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Asians Are at the Writing Center

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Abstract

What happens when an Asian body enters the PWI writing center? What forces are at work when an Asian woman enters the white-woman–dominated space of a writing center? Continuing the call to refuse colorblind approaches to writing center consultancy and administration, I push for a recognition of how racial power operates on and through the bodies of Asians and Asian Americans at writing centers in the U.S. nation-state. Attending to the presence and embodied histories of Asians and Asian Americans at the writing center can show how our centers reinforce U.S. imperialism alongside white supremacy, which thrive in our policies, supervisory and consulting practices, and, most subtly, in the ephemeral nature of our interactions, movements, gestures, and other non-verbals with one another. I take my cue from Women of Color feminisms and

***theorize in the flesh* (Moraga and Anzaldúa), hoping to activate spaces and practices of liberation. This self-reflexive piece offers an analytical lens that enables us to reflect on the persistence of the “model-minority racial project” (Fujiwara and Roshanravan) and, correspondingly, the epistemic erasure of Asians and Asian Americans at the U.S. writing center.**

For months—years, actually—I have been blocked when trying to write this piece, and I think it’s because this topic exists in subtleties and shades. I’m talking about the presence of Asian bodies in writing center spaces. “How could a racialized body be a subtlety?” I imagine someone asking. I want to explicitly acknowledge the presence of *Asians and Asian Americans*¹ *at the writing center*. In tutor education curricula and staff development practices, sometimes it feels like the only possible mention of Asian people is through discussions of supporting multilingual (and often international) students. Even in such moments, it feels as though language and “culture” (not race) are named.² I want to recognize the *racial* difference of the Asian body, not just the sounds coming from it (although we know that language is racialized, too (e.g., Delpit and Dowdy; Rosa and Flores)). If we only think of Asian writers and consultants through perceived language difference, we contribute to their racial erasure. Further, viewing Asians only through the lens of language difference also ignores entire communities of both monolingual and multigenerational Asian Americans. Crudely put, once Asians are perceived to speak English well, their Asianness seems to disappear from writing-center discourse. Thus, I want to think about how racial power operates on and through the bodies of Asians and Asian Americans. As an Asian American, I ask, *where are Asians at the writing center?* In the spaces of predominantly white institutions (PWIs),

what is the status of our *ways of knowing*? Can we let them loose at the writing center? Thus, while representation and numbers are important, I wonder, can we bring our full selves to the writing center? Invoking this special issue's call, what are the conditions and circumstances of our "arrival"? I lovingly invite readers to join me in a larger conversation about what equitable, liberatory administrative practice can look like. To fellow Asians and Asian Americans at the writing center—transracial and transnational adoptees and those who are mixed race, I see you³—I hope that this piece continues a conversation we can have together about the multiplicity of our experiences at writing centers.

In what follows, I focus on the erasure of Asians and Asian Americans in the U.S. nation-state⁴—and how this may take shape at U.S. writing centers. With its white-savior helping narratives, with white women making up the majority of directors, with the field's overall ethos of "good intentions" (Grimm), and with the white liberalism that characterizes much of academia, the work of writing center administration creates a perfect storm for this erasure. That is, a multiplier effect results from the white ethos of writing center administration combined with the "model-minority racial project," to embrace Lynn Fujiwara and Shireen Roshanravan's semantic intervention (for it is not merely a myth or stereotype) (9).⁵ I ask fellow practitioners of Writing Center Studies to take a hard look at how this erasure is reproduced in writing-center structures, from policies to supervisory practice. Pointedly, I resist suggesting "best practices" for "how to" work with Asians. My feel is that such an approach can unintentionally become a dehistoricized and/or essentialist exercise in surrendering nuances that are crucial to our comprehension of the workings of

white supremacy. Rather, I hope to offer an analytical lens that may help us identify the subtleties of what we might call *epistemic erasure* at our writing centers, contributing to a conversation about valuing and *believing* the lived experiences and ways of knowing of Asians and Asian Americans in writing centers. Taking as a given the tenets of critical race theory—namely, that racism is “ordinary, not aberrational” in U.S. society and that race is a social construction (Delgado and Stefancic 8, 9), I focus on the sociohistorical particularities of Asians and Asian Americans at the writing center in the context of larger concerns about retaining and supporting Indigenous, Black, Latinx, Southwest Asian/North African (SWANA), and Asian staff. I lean heavily on scholarship in Asian American Studies—especially Asian American feminisms—to consider how the embodied histories of Asians and Asian Americans emerge at the everyday writing center (Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet).⁶

In this way, because racial formations are shaped by the historical specificities of a nation-state, my thoughts are limited to and rooted in my observations working, researching, and studying at PWIs not only in the U.S. nation-state but on the U.S. mainland. As always, positionality matters. Living on stolen Dakota land, I currently work at a Research 1 land-grant (“land-grab”) university in the Upper Midwest (Lee and Ahtone). I experienced all of my formal schooling in Tennessee and my post-secondary learning in multiple regions. I am an able-bodied, class-privileged, U.S.-born cisgender daughter of naturalized U.S. citizens who are from Hong Kong and Thailand. Speaking Cantonese and English at home, I am also a second-generation PhD. All of these histories are wrapped up in my research and writing.

In this piece, I self-reflexively conduct a close reading of a personal story (and correspondingly, my embodied histories): I unpack a consultation I had as a student tutor, a story that brings up questions about embodiment, agency, consent, and racial power. Invoking methodologies from Women of Color feminisms, I value the rich site of personal experience and, with this, *the body's capacity to know and to produce knowledge*. This piece functions as a “theoretical rumination” on a subtlety,⁷ an exercise in “theorizing in the flesh.” In the iconic collection *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa introduce “theory in the flesh” as “the ways in which Third World women derive a feminist political theory specifically from our racial/cultural background and experience” (xxiv).⁸ Theory in the flesh has since been employed in a number of studies by women of color, especially Chicanx and Latinx feminists. As Bernadette Marie Calafell finds, “Anzaldúa continued to refine the theory of the flesh or theorizing through lived experience, noting the rigor associated with it” (31). According to Anzaldúa, “Instead of coming through the head with the intellectual concept, you come in through the backdoor with the feeling, the emotion, the experience. But if you start reflecting on that experience you can come back to the theory” (qtd. in Calafell 31). For Jesica Siham Fernández,

Theory in the flesh describes the contradictions, along with the quotidian ways women of Color reflect upon and engage their embodied subjectivities to problematize, resist, and heal from systems of oppression (Cervantes-Soon, 2014; Cruz, 2013; Hurtado, 2003). For women of Color scholars this process of bridging, reflecting and healing is

necessary to our thriving and surviving in academe. (224)

Theory in the flesh methodologically helps me as a woman of color center intersectionality, the body, and lived experience within a systemic critique.

Relatedly, I am interested in drawing from the non-verbals and the movement/knowledge of our bodies, as well as the histories in our bodies. I remember an embodiment workshop from years ago, when artist Pramila Vasudevan challenged attendees to push back on the mind/body split by participating as “moving-thinking selves”: our movements, gestures, and non-verbals produce knowledge (Tang and Vasudevan). This isn’t just about the big movements we might imagine in a great performance hall. I think about the meanings made by the sweep of a hand, a tilt of the head, a side-eye, a quick intake of breath, a long exhale. Writing as a moving-thinking self, I like to think that the explicit recognition of *movement* also pulls us away from static, essentialist renderings of bodies and communities. Thus, while this essay draws from personal experience and reflection to raise questions, it must not be read as definitive or representative.

I hope this reflective essay gestures toward the potential of self-reflexive praxis for racial justice, and perhaps one way to move closer to this goal is by centering embodied history—that is, our body’s reactions to what we experience and remember, as well as the interpellation that our bodies inherit. Our experiences do not exist in isolation, and *what* we experience is felt and stored in our bodies (Menakem). At our writing centers, every body is infused with history. And this history informs how we interact with one another and how our body is

situated in relation to the bodies around us (i.e., positionality) and in relation to the institutions and systems we are in (Godbee, Ozias, and Tang 62). If it is the body that bears racial difference, then thinking about our *racialized* embodied histories becomes paramount to the project of equitable, liberatory administrative practice and to our ongoing goal of treating one another—especially those we supervise—with humanity and love.

In the midst of the history, multigenerational remembering, and knowledge production of the body, most writing center practitioners would agree that the writing center consultation, like all learning spaces, is never neutral (e.g., Camarillo). If the singular body is infused with history, then so, too, is the writing center. Racial power persists, and the PWI writing center inherits and perpetuates histories of harm.⁹ “Yet writing centers can and do also function as sites of slippage and subversion where agents can challenge institutionality and where institutions fail to deliver on their objectives,” as Harry Denny, Robert Mundy, Liliana A. Naydan, Richard Sévère, and Anna Sicari remind us (5). Though not immediately visible, possibilities to “wiggle” under, around, and through the system are everywhere if we move/think creatively enough (Chatterjea as qtd. in Faison, Haltiwanger Morrison, Levin, Simmons, and Tang). One way to subvert and wiggle is to name—and therefore insist on the existence of—the violences and injustices we may witness or experience at our centers. I argue that attending to the presence and embodied histories of Asians and Asian Americans at the writing center can show how our centers reinforce U.S. imperialism alongside white supremacy. (By white supremacy, I refer to the systemic embeddedness of “the hierarchical categorization of ‘white’ as racially superior” (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 67).¹⁰) That is,

empire and white supremacy thrive in our policies, supervisory and consulting practices, and, most subtly, in the ephemeral nature of our interactions, movements, gestures, and other non-verbals with one another.

To mount this argument, I take my cue from Moraga and Anzaldúa and turn to a personal story, but first, I unpack the relationship Asians and Asian Americans have with racial power in the U.S. nation-state. Placing Writing Center Studies in conversation with Asian American Studies is therefore the focus of the next section, for Asian American Studies, from its inception in the 1960s in the movement for Ethnic Studies programs in California,¹¹ involved “conjoined political mobilizations *for* civil rights in the United States and *against* American imperialism in Asia, most pointedly through the Vietnam War” (Kang 5). My hope is that cumulatively, through an extended discussion of Asian American history and cultural politics, this piece develops and employs a lens that enables us to read the subtleties and particularities of how empire and white supremacy work on Asian bodies at the writing center.

ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES AT THE WRITING CENTER

With the Writing Center Studies community in mind, this section highlights frameworks in Asian American Studies toward what I hope is a fuller “critique for” racial justice (Diab, Ferrel, Godbee, and Simpkins 19). In the tradition of writings especially from women of color (particularly Black and Chicana scholars) who push for a reckoning with racism and white supremacy in writing centers (e.g., Faison and Treviño; Green), I contend that exploring questions about the lived experiences and embodied histories of Asians and Asian Americans

can further activate spaces and practices of liberation for our writing centers. I also build on existing conversations about disrupting the racial binary in writing centers (e.g., García). Further, I'm not particularly committed to making the case for "another Other" in Writing Center Studies¹² or fulfilling a 'four food group' liberal project of racial inclusion, nor am I looking to compete with scholarship that has understandably and necessarily engaged with such politics. Building on this work, I argue that recognizing the U.S. nation-state's historical/imperialist relationships with nation-states in Asia—and how Asian diasporic communities have fared upon arrival—can give us a fuller picture of the sociopolitical forces at play at our writing centers, providing another reason to refuse liberal multiculturalist pedagogies in our consulting practice.

But first, what do I mean by empire or imperialism—and how does Asian America figure into such discussions? While I limit my discussion of imperialism to U.S. empire in Asia and how this affects Asians in the U. S. nation-state, the history of imperialism is tied up in the history of the formation of the United States: in short, U.S. imperialism, built through land theft, Manifest Destiny, and enslavement, is closer than an ocean away. We are living in/on it. The "nation-empire" has always been at the U.S. writing center (See xv). From the Philippine-American War at the turn of the twentieth century, to the Secret War in Laos in the 1960s and 70s (involving the CIA recruitment of Hmong children and adults as soldiers), U.S. imperialist projects in Asia also haunt the everyday exchanges in our writing centers—and this haunting involves the bodies of Asians and Asian Americans. This is complicated by the fact that "a paradigm of denial" is one of the defining characteristics of U.S. empire

(Kaplan 13): that is, “the American empire constitutively forgets that it is an empire” (See xvii). In response, Asian American cultural production has produced counternarratives to visibilize and speak back to the U.S. empire (e.g., Bascara; J. Kim; See). In this respect, Asian American cultural politics (of which the discipline of Asian American Studies is their institutionalization) have the capacity to facilitate deeper, more nuanced conversations about equity in writing centers: they can push us to confront U.S. empire-building in Asia and how these imperialist projects affect everyday interactions and relationships at our centers. To explore this further and to contextualize the embodied histories of Asians and Asian Americans in the U.S. nation-state (and therefore in higher education and in writing centers), I now back up a bit for some conceptual and historical grounding.

The construction of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners within the U.S. cultural imaginary has long been a central concern in Asian American Studies.¹³ For example, introductory Asian American Studies courses often include history lessons about the Asian migrants who arrived centuries ago. The “Asian American as forever foreigner” construction is perhaps best articulated in the racial microaggression that many Asian Americans are familiar with: “Where are you from?” (and its corresponding, “No, where are you *really* from?”) (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin 276). Historically, Asian Americans have been constructed as racialized aliens in the U.S. cultural imaginary in ways that correspond with legislative acts (R. Lee). For example, political cartoons featuring derogatory portrayals of Chinese migrants were common during the era of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act (Choy, Dong, and Hom; Moon).¹⁴ Numerous immigration restrictions based

on race, ethnicity, and/or national origin have been imposed on Asians (among other groups) over the years (e.g., 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement, 1917 "Barred Zone" Act, 1934 Tydings-McDuffy Act, and more). And still, we cannot totalize the histories and lived experiences of Asian Americans. As I heard Ronald Takaki say in a lecture a couple decades ago, "In Asia, there are no Asians."¹⁵

The model-minority racial project is one example of the way that Asian Americans are viewed as a monolith, denying the "heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity" of Asian American communities (Lowe).¹⁶ Mainstream media sources dating back to the 1960s attribute Asian American academic success to cultural practices and beliefs, in effect totalizing Asian ethnicities and simultaneously rendering other communities of color as culturally inferior (A. Chung 4–5). Asian Americans have been read as emblematic of an Alger-like American Dream, accomplishing their goals through traditional conceptions of meritocracy.

A classic exercise in the divide-and-conquer logics of white supremacy, the model-minority racial paradigm survives on Asian foreignness, anti-Blackness, and cultural essentialism; it also leads to material consequences, obstructing the U.S. public's view of the realities that Asian American communities face. For example, once we disaggregate the data among these communities, existing disparities (e.g., in poverty rates and educational attainment) become even more visible ("Critical Issues Facing Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders"). As Anne Anlin Cheng remarks, "the praise of the Model Minority ensures compliance, erases inequalities (making invisible the fact that Asian Americans have replaced African Americans as the racial group with the highest

income disparity in the country today), and isolates them from other racial minorities” (“[Anxious Pedigree](#)”). To complicate matters, we as Asian Americans often buy into this so-called praise, participating in anti-Blackness and our own erasure, too.¹⁷ Simultaneously, the model-minority narrative stealthily and hegemonically fuels tension and competition among communities of color, making opportunities for solidarity more difficult to realize. While the cultures of non-Asian communities of color are pathologized as deficient, Asian cultures are totalized and pathologized in mutually constitutive ways: Asians thrive at rote learning and do not defy authority. Asians need to save face. These static, distilled scripts emerge over and over again for many Asians in the U.S. nation-state.

The model-minority paradigm dehistoricizes Asian America, flattening the histories of U.S. empire-building and of U.S. immigration laws, which, taken together, largely shape the composition of Asian American communities.¹⁸ Deftly directing our gaze away from the U.S. nation-state’s actions domestically and abroad, the paradigm drives mainstream perceptions of Asian Americans as having “made it,” masking the history of anti-Asian racism and state violence (e.g., Japanese American incarceration during World War II). The reach of U.S. empire in Cambodia, Japan, Korea, Laos, the Philippines, Vietnam (there are more) is forgotten.¹⁹ And, if Americans have forgotten about U.S. imperialism, then other empires (e.g., the British in China, in India) may not enter our consciousness, either. To be sure, the model-minority narrative extends beyond memory and history: it renders contemporary anti-Asian hate crimes, state violence, and racist rhetoric nonexistent, incomprehensible, or, at best, as anomalous acts committed by rogue individuals.²⁰

Writing center practitioners may wonder, what does this discussion of Asian American racialization and history have to do with our writing centers, with our day-to-day work? When we don't know about these histories and systems of violence, we lose perspective and context: we can slip into pathologizing culture—and the writers and consultants at our centers. Our writing centers are historical sites, and the model-minority racial project circulates within them on a daily basis. It may especially thrive in the teaching and learning spaces of writing centers. For example, I think of how praising Asians for their “work ethic” can come easily alongside our profession's arguable overdependence on praise in staff development (Levin and Tang). I suspect that such tropes exist at the everyday writing center in insidious ways that lead to the devaluing, dismissal, or erasure of Asians and Asian Americans.

Given my concerns about how writing centers may unwittingly participate in racial erasure, the activism that birthed Asian American Studies over fifty years ago can help us see how imperialism figures into white supremacy, and employing such a lens can both resist the model-minority paradigm and contribute to “unmaking Gringo-centers” (García). According to Yuichiro Onishi, “Coining a movement-building nomenclature, ‘Asian American,’ in and of itself was politics”; for example, “Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs, two iconic figures of Asian American movement history... learned to articulate a distinctly Asian American conception of politics derived from the currents of resistance that were anti-imperialist and anti-war.” I want to take this call for attention to U.S. imperialism *and* civil rights as a challenge for Writing Center Studies and practice: what can happen if we look at our administrative and consulting practice through this lens? That is, at

the U.S. writing center and beyond, once we acknowledge that white supremacy and imperialism are intertwined, we will be in a better position to identify and name the extent of violence (epistemic and otherwise) happening at our centers.

The teachings of Asian American Studies (particularly from Asian American feminisms) and Critical Ethnic Studies (especially Women of Color feminisms), as well as the embodied wisdom of my loved ones and co-mentors of color, provide context and validation to the emotions that arise in my body in different situations. To give some shape to this discussion of how Asian American Studies meets Writing Center Studies, I turn now to a story that I have been telling for years to anyone who listens.

“SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK? DO YOU WANT TO WORK WITH ME?”

I am working my shift as a graduate student consultant at the center. I read the writer as a white cisgender man who is older than the average college student on our campus.²¹ (This latter point is especially noticeable, for our student population feels very young.) The writer begins by sharing with me an idea for a long-term project and how he wants *me* to be part of this journey. He is in the military and says he recently came back from serving in the Middle East. I squirm with discomfort, thinking about what this kind of stuff—what the so-called War on Terror—means for SWANA communities here, too. At the end of this spiel about the project, the writer asks, “So, what do you think? Do you want to work with me?” I don’t know what to say. My unspoken response: *I don’t have a choice. You signed up to work with me. I really have no choice.* I vividly remember the non-verbals of the consultation:

Me: on the job, engaged.
Sitting upright, leaning forward,
welcoming, inviting.
Eye contact.
Strong engagement, good affect.
I was a seasoned consultant: friendly and
confident.

Writer: crew cut, glasses, big guy.
Very intense energy and eye contact.
Leaning, sitting back in the chair, legs
crossed over knee, hands behind head.
Taking up *a lot* of space.
Very confident,
very relaxed,
very direct.

Me: shrinking, shrinking, shrinking, as the
consultation progressed.

Writer: crotch adjustment. (Repeat.)

Me: Ewww. Shrinking, retreating. Maybe
freezing. Posture caving. Stomach tense.
Facial expressions going a little flat but
still fake-engaging. (Just get through it.)

Maybe here is where the shades and subtleties
of my story exist: there is no plot twist. The
writer doesn't make an undeniably racist
comment to me, but something felt really off
about this exchange—and I don't think it was
just about gender.

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I have an earnest question for writing center
directors: What would you feel, say, or do if I were a
consultant who told you about this experience?

What if I came to your office and said, “This icky thing happened, and I think that it has to do with my being an Asian woman”? I would imagine that most directors would nod and say, “Oh, ew [insert disgusted facial expression].” For many of us directors, affirming the experiences of staff and of writers is part of our daily work; we’re usually pretty good at it, too. And the reality for many of us is that conversations with women consultants about creepy or inappropriate writers (to say the least) are not unusual. Thus, I also imagine that many directors would agree that the story I describe above is gendered, but would people (specifically white people) be able to recognize that it could be highly racialized, too?

I want to read the situation in an intersectional “both-and” way: it was simultaneously an icky story that happened to me as a woman, *and* its ickiness was deepened and informed by racial identity (mine as Asian and the writer’s as white). As a reminder, as developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw when analyzing discrimination against Black women in the 1980s (“Demarginalizing the Intersection”), intersectionality is “a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and *exacerbate each other*” (“She Coined the Term,” my emphasis). In this sense, I am concerned that well-intentioned cisgender white women directors may dismiss how intersectionality is at work in a consultation like the one I had. Specifically, in the effort to affirm the messed-up, gendered, crotch-adjusting dynamics of the consultation, a white woman administrator may deny the possibility that racial power is wrapped up in the exchange.²² And in doing so, she can universalize and flatten the embodied experience of an Asian woman at the writing center.

The literature on racial microinvalidations can help us unpack the idea that race and gender were at play. As many of us know, “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin 271). I sense that white progressives will nod their heads when coming upon this term—but I worry that they may interpret racial microaggressions only as ephemeral, living and dying in the moment. Unfortunately, such an understanding reflects a liberal multiculturalist move because it centers a dehistoricized, individualistic reading of an insult or behavior that actually adheres to patterns in place over time. With a systemic critique in mind, I want to focus on the subcategory of “racial microinvalidations,” which involve *“communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color”* (274, my emphasis). As Janice McCabe points out, “The subtle nature of microaggressions makes it easy to doubt their existence or to dismiss them as innocuous, which contributes to their power” (qtd. in Diab, Godbee, Burrows, and Ferrel 463). As a subset of racial microaggressions, the idea of microinvalidation names the difficulty I have had when processing the shades and subtleties of my experiences, including the one I describe here. In conversation with Miranda Fricker’s study, Rasha Diab, Beth Godbee, Cedric Burrows, and Thomas Ferrel discuss how a racial microinvalidation can operate as an articulation of epistemic injustice: it “hurts ‘someone specifically in their capacity as a knower’ ([Fricker] 1)” (464). They continue, “When microinvalidations undermine people as knowers, they also undermine full personhood, which includes

having one's experiences acknowledged by others, being able to construct new knowledge, and being able to contribute as a knowledgeable agent within one's community" (464). I am concerned that in a liberal, progressive white woman director's efforts to affirm the experiences of someone like me (i.e., a cis Asian American woman), she may inadvertently participate in a racial microinvalidation—one of epistemic injustice—because she relates to the situation primarily through a shared gender identity. In short, the white woman director can undermine the Asian American consultant's "capacity as a knower." Thus, this is potentially a moment of epistemic erasure of Asians in the U.S. nation-state, shaped by the specificities of writing center work.

The act of ignoring—and even not attending to—the presence of racial power in the consultation (or in a post-consultation reflection) subscribes to the liberal multiculturalist ideology of colorblindness. This latter point may not be obvious. I think most white progressives would agree that colorblindness is something to be resisted, but the struggle may lie in operationalizing such resistance. As Robin DiAngelo notes, "White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived" (5). It is in these dynamics that epistemic erasure occurs—enabled and deepened, too, by the model-minority racial project.

And still, I know there are those (even in my own racial/ethnic communities) who, buying into the model-minority paradigm, question whether Asian American women can be recipients of racial microaggressions in the first place. In a moment when Asian Americans are described as being in close "proximity" to whiteness—and in a moment

when we are barely named even in best-selling antiracism literature (e.g., DiAngelo; Menakem), Anne Anlin Cheng asks, “Is the yellow woman injured—or is she injured enough?” (*Ornamentalism* xi).²³ Cheng looks at the construction of the “yellow woman”—and how there are persistent traces and material consequences to this construction. While the othering of Asian women has traditionally been described as an “objectification” (e.g., ‘Asian women are treated as objects’), Cheng analyzes how the figure of the Asian woman *began* as an object in the cultural imaginary—that is, “how things have been turned into people” (x). Cheng’s work theorizes and affirms my emotions: I *feel* the effects and traces of the construction of the yellow woman on lived experience and on the body. Further, the subtlety of the racial microinvalidation on the body of the Asian woman is part of a larger phenomenon of the erasure of Asian American communities. If the model-minority racial project has the power to erase the history of state violence against Asian American communities, then it also renders my emotions during my writing consultation illegible.

In short, if Asian women have historically been constructed as objects first in the U.S. cultural imaginary, then what is the status of our personhood and our ways of knowing in the “cultural and interdisciplinary contact zone” of the writing center (Monty)? Does anyone know we’re here? If Asians and Asian Americans *have* arrived at the writing center (as this issue’s editors ask), then our arrival is conditional, stuck in a Derridean hospitality anchored in white liberalism and “American imperial disavowal” (See xvii). To be clear, I’m less concerned about whether the crotch-adjusting writer committed a racial microaggression on me (he may have—to this day, I am not sure). I’m focusing on the actions that white writing center directors take when

a consultant of color reflects on a session with them. I have been struggling with the intersectional subtleties of epistemic erasure, and this struggle is compounded and facilitated by an historical landscape in which Asian Americans are situated as in-between—be it racially triangulated (C. Kim) or racially interstitial (Bow), if we are even acknowledged as people of color in the first place (e.g., Raymundo). The conditions of Asian women’s “arrival” at the writing center also rest on sexualized foreignness (Shimizu). So when this hypersexualized, exoticized body of the yellow woman enters the white-woman–dominated space of the writing center, what happens? The conditions are ripe for white woman administrators to over-identify with a story like mine. Racial difference gets dismissed, and gender takes center stage. Intersectionality is denied. Again, the perfect storm for racial erasure.

THE WEIGHT OF IMPERIALISM ON OUR BODIES

So, what actually happened after my consultation with the writer? I went to my boss, one of the writing center directors, and somehow just started *crying*. In the moment, I don’t know why I cried. You could say I am a crier (I am). But there was something I could not name that my cis white woman boss was able to as we reflected on the session: “And you are even going to that *Miss Saigon* protest tonight, too!” she said unexpectedly, remembering what I’d mentioned to her earlier that day and recognizing the problematic politics of this Broadway show. Whoa. That was it. *Miss Saigon*, “the hit musical that tells the story of the Vietnam-era doomed romance between American GI Chris and Vietnamese prostitute Kim,” based on the short story made famous by the Puccini opera *Madama Butterfly* of

the early 1900s (Hu Pegues 193). Both *Miss Saigon* and *Madama Butterfly* perpetuate stereotypical narratives about Asian women, something I remember learning about in my earliest Asian American Studies courses as an undergraduate student.²⁴

Somehow, there was this coincidence of having a shitty consultation on the same day I was going to protest *Miss Saigon*. The genre of the Broadway musical facilitates *Miss Saigon*'s ridiculous portrayal of Vietnamese women, featuring an opening number about how "The heat is on in Saigon. The girls are hotter 'n' hell... One of these slits [*sic*] here will be Miss Saigon." Somehow my consultation reflected a strange convergence involving what Susan Koshy describes as a historic "white man–Asian woman dyad" (qtd. in T. Chung 62). As Tsu-I Chung explains, "[T]his colonial narrative...functioned symbolically to resolve colonial conflicts through the willing subjugation of the Asian female body associated with the conquest of the land (Koshy 20)" (62). And at the protest that evening, as hundreds of mostly white theater-goers filed into the beautiful performance hall of the Ordway Theater, our small group of protesters passed out "Don't Buy Miss Saigon" flyers about what was wrong with the theater's decision to host this musical—for the third time in twenty years, as David Mura points out in his commentary on Minnesota's racial climate (50). Three runs, three protests. A big F.U. to Vietnamese and Asian Americans in a region known for having one of the largest Southeast Asian American communities in the country ("States with Largest Southeast Asian American Populations").²⁵

I suspect that this connection between my consultation and the *Miss Saigon* protest may be hard for many white people to understand. The root

of this is that Asian American women inherit a set of historical conditions involving their/our bodies in the U.S. nation-state. I can hear a reader's "yes, but [you aren't Vietnamese]" response to my claim. A shared though fraught interpellation of Asian American women results from the conflation of Asian ethnicities in the U.S. cultural imaginary, in spite of the histories of war and colonialism between our ancestors' lands in Asia.²⁶ The case of *Miss Saigon* illustrates this complexity, for its predecessor, *Madama Butterfly*, features a Japanese woman character. These dynamics involving Asian women's bodies haunted my consultation with the writer, whom I read as a white man. Was I triggered simply because the writer was in the military—and because I have an aversion to U.S. military operations abroad that may function to enforce the U.S. empire? Perhaps. And this is augmented by the fact that in these contemporary times, deployment in the SWANA region involves bodies that I as an Asian American feel some sense of kinship with. Or maybe, was I triggered because my mother, a Hong Kong immigrant, is a former subject of the British empire? More questions come up: what if it's just me? What if I am just too sensitive? Is this about a sensitive Asian woman who is making a big deal out of nothing? Could this have been a case of eros in the writing center—of a consultant getting confused by (and therefore denying the presence of) sexual tension with a writer (hooks)? No, I respond confidently and quietly.

Over time, I keep experiencing and witnessing this racialized, gendered dynamic around, through, and in me. I can already hear dismissals of my claim—that this is all about me bringing my own baggage to the writing center. Yes, my baggage, I want to say—and that of many of my Asian American friends, too. This must be what Cathy Park Hong describes as "minor

feelings: the racialized range of emotions... built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed" (55). I also turn to my Asian American Studies roots again and the unpacking of *Madama Butterfly* and with it, *Miss Saigon*, in which the Asian protagonist kills herself in the end. As Karen Shimakawa observes, "...the self-sacrifice of an Asian woman for the love of a white (Western) man has become an archetypal template, against which Asian women's sexuality is always measured in terms of self-denial/self-destruction (and often internalized racism)" (qtd. in Hu Pegues 193). This archetype in U.S. popular culture is linked to historical forces of U.S. empire-building in Asia (and, correspondingly, anti-Asian legislation within the borders of the nation-state). This is a crucial point that can help us recognize U.S. imperialism as it is enacted through the body and as it persists at the writing center. Naming the ongoing presence of U.S. imperialism and white supremacy at our writing centers productively lends nuance to the racial microinvalidations maintained by the model-minority racial project. In short, without this explicit acknowledgement, these acts of erasure will continue to exist in subtleties and silences, maintaining a liberal multiculturalist (and yes, imperialist) writing center that perpetuates epistemic injustice on Asians and Asian Americans.

The policies of my writing center intensified the racialized, gendered model-minority dynamics of my experience: specifically, the moment of interaction in which the writer asked, "Do you want to work with me?", was a confusing one. At our center at that time, a writer could choose a consultant based on the photographs and biographies on the website. So this "Do you want to work with me?" question was a fallacy, exposing the contradiction of someone

giving agency to another. It is also an arguably loaded question for the model-minority subject, for, as erin Khuê Ninh asks, “What is consent for a subject whose algorithm for all things is to identify and meet the standards set by others?” (76). That is, for Ninh, the algorithm of the model minority is involved in the “*subject formation*” of Asian American women (76): in short, the model minority plays a role in our socialization and, to some extent, how we as Asian American women come to understand ourselves.²⁷ At my writing center, these dynamics were situated in an appointment-making system that prioritized *writers’* choices (a system that is worth revisiting). Thus, at a structural level, the writing center anchored and participated in the racialized and gendered haunting—in the historical relationships between the body of the writer and my own.

Is it melodramatic to say that I cried in my boss’s office that day because of the weight of U.S. imperialism? Bascara writes about how Asian American cultural politics make U.S. imperialism visible and undeniable, given “the chronic resistance of American culture to casting the United States as imperial” (xvi). In this way, my boss, in bringing up *Miss Saigon*, was taking a crucial step toward acknowledging the presence of white supremacy and U.S. empire. The years of writer’s block I’ve experienced when trying to understand my tears that day also speak to the power of the model-minority paradigm, which clouded my ability to process and unpack the exchange. It is no surprise then that I felt relief when protesting *Miss Saigon* that night, joining others at the theater to resist our casted roles as model minorities.

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Weeks later, during a walk at a nature preserve, I am still bothered by the consultation and tell a friend about it. It's my Korean American activist friend who has thought a lot about Seoul's camptowns, which historically have been sites of state-sanctioned sex work in service of American GIs (Yuh). He remarks, "It sounds like you're a prostitute at your writing center." "NO," I say just as bluntly. (He tells me later that I was clearly angry, but in the moment, I'm too stunned by the comment to know my feelings.) As I think about it more, I hear my Writing Center Studies colleagues' voices in my head, for this possibility has been raised before (Russell). So, what if my friend was on to something? What happens if I think of the situation through such a lens, where my body is in service to another? (And, how do I even talk about this without pathologizing sex work or stigmatizing sex workers?) While questions of consultant agency and voice are not new, what does framing a writing center consultation as an interaction that reproduces that "ancient arrangement of provider and client" (Russell 71) mean for consultants who are Indigenous, Black, Latinx, SWANA, or Asian, whose labor and bodies *have* historically been in service to white people and in service to the nation-state? Where our bodies *have* historically been excluded by these very institutions that we teach, learn, and consult in (and most often on land stolen from Native communities)? What does this mean for Asian American women consultants? *What differential risk is there for minoritized subjects?*

"A GAP THAT WAS EXISTING INSIDE ME FOR A LONG TIME"

It is years later. I have more institutional power now. I am a co-director with my former boss. I am also the first and only full-time person of color on staff at

my writing center, the very place that trained me. The question extends and morphs: What are the costs of bringing Asians on board as consultants—and as administrators? How much epistemic erasure can the body sustain? And how in the world can we metabolize the subtleties emerging in our everyday writing center work? Once again invoking Hong, what do we do with our “minor feelings”—these emotions that “occur when American optimism is enforced upon you, which contradicts your own racialized reality, thereby creating a static of cognitive dissonance” (56)? Since becoming director, I have witnessed and been part of conversations with other writing center staff of color who also grapple with white liberalism’s subtleties and silences (in addition to more obvious articulations of racism). While we all have to “choose our battles,” what happens when we start noticing a pattern of comments and interactions that chip away your personhood, your histories, and your communities—as well as those of other marginalized communities? As Diab, Godbee, Burrows, and Ferrel suggest, “[M]oments cumulate and take larger, systemic turns” (460): the moment of erasure may be ephemeral, but the impact is not. The logics of white supremacy and U.S. empire exist in loud *and* quiet ways.

After I presented some of these ideas at an International Writing Centers Association conference, I received an email from someone who had attended my session:

I really enjoyed your presentation. It filled a gap that was existing inside me for a long time. I... have often thought of my involvement with writing centers in north America. What can I, an Asian female from [an Asian country], bring to writing centers? How would my background as

a [non-U.S.] national and my knowledge of writing centers be accepted by writing centers?
Am I even worth working in a writing center?

My eyes linger on this last comment each time I read it, with the writer linking her self-worth to her potential contributions to a writing center. I wish to draw attention to the gendered and racialized labor an Asian or Asian American staff member may feel at the writing center. Thus, as an Asian American friend and former writing center colleague recently suggested to me, maybe we need to flip this question about “worth”: is the PWI writing center worth our labor?

NOTES

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1. At the risk of wordiness, I use the terms “Asian” and “Asian American” together to acknowledge solidarities and differences among and within Asian communities in the U.S. nation-state. At times I use “Asian” by itself to refer to those from Asia *and* those in the diaspora. I use “Asian American” to describe those who self-identify as such, regardless of citizenship status. I also occupy a privileged status in which the term

“Asian American” has traditionally centered Chinese Americans. Further, at the risk of exclusion, I do not incorporate “Pacific” or “Pacific Islander” in my terminology or analysis (as in “Asian Pacific American,” Asian American Pacific Islander,” or “Asian Pacific Islander American”), given the history of Asian settler colonialism especially in Hawai’i. See Fujikane and Okamura; Hall; Trask.

2. One piece in Writing Center Studies that powerfully speaks to the intersection of race and language for Asian Americans is Tammy S. Conard-Salvo’s essay in which she reflects on how her multilingualism and mixed-race Korean American identity emerge in her writing consultancy and administrative practice.
3. I borrow this language from the BIPOC Healing Art Series at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities.
4. I use the term “nation-state” “to point to how the United States is not a natural formation, but one that exists through the maintenance of laws, systems, and regulations that rest on a history of colonization, genocide, and imperialism” (Godbee, Ozias, and Tang 69n6).
5. Hereafter, I also employ the term “model-minority racial project,” though I use it interchangeably with “paradigm” and “narrative.” All of these terms speak to the insidiousness of the historical

construction and figure of the model minority.

6. In this piece, I break MLA convention when it comes to citing source with multiple authors. Instead of using “et al,” I include all names so that all authors are explicitly credited.
7. This term is also used in essays by Ed Cohen and D. Soyini Madison, respectively.
8. This description is from the anthology’s introduction. In the “Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh” section itself, Moraga also writes, “A theory in the flesh means one where the physical reality of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse together to create a politic born out of necessity” (23).
9. Though higher education as a whole warrants critique (see, for example, Squire, Williams, and Tuitt), I especially look to hold PWIs accountable in this piece.
10. As Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre explain, “Our focus on white supremacy—instead of only race and racialization—is to *name* whiteness and its centrality to the construction of this racialized unequal world that we all inhabit” (67). See also Junaid Rana’s discussion of white supremacy as both ideological and systemic.
11. To be sure, the discipline has crucial divergences and tensions, and I’m concerned about the sexism,

heterosexism, and patriarchy that especially defined the cultural nationalism of the Asian American movement, as well as the centering of Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans in early Asian American Studies scholarship (Choy 12). Furthermore, even as I make a case for the usefulness of how the discipline engages with U.S. empire, it is not a given for imperialism to be recognized in Asian American Studies curricula.

12. I'm appropriating Catherine J. Kudlick's term "another Other" when she makes the case for Disability Studies to American Studies scholars.
13. While the "transnational turn" (Fisher Fishkin) disrupted and complicated this critique (C. Lee), Asian American Studies is not to be confused with Asian Studies (Hune).
14. U.S. popular culture depictions of Asians are not only connected to legislation of the state but also to U.S. foreign policy and shifting international relations over time. For example, see Naoko Shibusawa's study of changes in U.S.-Japan relations after the Asia-Pacific War.
15. In other words, the interpellation of a given Asian ethnic group as "Asian" grows stronger outside of Asia. In Asia, the distinctions between, say, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese people are historically and violently defined, but once our communities

arrive in the U.S. nation-state, we are often lumped together.

16. I also want to keep in mind regional and local particularity: how we understand the model-minority racial project can be informed by historical context and immigration waves and patterns in different places. And still, conceptions of regionalism on the U.S. mainland (and perhaps even institutional particularity) can become a way to deny Asian American erasure. I can imagine a reader saying, “Asians may feel erased where *you* are at, but *my* institution is different because...”
17. I find relief when reading Bao Phi’s essay, “Brutal,” which eloquently articulates these nuances and problematics.
18. For example, the 1965 Hart-Celler Act involved a preference system that favored individuals with training or occupations desired by the state, facilitating a so-called brain drain (see Reimers). The model-minority narrative ignores this historical context and renders post-1965 Asian immigrants as successful because they come from cultures that value hard work and education, implicitly suggesting that other communities of color do not have such values.
19. I recognize that this is fraught and that U.S. imperialism can look different across contexts. In the midst of being on the receiving end of U.S. empire, some of these nation-states

have turbulent imperialist histories
with one another, too.

20. In recent times, for example, 45's use of phrases such as "China virus" and "kung flu" to describe COVID-19 serves only to mark *him*, an individual, as racist; the phrase becomes stripped of the xenophobic rhetoric that is in its lineage. In short, how can such phrases be harmful to a community that is perceived to be so successful?
21. Looking back, I now wonder about the role of cisnormativity in my reading of the writer.
22. Critical race feminists help us unpack this situation, too, given their attention to antiessentialism, which involves "a critique of the feminist notion that there is an essential female voice, that is, that all women feel one way on a subject" (Wing 7).
23. I thank Michelle Lee for drawing my attention to this work. Lee has also written a helpful review of Cheng's *Ornamentalism*.
24. A number of compelling studies speak to the nuances and layers of this musical. For example, Celine Parreñas Shimizu urges us to "move beyond a one dimensional understanding of sexual representation as always already injurious, dangerous, and damaging. Asian women's performance and consumption of racialized hypersexuality provides the terms for

resistant authorial and spectatorial relations in the theater" (31).

25. For a multitude of reasons (including casting and yellowface), *Miss Saigon* has elicited many protests from Asians and Asian American communities since its debut in the 1990s (Burns 107–38; Kondo 228–34).
26. Lynn Fujiwara offers a compelling argument about how “multiplicity as a conceptual framework” is productive when analyzing differences within Asian America and across communities of color (245). In the context of imperialism, Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns also examines how productions of *Miss Saigon* invoke “the triangulated imperial histories of the United States, the Philippines, and Vietnam” (109).
27. Because Ninh is talking about sexual assault, I tread on difficult terrain and risk dismissing sexual violence in making this connection.

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