pertinent to the research design of this study.

As an employee during the transition period from my data collection before the COVID-19 pandemic, I began to become bound by the responsibilities that come with internet and virtual



planning, such as attending to emails, establishing an online persona, and being held to the standard of internet-based etiquette. This entails never being late - not even under five minutes - because of the elimination of travel and mobility due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, if upper administrative faculty would be present at a meeting, I was expected to log in to Zoom fifteen minutes before the event. Therefore, most of my autoethnography took place over Zoom and emails were ever-present and ridden with anxiety. Terry's instruction as the director of the Diversity and Inclusion Center was to also be wary and please upper-level administrative faculty such as Dr. Pam Bulwinkle (pseudonym). In this way, I also analyzed my position in terms of observing Terry's impression management depending on various events. This is not only characterized by the Diversity and Inclusion center I worked at but also the working modality given the challenges of physical proximity given the COVID-19 pandemic. This provided insights into the transformation of work culture as I collected data through in-person participant observation. While I was required to come in for various event preparations, most of my participation was through online video conferencing. Because of this, the research design of this study relies on autoethnographic references in conjunction with interaction beginning from my own standpoint - it should also be noted that all employees who worked at DCAA were second-generation Asian Americans except for myself.

The candid, autoethnographic approach is important to this study not as adoption of merely my subjection. In fact, it is far from it. I employ autoethnography as a means to critically assess all the time I spent being paid a poverty wage all while performing racialized labor. This application is, according to Cook (2014), a sociological method. I experienced the embodiment of the same struggles that often characterize other BIPOC workers who work in DEI. For these reasons - that DEI itself is needed as a source of social equality, but not as a way to make

subservient the BIPOC people who work within, as well as whites who reap the benefits from DEI endeavors (Thomas 2021), this study critically confronts the DEI as a dominant racial ideology that animates contemporary racial domination. Because I believe that DEI, in the most ideal sense, is a force to potentially realize racial justice, this study is also in part to start a critical conversation around DEI efforts. I celebrate diversity; however, because I hold these ideals important as a scholar-activist, there is no sugarcoating in this study of the institutional and individual failures of DEI and its workers. Reflecting on myself becoming an institutionalized, racialized body is a site of analysis (Hobson 2012), autoethnography in this study is meant to generate a context for the reader - not as a mere subjection or a methodological fad. The absolute hypocrisy which makes DEI efforts at the particular flagship university illuminates why the initiative fails. In order to interrogate this, I coupled my autoethnographic reflection as a source of data as I had embodied the DEI ideals at S.U. out of fiscal necessity at the time of my research. This precarity opened up insights into DEI as an organizational dynamic that would have been unapparent without it. And in the same vein, I understand that this study's research design is to fundamentally study up. In order to achieve this, I am critical of what I have observed in various correspondences during my time spent at DICAA, and now I turn to these exploratory findings.

## FINDINGS

In order to explicate the exploratory findings of this study, it is also necessary to establish the ways in which DEI functions as ideological domination. Because DEI workers and initiatives situate themselves as fighting for the persisting inequality of race, gender, sexuality, and other minoritized statuses, the racial ignorance is incredibly difficult to interrogate - let alone locate -

in bringing actual change. This is not to downplay the agency that lives within universities around the U.S. Rather, this highlights a context that illustrates the powerlessness of just one DEI worker even with the best intentions. Intentions in this sense fail to dismantle what has effectively become a ritual for whites and BIPOC in services of whites to redirect, refract, and reinforce existing racial inequalities unaddressed by the DEI initiatives and efforts. The process that leads to failures of the DEI initiatives and workers, as my findings illuminate, implicates what it truly means to have a diverse, inclusive, and equitable role in which universities can play in harnessing the power of cultural pluralism.

#### *How Do Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives Fail?*

As a part of the diversity and inclusion initiative, DICAA at SU hosted professors of upper-administrative level academics to satisfy a rising trend in addressing critical race theory and race in academic spaces. After the event featuring higher education administrative faculty, I asked the professor who participated, Dr. Bullwinkle (pseudonym), a woman of color who occupied an upper-level administrative position about the woes of COVID-19, being Asian, and her academic job prospects. Her answer was a sugarcoated, generic message: “I think it is important for you to write right now, create knowledge from the margins, right? In this way, you have power and control over your situation in exercising agency.” I did not respond because as an hourly wage worker, I could not comprehend what it meant for me to create knowledge from the margins when I could barely get by after paying rent, utility, and other living expenses. The fact that I struggled to make ends meet throughout my ethnographic project was not unusual. My wages consisted of twenty hours (20) a week at twenty dollars per hour working for DICAA. This wage is below the poverty wage. It is the same wage that Dr. Bullwinkle expects to have

great epistemic innovation by the marginalized who can barely afford rent and food despite being highly educated. In other words, it illustrates just how far removed she is from the reality of many DEI workers barely making ends meet.

Being paid more than the minimum wage to the workers who embodied diversity - for diversity - to live barely above the poverty line while forced to produce scholarship and strategic visions for the ambiguous diversity initiatives fail to adequately pay its BIPOC workers. This, in itself, is one of the greatest detriments of DEI initiatives. My questions and inquiries also open up a discussion about the continuous austerity and the employment of adjuncts to reduce overhead costs by many other flagship universities. How am I - along with many others who are precarious - supposed to produce knowledge in the face of financial constraints? What message does this send to someone like Terry, who has secured a relatively permanent position as the director of the DICA at SU? Why would Terry, for that matter, want to leave this job of relative security? Although not the highest-paid administrative worker on campus at SU, Terry expressed how secure their current job is compared to the adjunct teaching appointments in their past that were dependent upon annual contingencies and criminally low pay - often driving back and forth from multiple institutions to make ends meet.

Another troubling aspect of DICA was the ways that brand image was centered as the most important component of the work. Of course, an organization needs to frame its identity through branding. However, given the focus on branding and political ties with senators, congresspersons, and delegates, the center functioned in ways that representation was used to distance the idea that Asian Americans - at least for those affiliated with DICA at SU - were docile. This is the very control that can be found in respectability politics that subsumes relative valorization (Kim 1999), a racial position that effectively upholds the U.S. triracial order

(Bonilla-Silva 2018). This also goes to the portrayal of an incredibly heterogeneous political consciousness among Asian Americans as a whole. The political interest – and therefore racial investment in honorary whiteness – is complex and cannot be reduced to merely a singular political entity by grouping all Asian, Pacific, and Desi American (APIDA). This was an initiative that Terry had to keep to convey institutional legitimacy for SU and DICA, as an institutional directive. There was no substantive effort to rethink geopolitical tensions with the centering U.S. as an imperial force. The countless Black lives senselessly murdered in the U.S., the growing Sinophobic sentiments that racially victimize Asians who pass as Chinese, and the brutal genocide of Palestinians all have one thing in common: They are a manifestation of white supremacy and the conditions of white supremacy as a global construct. After an incident of hate crime fueled by white supremacy at the Jewish community center at SU, the following message was crafted by the center director, Terry:

We, the Diversity and Inclusion Center for Asian Americans condemn acts of violence towards people of different religions, ethnicities, and races. The surge of violence in Israel and Palestine that is implicated by the Israeli military on the Al-Aqsa mosque has led to an increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic attacks around the world and here at Southern University (pseudonym). The vandalism of the Jewish Center at Southern University, which may have been a result of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, has exacerbated safety concerns amongst the Jewish community. Similarly, there have been increasing levels of concern for our Muslim students at Southern University, especially for our Palestinian students. The ongoing suffering and intergenerational trauma that

Jewish and Palestinian students face are unacceptable in the Southern University community...

Here, the logical inconsistencies in addressing the militant colonialism of Israel lack any depth or awareness of the origins of the conflict itself. Consistent with the discussion surrounding DEI during the weekly meetings, solidarity towards a particular conflict which is at its root, white supremacy, was neatly packaged into a dialogue that superficially addresses the true needs of the geopolitical tensions and genocide of Palestinians. The current geopolitical tension, to be clear, is an act of colonialism by Israel as a nation-state (Tubi 2020). Obscuring DEI in the way that Thomas (2021) finds in terms of institutional framing that neither acknowledges nor takes any solidified stance is precisely the way that racism functions. Extending Ray's (2019) work that demonstrates how organizations decouple formal from informal ways of racialized protocols and policy enacting, DICAA's statements reflect this institutional panic over racial and imperial tensions. In contrast, giving a coherent response to the statement on Palestine precisely fails those BIPOC the Center purports to stand with as an ally. With this in mind, my experience as well as the consensus around DICAA was that it thrives on its subservience to whiteness. The previously affiliated faculty, professor Odeh - a South Asian faculty who shared the same views that I articulated above - prompted a response email that captures the frustration of this situation: "Please remove me from the listserv as I wish no longer to be associated with the DICAA."

Similar to the incident that transpired after the statement, which prompted professor Odeh to leave the Diversity and Inclusion center as a faculty affiliate, Terry, as the director of the DICAA, pivoted topics and themes of the events aimed toward higher education administration and moderate, neoliberal politics. DICAA had close political affiliations with Terry, who was

directly in contact with the local to state government officials. When hosting events surrounding Asian American politics, I was not permitted to ask questions at all to politicians about affirmative action as it relates to Asian Americans and the U.S. racial order. Tasked with organizing a panel on Asian Americans in politics, I specifically inquired Terry if I could list a set of questions regarding affirmative action policies in historically and predominantly white universities. After reading my list of questions before the panel, Terry deleted all of my questions regarding affirmative action policies. “Joong Won, this is going to be given to their aids and secretaries, we are not asking this question,” said Terry in a manner of quipping. “You’re also not mentioning this at all, please be on your best behavior,” further elaborated Terry. I was not to even mention the topic as the controversy would “do more harm than good.” I was confused about this statement as racial justice, and the complexities embedded in affirmative action was such a pertinent question that I naively thought DICA was spearheading. Instead, the event turnout was the metric that gauged interest, and therefore the most prioritized subject and goal.

After the tragic and senseless murders that took place in Atlanta GA, the Asian and Asian American communities at SU came together. Although still divided in their political interest as consciousness as evidenced by the signs reading, “Yellow Lives Matter,” a poorly understood co-opting of what the Black Lives Matter represents, Asian and Asian Americans came together in solidarity. The protest also invited the local news reporter as well as various white upper-administration faculty members anxiously telling Asian faculty members to “let me know if you need anything.” Terry had other agendas, however. Terry instructed me to direct all of the DICA undergraduate workers to “not to attend the protest. It is dangerous to be out there, and I don’t even know who organized this without even consulting me so you don’t have to be there

either.” This is illustrative of the ignorance I witnessed and had to perform. In this case, I disobeyed Terry’s directive just for myself while simultaneously having to email and inform the undergraduate workers not to mobilize. This event triggered an unpleasant emotional response – disgust. I felt betrayed by Terry as a fellow Asian American who, before my official employment, would loudly let me know that “racial discrimination has no place, and if people keep misspelling your name, you let me know!” These micro-interactional moments are tethered to the global and transnational white supremacy that drives any racially motivated practice - ranging from genocide to racial microaggressions (Mills 1997; J. W. Kim 2021). As such, racially motivated practice is the driving force of the incident captured in the statement, and through Terry’s performative solidarity, DICAA also dismisses the root of systemic racism through superficial statements of solidarity and careerist-driven activism. Before the demonstration which took place at the SU campus, the center director refused and directed the following to me: “It might be too dangerous for the undergraduate assistants to go out there (i.e., as in the site of protest at SU). Make sure that you tell them not to go to the demonstration. I don’t even know who organized it and I also had no part in it, so I plan not to go.” This sort of apathetic, performative activist stance was archetypical of the center’s goal. Rather than stand in solidarity with everyone, the director focused more on meaningless detail in work and with a strong emphasis on impression management. Events were designed to help Terry achieve a higher status on the institutional ladder. No matter how many times Terry asked students, including myself, “I wanna mentor you and help you,” it felt superficial. It is because Terry would reveal the careerist motivations when discussing event turnout: “We want to have a good turnout for this because Dean Heiden (pseudonym) will be there tonight, so make sure to log in to Zoom fifteen minutes prior just in case.” Mistakes were not tolerated. Anything that anyone



did to jeopardize the attendance numbers, such as wrong information on publicity materials, questions that “crossed the line,” and any pushback against superficiality was met with a meeting on the following Monday filled with microaggressions, sometimes downright hostility. This detail matters because this is the daily stress that DEI workers often bear. There was no difference here from my previous experience working as a cold call salesman in the private sector - only thing differentiating it was the use of expletives. This is the private sector of academia - it fails people who look like me. It legitimizes whiteness by giving institutional legitimacy rather than tackling the problematic aspects of tokenism and the appropriation of its laborers. Coupled with the working conditions and precarity, it drives one - such as Terry and their colleagues - to participate in an echo chamber rather than to collectively bargain for substantive change at the institutional level.

*The Imperial Modality: “Bring in Americans for This Month’s Newsletter”*

Because Terry was a second-generation Asian American, they were keen on featuring American-ness in the newsletters and publicity materials. This was not explicitly mentioned or brought up to me as I featured international students in the newsletter, inviting them to events, as well as showcasing their research which was met often reluctantly by Terry. The director, Terry, had a political position representing Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders directly with the governor of the state where SU is located. Their role was to advise the governor on the cultural, economic, and educational needs of Asian American student population at SU - not Asian international students nor any students without U.S. citizenship. Here, my previous muzzling of the question during the panel discussion involving Asian politicians is quite pertinent. I

wondered to myself about the question of affirmative action both as an object of intellectual inquiry about racial domination and as a matter of racial justice.

I was conflicted about inquiring into these matters as they relate to the political advisory role that Terry served. In this advisory role, Terry was hesitant to relay any racial matters deemed in his words, “too radical.” As Terry’s position related to their employability in the university as a whole, questions regarding Affirmative Action and Asian Americans were sequestered. Here, I critically questioned whether the advisory role that Terry had was *influencing* rather than being *influenced* by the state. This calls into question the motives in which the role served by Terry and whether Asian America is accurately represented in this way accounting for its immense political complexities. This matter is again heavily dependent on nationality (Drouhot and Garip 2021; Jung 2015; Zhou and Bankston 2020), which again draws a parallel insight from my second chapter.

Tasked with coming up with a student to be interviewed for every newsletter released at the end of the month, Terry had consistently asked me to recruit and solicit students on campus. “We want someone who is in engineering this month,” said Terry. “Make sure that they are American this time, unlike that student you peddled.” Scolded for not being able to recruit an American student, Terry was also tasked by the upper-level administrative directives. “Bring in an American student and make sure that you are not peddling people you know,” said Terry. In a fit of rage, Terry had implied that “we need to feature American students this month” because the student organizations Terry oversaw were Asian American. Terry, as a Japanese American, was anxious that DICA was inviting “too many international students,” and I was the culprit for this. Relating directly with regards to Terry’s advisory role for the state government as well as their racial biography that insists their American-ness brings up the imperial modality (Go

2011), a positionality shaped by the white supremacist core of U.S. empire (Chou and Feagin 2016; Jung 2015; Mills 1997). These connections are critical insights to seeing how the U.S. as an empire matriculates its citizens - through having a direct connection to influence the DEI initiatives in higher education.

*Precarity and Adjunctification: Why Careerism Thrives in Diversity and Inclusion*

As the modern-day industrial structures have become ever more reliant on precarious temporary gig-work, flagship universities around the U.S. have adopted a similar model (Kelsky 2015). The continuous divestment from the education system created a pool of contingent laborers, such as the rise of adjunct faculty that teach university courses, which have made the precarious nature of academic careers worse than it has ever been in the history of U.S. higher education (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021; Kelsky 2015). Terry, who worked as an adjunct professor since they finished their degrees, felt particularly sensitive about this matter.

Understandably so since they confided that they were not allowed to teach courses at SU due to their track record. As a Ph.D. candidate on the job market, this was a resonant experience. Most of my own colleagues at the time of this writing have taken on employment opportunities in the DEI industry, which is not strictly limited to the academic sector. After a series of adjunct employment at various universities, ranging from small liberal arts colleges to state universities, Terry had finally settled on the position of the director at DCAA at SU. Not only was this a better-paying job, but it also came with a particular form of status - they were now treated with at least a modicum of respect and without having to worry about a dossier of teaching materials. Terry always remarked, "I just love books, I wish I would have been a librarian if I could." Yet, Terry took their director position seriously *because* it provided them with political connections in

the advisory role to the state. Terry's directorship that made executive decisions on the diversity initiatives funded by the university, as well as students who now came to them for life advice made them excited.

Because of the pressure to maintain their current position as the director of DICA at SU, the university's audit of the center's expense document made Terry fearful. Simply put, I observed in meetings the lengthy process by which the auditors presented - no turnout, then the event funding is simply not justified as an overhead for DICA. I could sense the anxiety whenever I would enter the Zoom room during our weekly one-on-one meetings. This was weekly and while I did not have access to the data or the budget, I was allowed to speak with the auditors at SU which handled the DICA among other centers included in SU's diversity initiatives. The event turnout was a key determining factor in the allocation and justification of resources. Without this justification provided by the metric - event turnout - the center was a "dead-weight" which was "ineffective" to the overall DEI initiatives at SU. From this institutional logic, substantive matters on DEI are an afterthought. As the second chapter of my dissertation observed, students are exhausted and evasive towards racial matters. It is important to note that I observed the same students constituted in attendance as I did in my previous fieldwork at a Korean-American student organization affiliated with the DICA. This implies whether these events were even drawing attention outside of the social circle that I observed - that is, the likely attendees at the events held by DICA were the same cast of students rather than attracting anyone new. This again drives home the point that the DICA fails to elucidate the racial matters by obscuring them. This also fails people who look like me that work there. The implication of this failure is discussed in the following section.

## CONCLUSION

So, what can be done about the problems I have experienced as a living embodiment of the institution's justification for being "diverse?" And does this justification end up becoming a reproduction of racial inequality? What truly happens when DICAA - an organization purported to have critical approaches to racial matters - cannot substantively change or address racism harbored at SU? The DICAA held events on educating the public regarding racial matters, inviting and organizing panels ranging from invitations of speakers who highlighted the perils of anti-Black racism in the Asian American community to historians illustrating the important role that Yuri Kochiyama played in the Black Power Movement. However, did this go far enough beyond existing as mere acknowledgments and problem statements? Scholars who looked into the problem of the DEI sector have already suggested (Ahmed 2012), and continue to suggest (Thomas 2021), the DEI sector does not go beyond the performance to keep a facade. In line with their previous findings, my study also concludes a similar outcome - Terry and the DICAA talk the talk but do not walk the walk. Furthermore, the problem of careerism and faux activism is relational to the state divestment in education as an institution (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021; Kelsky 2015). As Terry's employment history suggests, as well as the continuous precarity among the "gig-workers" of U.S. universities - adjuncts - compounds the problem of those who are working in the DEI. The problem I see, as many before me have articulated, empirically observed, and explored through nuanced approaches, is the neoliberal logic of the university as a profit-driven institution (Underhill 2019). Race is a factor that is merely gestured by the marriage of platform capitalism with racial capitalism as Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020) highlights - to look diverse is institutional racial impression management undertaken by the university, with DICAA being a site where this initiative took place. The mere gestures performed are not enough

to substantiate its existence as it has done next to nothing in changing the racial conditions for Asian and Asian Americans, let alone the racialized laborers at the center. Yet, this is the function of DICAA as SU sees fit. It accomplished its intended purpose to protect the image of SU as a benevolent and heterogeneous place where DEI is celebrated at the face value. From the standpoint of whites, the failure of DEI is white agency.

The problem of contingent labor in academia is reflected in Terry's anxiety to hold onto their position as a director at the DICAA at all costs. Terry's experience is characteristic of the academic job prospects as a tenured faculty - most are relegated to the contingent position, or what has been described as the "adjunctification" of the U.S. academia (Kelsky 2015). This of course extends beyond academia and to the ever-increasing gig-work observed in the mainstream social discourse (Adams-Prassl 2018). In the backdrop of the shift to the digitalization of social life, the time has come to critically re-examine the role of higher education. How will they treat knowledge? Will BIPOC be warm bodies to justify the existence of the universities? Are the same set of conditions that drove Ahmed (2012) to leave academia go unaddressed? These questions undergird various modalities that I have focused on in the previous chapters, such as the question of national identity and intraethnic solidarity, the empire, the university, and the extraction of labor of BIPOC in predominantly and historically white institutions such as SU. What is clear is that no "clear solutions to all" approach is more problematic, which implicates the contemplation of the racial climate in the broader social discourse. With consideration of this, I could have also gone my entire life with complete apathy towards racial domination without academia. But how much longer can we rely on marginal forms of resistance? And how much longer will universities purport to solve the problems that it as an institution reproduces over and over? Disrupting this cycle through subversive routes has implications for the future of

knowledge production with regard to racial democracy in the U.S. Without critical intervention, the U.S. academia is, then, part and parcel of the white supremacist U.S. empire. The time has come to make radical action rather than to celebrate and continue the marginal resistance.

## **CHAPTER 5 : Conclusion**

If this dissertation performs anything meaningful to the contribution of the literature, it highlights the symbiosis of transnational connections that structures the United States as a white supremacist empire. Most importantly, this dissertation is a theory and case-building study with multiple points of entry to understand that racism cannot be remedied through simple means because historically, its omnipresence has made it hard to combat as a mode of ideology. It has been made more insidious by its way of transnational and translocal adaptation. The promulgation of how racial ideology in terms of various cultural facets, such the racially affective economy of language, Hallyu as a racialized cultural toolkit, and DEI efforts housing all of the former is a reminder of just how deep the interconnectedness of the racial order. As my findings illustrate, racism harbored by Asian and Asian Americans necessarily depends on institutional and systemic matriculation. It is through this matriculation that white supremacy is renewed with new generations of whites; and honorary whites, who possessively invest in their racial position so as to look at the short-term gains without any critical consideration of racial uplift at a macro-level scale. In many ways, this dissertation is also a critical self-reflection of my own racial biography as a heterosexual Asian man living in the margins while enjoying relative privileges. Without this critical self-examination and becoming the participant, any analytic points made in this dissertation would be merely a subjection at best, aberration at worst. Here, I reflect upon my own possessive investment in honorary whiteness by dismantling it. I do this in the first analytic chapter (Chapter 2) by illustrating the conundrum of a lose-lose situation as it pertains to the maintenance of global white supremacy between Korea and the U.S.

The second analytic chapter (Chapter 3) of this dissertation integrates the voices of those in the field sites in their own words, contextualized to the reception of Hallyu and their racial



biographies. Further highlighting the imperial modality of Asian and Asian Americans, this chapter also analyzed the ways that diasporic culture (i.e., Hallyu) cannot escape the grasp, persistence, and insidiousness of white supremacy at the center of the intraethnic divide. The racial apathy observed in this chapter is crucial to future studies and all endeavors regarding the racial position of Asian and Asian Americans. Furthermore, it begs future studies to consider the heterogeneous political interests of Asian and Asian Americans. The methodological design and principle of this study were aimed to tease out the racial dynamics to build a theory rather than test or reaffirm an existing theory. Future research must consider the implications of racial acts unobserved in this study. This dissertation, however laborious, is still a testament to the ways that Sociologist of race and ethnicity can still consider ethnographic and qualitative methods as a systematic tool to analyze despite the controversies surrounding it (for examples of ethnographic research with little critical consideration of positionality, see Goffman 2014; Venkatesh 2014). In this dissertation, there was no escape for me despite being in these various roles and positions for my participant observation. Moments captured are often what constitutes my daily life and those who are designated in my racial position within the racial order. Of course, the research design of this study is not the first of its kind, however, since it is a blending of my life's training as a Sociologist of culture and centering race as the most fundamental organizing principle of society, which meant reconciling the contradiction and juxtaposition of contextualizing race to aracial theories of culture. It is with full understanding that I pushed for this approach in order to further revitalize and highlight the standpoint epistemology focused on anger (Judd 2019) and pessimism (Fanon 1967). This allowed for a critical insight that future studies must consider in studying the depth of the magnitude that is caused by the omnipresence of white supremacy.

The pressing question of the dominant racial ideology today - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) as an ideology - is essential for social justice. The pressing issue of economic status here - and global capitalism is a major source of motivation for universities around U.S. (Ferguson 2012). This chapter is intertwined with my personal experience embodying the racialized labor as well as witnessing the tip of the iceberg that is the nation-state's intermingling with university DEI initiatives. While my observation indicates this at this in the context of SU, future studies are wise to incorporate this insight when teasing out the nation-state and university connections that form a mutually constitutive bond. Grants must be filed and money must flow in order for DEI to stay afloat, and the DEI administration bloats as more and more academics in disciplines in humanities and social sciences are being re-designated, hacked apart, and housed into various different units at SU. Who does this benefit and what are the long-term consequences of this function that essentially derives from the DEI initiatives? This is something future studies must be hyper-vigilant to address. It is important for understanding and teaching the racial dynamics pertaining to this dissertation, and beyond. DEI initiatives to protect and uplift their Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) are a ruse. Ferguson's (2012) insight has been almost clairvoyant concerning the birth of DEI. According to Ferguson, white academia has used the same strategy of disciplinary fields that DEI was born of, such as ethnic studies, queer studies, and various other disciplines to invoke the intersection of social inequality. Critical questions about this as a whole - and what is emblematic of my experience - raise many red flags about who is to be trusted as an ally, let alone authentic in their desire to be of service to BIPOC beyond careerist motivations. DEI treats racial domination as something to be an expert in ameliorating. This was particularly applicable to SU's Diversity and Inclusion Center for Asian Americans. Although, again, a study aimed at teasing out the

interconnectedness rather than testing a theory, this dissertation illuminates the social processes which make it possible for the state to have omnipresence over educational matters, matriculating imperial modality in service of white supremacy. With this in mind, then, whites reap and sow the beneficiaries of racial domination through the representation of Asian Americans, their culture, and DEI initiatives as a method of control rather than racial uplift. While it is certainly true that knowledge ought to benefit social change, how are we defining social change? With DEI initiative, or rather, the lack of a meaningful one, SU continues to expand and matriculate biculturally assimilated Asian and Asian Americans as translocal brokers, dispersing them throughout East Asia, who then become the key policy decision-makers, transnational racial actors, and DEI workers; and the cycle repeats all over again.

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## APPENDIX A: Table 1 Interview Respondent Demographic

<b>Participant Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Self-identified Gender</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>University Affiliation</b>	<b>Race and Ethnicity</b>	<b>Generational Status (if applicable)</b>
Ashley	20	Female	Korean-American	Undergraduate Student	Asian	2nd Generation
Eunice	20	Female	Korean-American	Undergraduate Student	Asian	1st Generation
Grace	22	Female	Korean-American	Undergraduate Student	Asian	2nd Generation
Shawn	22	Male	Korean-American	Undergraduate Student	Asian	2nd Generation
Taehoon	32	Male	Korean	Graduate Student	Asian	N/A
Jason (Daehyun)	24	Male	Korean	Undergraduate Student	Asian	1.5 Generation
Dongguk	31	Male	Korean	Graduate Student	Asian	N/A
Sophie	21	Female	Korean-American	Undergraduate Student	Asian	2nd Generation
John (Seongbum)	24	Male	Korean	Undergraduate Student	Asian	2nd Generation
Jinhee	21	Female	Korean-American	Undergraduate Student	Asian	1st Generation
Christine	20	Female	Korean-American	Undergraduate Student	Asian	2nd Generation