

Identity: A Theatre Play and Reflection Looking to
Understanding Personal Asian Identity

A SENIOR CAPSTONE PROJECT
Presented to
The Department of Anthropology
The Colorado College

By
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Abstract

This capstone stems from a desire to learn and explore my own Asian American identity and its relation to the wider Asian diaspora. My capstone project combines both anthropological work with documentary theatre to understand how personal Asian American identities can be formed and influenced. The main portion of this thesis comes from a documentary theatre play about Asian American identity, created through interviews involving Asian American participants coming from various backgrounds and experiences. This paper starts off with a reflection of a history of anti-Asian discrimination prevalent in the United States, from hostile violence in the late 1800s to the rise in anti-Asian rhetoric from the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. This paper also goes through both an explanation of the interview process and an analysis of how these interviews present underlying social themes in the Asian American community. These themes specifically point to discussions regarding erasure and assimilation, high expectations, and positions of leadership. Attached is the playscript of the documentary play formed through the personal statements and stories provided by the interviews conducted in this project. A staged reading for this play was presented on December 16, 2022, in Celeste Theatre at Colorado College; the cast of that stage reading is presented in the playscript.

**On my honor, I have neither given, nor received, any unauthorized aid on this project.
Honor Code Upheld.**

Introduction

The wake of the COVID-19 pandemic became a wakeup call for Asians living in America. In 2020 alone, FBI Hate Crime Statistics noted around 279 anti-Asian hate crimes reported, a 77% increase from the previous year. Further data from the STOP AAPI HATE reporting center shows over 2,500 reports of COVID-related hate crimes directed towards Asian Americans living in the United States (Wu et al. 2021). These crimes included verbal harassment, reinforcement of harmful stereotypes, and violent physical attacks that left many Asian and Asian American people injured or killed. While there were many reported cases of anti-Asian discrimination throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there were many more that have gone unreported or worse, publicly ignored.

The rise of anti-Asian discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic can be pointed to a larger spectrum of racism towards Asian Americans. It is important to recognize that recent anti-Asian discriminatory behavior is not new, but rather a reinforcement of racist attitudes towards Asian and Asian American communities. Throughout U.S. history, Asians were often “ostracized” from White American society as they were considered “immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds” (Kim 1999: 107). Further political actions have pushed the narrative of Asians as foreign outsiders, such as the Chinese Exclusion act or the Immigration Act of 1917 that further barred Asian immigrants. Anti-Asian discrimination remains to be a long, continuous peril in U.S. society for Asian American communities, yet many Asian Americans today hold different perspectives surrounding how their Asian identities play into effect in today’s world. This paper looks to examine how Asian identities are personally affected by both different Asian American lifestyles and harmful anti-Asian discriminatory factors.

Motivation for Change

For my senior thesis project, I wanted to combine my theatre background with anthropological research to examine personal individual stories of Asian identity and their developments, specifically in the framework of anti-Asian discrimination. This project mainly involves creating a verbatim documentary theatre play looking into different Asian American perspectives, as well as a paper reflecting on the research and interview process that came along with it. This project looks to examine how personal Asian identity is individually perceived and developed through personal life experiences and the impact of anti-Asian discriminatory behavior in the United States.

The decision to pursue this topic relates to my own personal experiences and viewpoints as an Asian American. My own life was filled with microaggressions and stereotypes, yet I never fully recognized the harm it did to me until the COVID-19 pandemic. I was wary of hateful stares and jokes that came into my life, yet I also became frustrated seeing others who look like me being harassed and harmed worse than I did throughout the pandemic. I questioned why such violent, abhorrent behavior towards Asians and Asian Americans occurred, with a lack of accountability going towards these racist behaviors. I started to reflect on the pandemic's harmful effects towards the Asian American community. I wanted to explore not only my own experiences with my Asian identity but look into how the Asian diaspora provided diverse perspectives on the development of racial and ethnic identities. For me, there's a personal need to address an issue that connects to my own well-being and identity as an Asian American. What I realized and can be argued for is that Asian identity is individually unique, developed through different factors and events in U.S. culture that can further anti-Asian discriminatory behavior in the U.S.

Asian American Call for Advocacy

The problem of racism and discrimination continues to affect Asian Americans every day, yet many are not aware of how this continuous racist behavior personally affects Asian identity. Asian identity includes the physical and mental experiences of being Asian, yet it also reflects on how we, as an Asian American collective, perceive ourselves based on our racial and ethnic identities and how they have been perceived by outside society. When one experiences anti-Asian discrimination, whether it is in the form of small microaggressions or physical violence, their Asian identity becomes distorted and impacted, creating an inaccurate and harmful depiction of how one perceives being Asian. In a study on perceived COVID-19 related anti-Asian discrimination on mental health, about 25.6% of the study sample reported having “prior mental health diagnosis,” most commonly showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as anxiety and depression (Hahm et al. 2021). There is also the issue of Asian Americans frequently facing internalized racism, where one accepts negative beliefs and values toward themselves or their own race (Hahm et al. 2021). Harmful anti-Asian stereotypes and behavior become accepted and endangers how one sees Asian identity. By understanding different personal Asian identities and the factors that affect it, this paper looks to reflect on the Asian American community and possibly create an Asian American call for advocacy. Asian American communities can start to look towards how they themselves can advocate both against anti-Asian discriminatory behavior and for a more respectable Asian presence and identity in the United States. If we continue to ignore anti-Asian hate crimes and only acknowledge the distorted Asian identity we see today, present and future generations of Asians will continue to see their well-being harmed and their lives in danger.

U.S. Involvement of Anti-Asian Sentiment

To understand anti-Asian discrimination is to understand Asian identity. Asian Americans and immigrants have a long history of racism and discrimination in the United States. It is important to understand the history and studies done on anti-Asian discrimination to understand how Asian identity can be impacted. There have been two main ways in which anti-Asian discrimination has taken form in America: one is through “civic ostracization” of being seen as a foreign outsider, the other is through “relative valorization” against other people of color (Kim 1999: 107). Both used similar ways in portraying Asians in America, from linguistic labels to harmful stereotypes.

Harmful History and Linguistic Labels

A major reason contributing to the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes has to do with the harmful labels put upon the Asian and Asian American communities. These labels have traversed throughout Asian American history and continues to play a part in Asian representation and identity formation. There are many terms that label Asian communities as an outsider unfit to be a part of American society, constantly known as a “virus” or “unclean.” Yet there are also labels, specifically the Model Minority Myth, that places Asians in a position below whites yet above other people of color to succeed.

The Unclean Yellow Peril

Nayan Shah’s book (2001) *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* shows that in late nineteenth century, California and San Francisco not only became a hot spot for Chinese and Asian immigration, but an emergence in xenophobic propaganda against Asian migrants by white American nativists. Around that time, small epidemics of

smallpox and other diseases were blamed towards Chinese migrants; accusations were made regarding Chinese and Asian migrants as “unclean” that eventually led to San Francisco Chinatowns being burned down or flooded (Shah 2001: 1). This would fuel further xenophobic behavior through the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first U.S. law to specifically ban a group of immigrants based on race.

Since then, there have been further instances of anti-Asian discrimination in history. One example relates to the U.S. colonial control of the Philippines. To maintain said colonial control, U.S. officials disregarded the Filipinos for their “unclean and uncivilized bodies” (De Leon 2020). They would refer to the Philippines' “tropical diseases” and the possibility of Filipino insurgency to justify U.S. colonial rule. It is not new that Asian and Asian Americans are racially associated with emerging diseases and viruses and are thus unfairly seen as “unclean,” even when it is abundantly clear that diseases are not exclusive to Asians. Another example is with the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in Canada, which brought harm to the East and Southeast communities in Canada. In an article written by Canadian writer Carrienne Leung, “the hysteria surrounding SARS evoked a number of racist backlashes against the Chinese and other Southeast Asian communities,” which ranged from “feelings of isolation” to “acts of harassment” (Leung 2008).

Model Minority Myth

Another harmful label imposed on Asians and Asian Americans is the Model Minority Myth. One of the most prevailing narratives to describe Asian American culture, the Model Minority Mythology (Shah 2019) implies that Asian Americans can assimilate better than other minorities in America and thus, tend to achieve higher levels of success (Blackburn 2019). At first sight, this label contradicts previous notions of Asian and Asian Americans being seen as

“unclean” or a disease to white Western norms. However, the Model Minority Myth is problematic in its own way as it works to create a structural hierarchy regarding race in U.S. society. It places Asian Americans not only below white nationalists but above other people of color to create a disparity between other people of color. This overall places white people above people of color while also being able to put down any criticisms by communities of color.

The Chinese Virus Propaganda

The most recent labeling towards Asians relates back to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 strain originated from Wuhan, China, which would later spread throughout Europe, North America, and eventually cause a worldwide pandemic. According to Roger Luckhurst, Western ideologies pointed toward its place of origin of China as the source of the problem. This is evident when former president Donald J. Trump insistently referred to the COVID-19 strain as the “Chinese virus” or “kung flu” rather than its scientific name, even continuing to use the phrase when proven the term was harmful (Shuttleworth 2020: 54). This led to many of his supporters and colleagues referring to the virus solely as the “Chinese virus” to politically scapegoat China for the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet the social consequences resulted in anyone being racially and xenophobically targeted for simply “looking Chinese”, an enemy to U.S. society.

Being Seen as Dangerous

I bring up these harmful terms and labels as they relate to a multitude of theories relating to history and linguistics. One should consider the theory of French Structuralism when looking at the history of anti-Asian discrimination. Coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss, French Structuralism argues that there is a universal binary structure for organizing cultural practices and human

behavior. When examining Asian American history, accusations of Asian Americans being seen as “unclean” or associated with a disease have been prevalent throughout the U.S. consistently since the late 1800s. Terms such as “yellow peril” and “kung flu” stems from historical racist beliefs from white nativists, which are ingrained into creating a universal thought structure of racism and xenophobia towards Asian people from a global viewpoint; one which imagines white nativists as “clean” and Asian people as “unclean.”

Other linguistic theories to consider for this project include Cognitive Anthropology and Exemplar theory. Both theories investigate how perceptions of social reality and episodic memory relate to language structures. When looking into Western beliefs and white American culture, their perceptions toward the Asian American community are affected by racist preconceptions. Terms from “yellow peril,” “model minority,” and “Chinese virus” become ingrained into a Western dominant belief that sparks a rise in anti-Asian sentiment and discrimination. What one needs to realize are the harms that these linguistic labels have on the well-being of Asian and Asian American people, especially when these labels come from Western historical beliefs.

Politics of Anti-Asian Hate

The other major discriminatory factor that affects Asian identity relates to the political actions of the United States. This includes both government policies and political propaganda that targeted Asian immigrants throughout U.S. history. This in turn influenced how a larger U.S. society viewed Asian Americans, which in turn catalyzed anti-Asian discrimination.

Exclusion Policies

As mentioned earlier, Chinese and Asian immigrants became the target for hateful language relating to emerging epidemics throughout the late 1800s. The impact of anti-Asian discourse language, specifically the association of disease, not only impacted Asian immigrants socially but also through U.S. political action through the passing of specific legislative policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act. The Chinese Exclusion Act, infamously known as the “first law in the United States that barred immigration solely based on race,” placed a 10-year moratorium on all Chinese immigration to the United States (De Leon 2020). This made it difficult for not only Chinese immigrants but also any Asian immigrant to come to the U.S. as there was no specific way to differentiate between ethnicities in Asian immigrants. The specific language used in these policies targeted Asian Americans as “foreigners who didn’t belong in the US;” the first line of the Chinese Exclusion Act specifically says that “the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof” (Zhou 2021). The Chinese Exclusion Act makes it clear in its wording that Chinese immigrants were considered foreign threats against white natives, painting an outsider narrative on the Asian community and fueling further anti-Asian discourse throughout the country. Further policies were enacted to bar more Asian immigrants from coming to the U.S.; the Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, made it so that any immigrant from any Asian country not owned by the U.S. were barred from entering the United States. Eventually, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 eliminated any immigration policies that focused on racial restrictions, which allowed immigrants coming from war-torn Asian countries to find refuge by coming to the States.

McCarthyism Propaganda

Sometimes political words are enough to shock a nation. While there are many policies that have restricted Asian immigrants as outsiders, political propaganda is another tool for political attacks. The term “Chinese virus” is just one way the Trump administration has targeted China for the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic. Trump had repeatedly made comments on how the COVID-19 strain came from China and that “It’s China’s fault” (Hahm 2021), even going so far as supporting the “conspiracy theory” that the COVID-19 virus was manufactured in the Wuhan Institute of Virology (Shuttleworth 2020). Trump here implies, without conclusive reason and evidence, that China is to blame for a pandemic. This put a political target on China that justified blame and hate crimes towards China and Asians for the cause and spread of the COVID-19 strain (Hahm 2021).

These actions can also be referred to as another form of McCarthyism, which can be described as “any political attack based on reckless and unsubstantiated accusations” (Moberg 2018: 285). This stems from the actions of former U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, who notably made constant, baseless allegations towards the U.S. government and college universities of communist spies. The Trump administration and Trump’s continued followers have made its own “reckless and unsubstantiated accusations” towards Asian people for the spread of COVID-19. It is seen that COVID-19 is not exclusively restricted to China and Chinese people despite the strain originating from China, nor has there been any evidence of COVID-19 being spread purposefully by the Chinese government. Despite that, China is still used as a baseless scapegoat tool where the Chinese, or more accurately anyone who looks remotely Chinese, become the target for hate crimes. This meant that anyone who looked Chinese, even if they are of a different ethnicity or have only lived in America their whole lives, were victims of ever-growing harassment and attacks based on the political propaganda fueled by the Trump administration.

Political Ecology

The theory used to describe this political use of anti-Asian discrimination is called political ecology. Political ecology, first coined by Eric Wolf in 1972, studies how political actions tend to influence definite human behavior and social movements. This theory is evident through the actions caused by U.S. politics, such as how the U.S. government passed policies and laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act that promote the otherness of Asian immigrants. In addition, the political accusations by the Trump administration racially target Asian and Asian Americans based on whether they look Chinese, which the Trump administration considers a threat due to baseless propaganda around COVID-19 being the “Chinese virus.” This resulted in actions that contributed to anti-Asian discrimination and hate crimes, showing the powerful influence U.S. politics have played in impacting Asian identity and wellbeing negatively.

Process, Storytelling, and Positionality

While past scholars have investigated how Asians have faced discrimination, little is known about how it has personally affected them. Furthermore, not much is known on how anti-Asian discrimination greatly influences the development of personal Asian identities, from childhood to adulthood. When it comes to the issue of race and ethnicity, numbers do not tell the whole story. Personal viewpoints and anecdotes from Asian Americans are needed to provide insight into Asian lives and the deeper impacts of anti-Asian discrimination. This project looks to delve deeper into specific Asian identities and how each one of these identities have been affected by different cultural and anti-Asian discriminatory factors.

Interview Process

To shed light on the different perspectives in the Asian American community, this project looks to utilize personal stories other than my own. This was done through interviews conducted with other Asian Americans. I asked them about not only their own experiences regarding the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic but also their perspectives and what they have learned on the issue of anti-Asian racism. The answers taken from these interviews can be seen as testimonies, considered as “storytelling with a purpose” (Cotera 2008: 179) as they provide critical knowledge on the study of anti-Asian discrimination. Specifically, the testimonies from these interviews provided an insight into how anti-Asian discriminatory factors personally affect Asian and Asian American identity. Conducting these interviews provides both personal stories regarding anti-Asian hate and anthropological analytical data to analyze. These personal stories regarding other people’s experiences and perspectives helps my senior capstone project as it provides a more holistic study on anti-Asian discrimination and Asian American racism. At the same time, these stories can be analyzed to find similarities in how Asian Americans face different challenges relating to their racial and ethnic backgrounds, creating patterns and themes regarding how the Asian American community functions and handles anti-Asian discrimination.

Pilot Questions

Before interviews were conducted, the interview questions themselves needed to be evaluated. Initially, 32 questions were written that asked about a participant’s individual development of their Asian identity, as well as their experience with anti-Asian discrimination. This was later shortened down to a total of 10 questions, with room for follow-up questions when needed. The interview questions, as well as a standard interview consent form for participants, were both approved by the IRB process beforehand. Two pilot interviews were

conducted between February 13th and 14th of 2022. This was done both to evaluate the interview questions and for the interviewer to get an understanding of how to conduct interviews regarding Asian identity. The statements in these interviews were not used in the final analysis of this paper nor were they used in the verbatim documentary theatre play but mainly helped to test the interview process.

Main Study Interviews

After the pilot interviews, two questions were added to help clarify a few topics, resulting in a total of 12 interview questions. Questions were divided between two sets of six questions: the first set of questions asked about the participant's own Asian identity and backgrounds, specifically how their racial and ethnic identities play into their daily lives. The second set of questions specifically asked about participants experiences and viewpoints regarding anti-Asian discrimination, such as harmful language used on them or discrimination they had seen during their lives. Interviews took place throughout the Spring of 2022, with a total of 10 interviews conducted for this project. These interviews all took place at Colorado College, with 7 students and 3 staff and faculty members taking part in these interviews. This demographic provided an insight on how Asian identity perspective and development differed between the younger and older generation. Interviewees had roots mainly in East and Southeast Asia, yet some interviewees had grown up mainly in America or broadly identify mainly as Asian American. Before interviews were conducted, participants were asked prerequisite questions regarding comfortability and confidentiality, in which 4 participants chose to remain anonymous for this study. For the verbatim documentary theatre portion of this project, different character names were given for each participant's statements.

Discussion and Takeaways

The majority of these interviews are presented in the verbatim documentary theatre piece. These interviews presented an individual unique story regarding each person's ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as individual lifetime experiences that affected how they view their own Asian identity to today's society. Yet, as I conducted interviews and transcribed them, I came across similar ideas or experiences being mentioned. I eventually noted down three notable themes regarding Asian identity that were caught throughout these interviews: erasure and assimilation, high expectations, and positions of leadership. While each interview did not mention all three of these themes, these themes were mentioned throughout multiple interview answers in diverse and unique ways.

Erasure and Assimilation

"I've been lucky that I haven't grown up experiencing a lot of racial discrimination, which is why I sometimes feel like I'm more white than nonwhite. I felt like people haven't treated me differently. But I think that's based on the schools that I've went to and the communities that I've been part of." -Ann-Claire Lin

One major topic that came up during interviews was the idea of assimilation and erasure of Asian identity. There were stories that showed patterns of Asians having either their cultural backgrounds erased or being replaced with American culture. Some participants recall having lost their native languages, growing up in predominantly white communities, and being exposed to a lack of Asian media and more American media. There was also a collective theme of people not knowing much of outside Asian history or culture growing up, which has made a few participants feel as if they are "less Asian" or "more white." Yet there are also stories of how

participants wanted to view or expose themselves differently. One interviewee, Denise, recalled a story about using blue contact lenses to fit in with others at her school:

“So in the fourth grade, I, um, I didn't understand that I was not white because I went to a predominantly all white school, all Catholic school in the South because I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee. Right. So I never really understood that I was different from any other kids. And so in the fourth grade, I bought blue colored contacts. Like, my blond best friend had the prettiest blue, like, pair of blue eyes, and I was jealous of her. And I don't know why my mom agreed to that, but for an entire year, I wore blue colored contacts because I wanted to fit in. And the pictures are gnarly.” -Denise

Many deemed themselves with the term whitewashed, as many have been exposed to American ideals or a predominantly white community. This plays into a growing idea of internalized racism that the Asian community faces as they adjust to American society and eventually assimilate into it. That said, participants also stated how as they grew up and went to college, they had been exposed to more diverse communities and received further education regarding Asian American history. Some participants, especially those who grew up in predominantly white communities, expressed a desire to live more multi-culturally or to embrace their Asian culture and identity in the future. The importance of education and learning of Asian culture and experiences was emphasized heavily by participants as they not only wish to learn and grow more with their Asian identities, but they hope that those who are not Asian or are outside their Asian culture can respectfully learn who they are racially and ethnically.

High Expectations

We also see an erasure of Asian culture and identity due to high expectations placed on Asian Americans, which plays into Model Minority assumptions. When asked about past movements of Asian history, the majority of participants did not relate to stereotypes and harmful language that came from the “Yellow Peril” movement. This may be due to many of the participants growing up in America and not feeling like a “foreigner,” or it’s possible that the harmful language that came from the “Yellow Peril” movement has become outdated in today’s society. However, many of the participants talked about relating to the Model Minority Myth or had a lot of experiences that contributed to the Model Minority stereotype. Participants express frustration of people expecting them to know everything regarding Asian knowledge or Asian culture, which is not true:

“Definitely at college, people would try to think that I have all the answers to everything, but I don’t. Or expecting me to know everything. In some cases, saying, ‘oh I thought you were Asian or something’ and me responding ‘so what?’” -Anonymous

Many participants expressed disdain towards the Model Minority Myth as it put stereotypical expectations and pressure on them to fit into that mold. There were many instances where participants talked about the complications of the Model Minority Myth, such as how it plays into certain Asian cultures or how other Asians around them seem to embrace and embody the Model Minority stereotype. Despite that, participants stated that they wish not to live up to any standards and that people should be free to be who they are without being pressured to live

up to a stereotypical ideal. Some participants also expressed that the Model Minority Myth does not apply to all Asians:

“The other thing that I hate about it, too, is, I don't actually fit into the Model Minority Myth as a subgroup. And so that bothers me more and more how Southeast Asians are always the ones trotted out to say, “look the Model Minority Myth doesn't exist because we have these Asians that aren't successful.” And I mean, other Asians do that all the time. And it's so unhelpful.

-Anonymous

Participants who identified as Southeast Asian found the Model Minority Myth particularly challenging because from their experiences, they personally never experienced it the same as other Asian Americans. Southeast Asian participants noted situations in which they themselves are not noted as Asian, due to either having an ethnically ambiguous appearance or darker skin, or talked about how their communities never fell into having high expectations in school or work.

Positions of Leadership

I read an article in high school freshman year about the Harvard admission process and how a bunch of Asian students who applied to Harvard didn't get in when white students who had the same test scores and the same grades did get in. They wanted to look into why that was or I think it might have been a lawsuit or something. But it turned out people who were assessing applications systematically viewed the Asian students low in leadership, even though they did have club leadership, they did have athletic leadership. All the leadership was there. But the

quality that they were ranking them low on in the rubric was leadership. Because the cultural way that is played out, Asian people are seen as more submissive and not being the main characters, being the side characters, not being leaders of things. I guess Asian leadership is resistance to that stereotype. – Doré

One unexpected topic that came up throughout the interview process was the idea of Asian leadership, specifically how that is a form of resistance towards anti-Asian discrimination. Participants noted how harmful stereotypes they faced in society include being seen as “quiet” or not having a strong opinion. Meanwhile, they noted how leadership in America has been notably known for “being loud” and “taking charge,” traits which are stereotypically not seen with Asian Americans. Many of these notes correlate back to both the “Yellow Peril” movement and Model Minority Myth; Asians are constantly seen as “outsiders” and “foreigners” that do not fit American ideals, ostracizing them down in a position below white Americans. At the same time, they are put in a position where they are expected to succeed above other minorities while still positioned underneath white Americans. Asian leadership looks to give Asian Americans a chance to break away from anti-Asian stereotypes and to use their voice but in a way that resists how American leadership is usually seen.

I consider myself a very important, reflective voice in a room. So much of leadership that I see represented here in the U.S. is the loudest voice in the room. I would not say I'm that voice. I hope that my presence and the leadership that I bring challenges a space to be quieter so that the quiet voices could speak. Because so often the message is, Oh, if you just want to speak, then speak up. No, speak down. Why am I being asked to match your loudness because all I know you're going to do is that you're going to shout louder. So that is part of my philosophy of leadership is how do I ask spaces to be more reflective in that sense? -Angela

Asian leadership looks to not imitate stereotypical American leadership traits, but it is a chance for Asian Americans to create their own success. Participants find typical leadership roles troubling as it forces them to match to the ideals and traits of white Americans to find success, which also contributes to the Model Minority Myth of finding success through meeting expectations. Many participants state that they cannot nor wish to become the loud voice that takes charge, but rather encourages the quiet voices to speak and take space. Many state that as Asian leaders they hope to express their ideas by letting other marginalized voices speak as well, rather than taking command of people's choices and work. Statements communicate how many Asian leaders look to provide both a "collective" and "reflective" space and resisting having to match the loudness and strictness of typical leaders in the past.

Conclusion

While interviews in this project had similar themes and ideas, there is no singular Asian identity that can be assigned or determined. Each interviewee went through different experiences and backgrounds regarding the Asian American lifestyle. Yet the presence of anti-Asian discrimination needs to be addressed deeply to dismantle its racist universal patterns and structure. This play looks not only to explore my own Asian identity but looks to uplift the voices and stories of diverse Asian identities to provide a more holistic outlook regarding Asian American experiences. What I hope is that we can further explore and uplift the Asian American experience. Current and future social scientific studies would hopefully conduct additional interviews or gather new data to learn new trends about either anti-Asian discrimination or social justice work to uplift Asian voices. The Humanities and Arts allows us to reflect, learn, and cope with the hardships Asian Americans face. I hope to continue to add a holistic and educational lens regarding the Asian American community to my future research and artistic works.

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IDENTITY

by
Al Lo

CHARACTERS

| | |
|--|------------------------|
| Al Lo/Usher/White Boy/Prank Caller/Principal/ Teacher/Uncle/Stepdad/Stranger/Silhouette | Andy Sameshima |
| Ella/Emma/Mom/Girl Classmate | Grace Nguyen |
| Michelle/Alice/Wife | Kanitta Cheah |
| Danielle/Sydney | Rachel Phillips |
| Elijah/Robert/Parents/Dad | Daniel Wu |
| Alex/Sam/Parents/Friend | Primera Hour |

A staged reading for this play was presented on December 16, 2022, in Celeste Theatre at Colorado College. The cast for the 2022 stage reading is presented above, with Michelle Solomon reading through stage directions. Most of the unnamed characters in the play, such as the White Boy or the Stepdad, should be played by the actor playing as Al Lo. Actors may be given multiple named or unnamed characters so long as it does not conflict with interactions and dialogue presented in this play.

(John F Kennedy Airport. Al Lo emerges with a suitcase or traveling bag in tow. There is a boat stage left and a train door stage right.)

AL LO

I was born in the capital city of Taipei on January eighth 2001. I was born a few days after American New Years yet a few weeks before the Chinese New Year, so my Chinese zodiac sign has always been fucked. I think my family told me I had a snake's body and a dragon's head, or maybe it was the other way around? Either way I'm half of each. For about 5 years after my birth, my family kept traveling between Taiwan and Denver. Half a year in Taiwan, half a year in Denver. I cannot recall any part of my early childhood in either of my homes. What I can recall is that my family eventually settled in Denver because my mom wanted my brother and I to "experience a carefree American childhood" rather than deal with the rigorous academic lifestyle in Taiwan. Since then, I spent the majority of my childhood traveling between my Asian culture and American culture. Sundays would be reserved for Chinese Language School, the weekdays are for English Elementary school. We would celebrate Christmas one day and then prepare for Chinese New Year the next day. Do I consider myself an Asian American? Well I definitely look and grew up Asian. And I feel like I have lived long enough in the States to be an American. Yet I always find myself pulled and tugged between the two identities. As I travel throughout life and discover things about myself and my culture, I wanted to address my own identities and many more in the Asian diaspora. One. One question always came to my mind. What does it mean to be an Asian American?

(Al Lo leaves as the stage fades to blackout.)

Scene 1: Backgrounds

(Michelle, Sydney, Robert, and Sam enter with suitcases and walk around, as if they are getting ready to board a plane.)

MICHELLE

I think broadly I would say I'm Asian American and then I add qualifiers. It's really important for me to say that I'm ethnically Hmong. And because I think that has a particular history, that doesn't quite fit into Asian America. We're not a big ethnic group, also Southeast Asian, which is not usually what you typically think of as Asian American. I think we're always pointed to as the people who debunk the model minority myth because we're not usually traditional high achievers. Even as an American, I have a complicated relationship because I wasn't born in the US. When my parents left Southeast Asia, they were in Thailand for a bit and then they went to France. That's actually where I was born. I'm not even really American American. I would say I've been mostly raised here and I'm an American citizen now, but it's like I don't think anyone really fits perfectly into that label.

SYDNEY

Well, I say I'm mixed usually. And I just say my dad's white and my mom's South Korean. That's how I go by. I just go by mixed. I don't go by one or the other. Culturally, uh I usually say I grew up in an international school with a more Western curriculum. So kind of American culture. But I grew up abroad.

ROBERT

I am a U.S. citizen, but I have lived my entire life in Hong Kong. My parents are both Chinese. My mom is from Singapore, my dad's family came from mainland China. And so...I was born with different Asian cultures, from Southeast Asia and China. Um, yeah. And in addition to Hong Kong culture. So I guess that's my...what I experienced growing up.

SAM

I was born in China. Biologically Chinese but I think I've been struggling to come to terms with having that Chinese be part of my identity just because, I don't know, I just feel so weird to be like, Oh, I'm Chinese. I think I just go by Asian or Asian American. I think for me, like, my iffyness with identifying as Chinese Chinese is just the bad rap that I would hear. Um, and I guess, like, being ashamed. I feel like there's just this negative connotation of, like, things being made in China or like...and I guess being in the pandemic, like associating the pandemic with China, which, I mean, they are very much associated. But I guess like the negative connotation I think just makes me shy away from that identity even more. Um, and I feel like other Asians are cooler than being Chinese so...just call me Asian. I don't know.

(Robert, uncomfortable, quickly hurries offstage. Awkward pause. Everyone else moves offstage. Danielle, Alex, and Emma emerge onto the boat the stage left, sharing their own stories.)

DANIELLE

Both my parents immigrated here from the Philippines and brought me up in that culture. They have more of the Spanish influenced culture side of the Philippines. I do believe on my mom's side a great uncle of mine decided to write the lineage of our entire family. Why? I have no idea. They basically talked about how both sides of my family stemmed from Spanish immigrants who came over and, I want to call them Spanish conquistadors but you know, they basically came over and influenced our families. Personally I don't really interact with my family back home that much. I know the stories here and there and I know a few relatives here and there. But, um, my mom and my dad pretty much assimilated and cut ties once coming to the U.S.

ALEX

Both of my grandparents were born in Cambodia. My grandpa's parents were immigrants from China but my grandma lived in Cambodia. So the Khmer Rouge happened in 1975 and my

grandma was in Phnom Penh at the time. When that got stormed, she and her family had to cut their hair, throw away everything, put mud on their skin, you know, act like they don't know anything. She was actually warned, her driver was part of the Khmer Rouge regime, and he liked her. So he warned her that it was going to happen, which is why she was able to survive and get out of there a little bit before being killed. Her family ended up in a work camp. My grandma was interrogated three times, but survived all three interrogations. At some point, she lost contact with her sister, her mom, it was just her alone. She ended up in a refugee camp in Thailand, where she met my grandpa. He had a wife and kids, but he left them to be with my grandma. My grandpa and my grandmother had a son. And then with that son, they sought refuge in New York. In New York, they were homeless and they were living in an abandoned building with nothing but a mattress, and they didn't have jobs or anything. They eventually got taken in by a family of white people who invited them to Thanksgiving dinner and then let them move into their house. So they lived there for a year. Their son tragically passed away, he drowned in a puddle when he was two, and then my grandma in grief prematurely gave birth to my mom. After they had my mom in New York, they couldn't stay there anymore because the son had passed away, like in the backyard. And so they thought, well, we know people in California. So they went to California and my mom was raised in California. Now I'm here.

EMMA

My mom is from Vietnam and my dad is from China, so there's an awkward 50-50 there. They met in Houston, which was pretty interesting. I grew up with both cultures. We would alternate which, well not like clean alternation, but we would change which culture exactly of Chinese New Year we're going to. It's interesting how I say Chinese New Year, I should say lunar new year. But sometimes we would go to a Chinese community center and sometimes we go to a pagoda, sometimes both if we have time. So that's a nice mix of cultures. Whenever there's a common food, there's two words for it. Like rice porridge or congee. But sometimes there will be a confusion because when I was little, I'd be like, "Hey, I want this thing. And then they be, Oh, you want this thing that said the other way? And I'd be like, What is my life?"

(The three arrive at a port and exit offstage with the boat in tow. Elijah, Ella and Alice enter from stage right, one by one, talking about their stories and then boarding the train.)

ELIJAH

I identify as Japanese American. I grew up in a Japanese household. Both my parents are from Japan. There was a small pocket of other second generation people my age. And I don't know if you've taken an Asian American history class, but there's been distinct stops to when Chinese Americans came to America. Then 1924 is when Japanese really kind of slowed down. And so my parents came during this one time period where there were a couple loopholes to get into America. So they came in like the fifties, they met here and so on. So I grew up in a very

Japanese household. They pretty much tried to keep me Japanese and failed miserably. But I think there's still a lot of Japanese in me that I just can't shake up easily

ELLA

My parents both were born in the U.S. Both were born in California. Our family is very established there, both immediately. Most of my extended family are in 100% Chinese households. But half of my grandparents were born here. Half of them were born outside of the U.S. So my dad's grandmother was born in the U.S. and if I remember correctly, her line can be traced back to some ancestry that came in regards to that. I want to say the gold rush, if not the gold rush, the Transcontinental Railroad, but one of the two so long enough. And then my mom's dad was also born in the U.S. He was born in Pennsylvania. And we definitely have records of...I want to say it was his great great grandfather who worked on the Transcontinental Railroad. So that's as far as I know. Our family life goes back very specifically. I can recall that because there were like short conversations. He worked on the railroad and then he has an unmarked grave somewhere in Nevada. So that family line has a lot of history, but a lot of it's unknown in that we just never recovered that person for our family. So that's the most that I know of, like going far, far back here in the U.S.

ALICE

So my racial and ethnic identity and my culture are different. I grew up in a family where there were a couple elements of Taiwanese culture, but it was mainly, umm, I would say a blanket term would be white. I don't know if that's really politically correct, but I did not grow up speaking Chinese or Taiwanese or anything related to my actual Asian heritage. My dad's side of the family is from Taiwan. He moved here when he was six years old, and the first time he actually ever met his dad was in John F Kennedy Airport because his dad came over before his family did. He speaks Taiwanese with his parents, but he's never spoken Taiwanese with me and my brother. So I have not grown up with that. My mom is...her mom is from Beijing and had to be evacuated when the Japanese invaded China. And then her dad is German, like very German, I think German Polish. On my mom's side, my grandma and my grandpa who were Chinese, Korean and German Danish people met at Wesley College on the East Coast. My grandma was there on like the default Asian American scholarship. She had horrible grades, but she was like the Asian one who they picked out of this like private school. So she basically rode scholarships all through her education, which was interesting.

(Train Whistle blows as Alice goes to board the train. Blackout)

Scene 2: New Start

(Airport Luggage Claim Area. Stage right is a customer Service Desk with a single usher. Robert, Sydney, and Michelle, enter with suitcases and passports in hand. They are working with the usher to complete their visas, Robert and Sydney engage in dialogue).

ROBERT

So when I came to college, I've not seen so many white people in my life before.

SYDNEY

As a kid, I always thought I was more white because I had a lot of South Korean friends, and compared to them, I was a lot more white and Americanized. But then when I came here to the States, I felt my Asianness a lot more just because people are like “wow you speak English really good,” or they ask questions kind of in the context of “I'm a foreign person.” Somebody called me Oriental before. But this is all, like, really new to me, you know?

ROBERT

I had trouble in the first couple months identifying people because to me, a lot of white people look the same, and I guess I didn't feel much discrimination at that point. But it was just logistically difficult to assimilate, as in I would call people by the wrong names, identifying someone and then feeling as if I discriminated against them. And feeling bad for that.

SYDNEY

I thought at first that it kind of wasn't fair for me to say I was Asian because I had whiteness in me. But now it's almost like here in America, I kind of have to notice it. I'm not sure how that changes things, but now that I notice it, it does in certain ways. It feels a lot better to embrace it. It's just like becoming more of myself. And I guess that affects everything I do. I don't know if it's good or bad. It's just different, you know.

MICHELLE

So much of our lives are undocumented and sort of unmapped too. Especially for Hmong people, everything is passed down orally and we don't have birth records and things like that. So even my own parents' birthdays are made up. They made them up when they were registered as refugees. They needed to have a birthday. And so they made themselves older than they actually were knowing that they would probably be resettled into a western country. And that if they were older they would like to start working immediately rather than like having to go to school. So most people who are young made themselves older and then those people who are older made themselves younger. Um, and it's a joke in the Hmong community, but like almost everybody's birthdays in June because. That was like the day that people picked. So both my parents were born in June. And there's like all these Hmong people who are born who have a June birthday even though that's not like their actual real birthdays. It's like, fascinating to know that even just one generation above you is like...obviously they're real people, right? And they had real birthdays, but we don't actually know the dates.

(Blackout)

Scene 3: Youth

(A classroom. The alphabet and basic English words are on the chalkboard. Actors are reading or drawing, taking in the educational materials around them.

(Al Lo is at the center)

AL LO

I think about how many of us came to where we are now. Many Asian immigrants had taken boats to get here, whether they were on the run or were looking for new opportunities outside of Asia. Once they got here, many worked in mines and railroads to try to make a living. The past traveled on railroad tracks and rocky waters to get to their dreams and homes in America. For me, I rode on China Airlines and my mom's 1999 Honda CR-V to get to my home in Denver. I recall my first memories as a child in America in English learning classes. I had two instructors for ESL, since one at my school wasn't enough. Don't get me wrong, I actually really enjoyed my time in ESL. But looking back, it was the first step towards me blindly assimilating into American culture.

(Al Lo exits offstage)

EMMA

So by the time I got to first grade, I should have lost most of the languages. I do remember someone would say something to me and I would have a knee jerk reaction going like, "Oh, you're saying that." I don't have that anymore. In elementary school we were learning languages. You could choose Chinese, Japanese, French or Spanish. I was put in Chinese, so I should not know Chinese at that point. I also went to a Vietnamese Sunday school, which I sort of hated, so I didn't learn anything there. Really I found it rather embarrassing because I'm Chinese and Vietnamese and my parents can speak it. I used to be able to speak it but now I can't. Because of that, I think I just sort of avoid re-learning the languages.

ELIJAH

I don't speak Japanese any more, but I understand it a lot more. I've always understood more than I could speak because I was the youngest. I grew up in a Japanese household and they will say something in Japanese. I'll understand, but I'll have to answer in English like, I'm sorry, I don't... I can't really speak that well with that. The interesting thing, though, about being the youngest was my older brother, my older sister, they went by their first names, but I always grew up going by my Japanese middle name. And when people ask me why does your brother go by this and you go by that? I'm like, well, that's what my parents call me. That's just my name, my brother and my sister, we still call each other our Japanese names, but I never identified with my English name until I went to college.

MICHELLE

I learned Hmong first at home because that's what my parents spoke. And I lived with my grandmother too. And then I learned French at some point, and then I learned English when we moved here. I was six when I moved to the U.S., I do remember being put into ESL and feeling like I had to learn a different language. And I remember having to go to a special school that had an ESL program. I don't remember having to learn French but I do remember having to learn English. And I think that was probably the moment where I felt like the language that I knew wasn't right or wasn't the correct language to know, and that I had to learn something else. I think it was the first time in the school setting that I felt like I wasn't enough or that I didn't know enough. That I wasn't learning just alongside everyone else. I had to be placed in a different group of people who look like me in order to catch up to other people. I still speak Hmong. I don't speak it as well.

(A school bell rings. Characters enter or stand to go outside. Characters are walking, sitting or playing by themselves or with one another, as if they are in their youths. There is a white boy walking alone)

ROBERT

It is the attitude which I feel from other people in various classes. I would be wanting to find someone to do a group project with and they'll look at me briefly and try to find someone else before I find them. Something which I think maybe because of my racial identity, because they're white, they would find someone else that's white or is from their own culture. Because I understand that besides being racially different, I'm also culturally different. I would say that I've tried to adapt to that so that it happens less and less, but it is still very present

(Robert waves at white boy, the white boy ignores him coldly)

ALEX

But because I'm white and Cambodian, I just look very racially ambiguous.

DANIELLE

I have a weird...I think my face gives a...my ethnicity is ambiguous, like I mean it's super weird because I am fully Filipino but I have gotten that I am indigenous

ALEX

Maybe I'm Hispanic

DANIELLE

I have gotten that I'm Latinx.

ALEX

Maybe I'm Islander.

DANIELLE

Once people knew I was Asian, then those comments, those labels like the nerdy aspect, would have an impact on how I felt. But I've never received the derogatory words, like yellow or anything like that, because sometimes people don't even realize that I'm Asian, which has its own feeling and makes me feel my own type of way about it. Because when people don't even know what I am, sometimes it's just yeah that kind of sucks.

ALEX

I kind of fall in that burden of like my accomplishments seem more important because I don't look Asian. I could definitely imagine looking at me and going "wow, that's very impressive for someone who looks like you, you should be proud of yourself" which definitely wouldn't be the case if I did look more Asian.

ELIJAH

It was hammered in my brain that I was Japanese right from the start. When you're a kid and you think, "Oh, I didn't know race and I played with everybody kind of a thing." And I mean, then you do because you're a kid, you play with everybody. But it was always hammered in my head. "You are Japanese. Like you are a Japanese person. And I'm like, "No I'm American. No, you're not. You are Japanese." So I always knew right from the start that was kind of how my mom thought of me. "You're Japanese. You're going to marry somebody Japanese, you're going to have Japanese babies, blah, blah, blah, and so on. Like whatever. The one time that I really didn't appreciate being Japanese was December 7th or Pearl Harbor Day, you know, everyone learning about the history of Pearl Harbor. This is back when they didn't talk about the internment at all. I always, always knew I was Japanese and that was always kind of what I was fighting, like no I'm American. Eventually I got to the point where I accepted being Japanese American. But then December 7th was always that reminder of-

(White boy does an offensive slant eye gesture towards Elijah.

The white boy then starts doing the slant eye gesture to other characters outside)

Things like that. I'm like, really, like this is stupid.

ELLA

It was third or fourth grade, fairly young, definitely in elementary school, but I was on vacation with my family. And we as a family who practices in faith will still go to church, even on vacations, or just find a local church. And so we attended this local church. I, of course, was put

with the children and we were just playing generally. And this boy about my age, white, comes up to me and I don't remember if anything was prompted on either side of us, but he just

(White boy does the offensive slant eye gesture towards Ella
Ella runs away. Other characters start to berate the white boy)

And I was aware enough at whatever age I was that I knew what he was doing. I knew he was making fun of me. I knew he was pointing out that I was Asian, if not specifically Chinese. I mean, you can't always necessarily tell that specifically, but I knew at that moment I was mad and upset, and I just ran away because I didn't know what I'd do. That was my first experience seeing that. And so I didn't know what to do. I remember running away and I wasn't crying, but I knew I had an upset face and some other kids saw me going. What's wrong? And I was like, he was making fun of me. And I imagined that they probably told one of the adults, and so they made him apologize to me.

WHITE BOY

...I'm sorry

(The white boy runs away offstage)

Again, I just didn't know what to do.. (silence) But yeah, that's the first time I can recall ever knowing that I physically look different from somebody enough so that they can make fun of me for it.

ALICE

The first time I realized that people discriminated on the basis of race, the first time it ever happened to me, I was in sixth, fifth grade, which feels like it's late for maybe a lot of people. I've been lucky that I haven't grown up experiencing a lot of racial discrimination, which is why I sometimes feel like I'm more white than nonwhite. I felt people haven't treated me differently. But I think that's based on the schools that I've gone to and the communities that I've been part of. But there was this one time I was about to play a lacrosse game, and I got a spam phone call, from a number that I didn't recognize. I picked up the phone really confused. And the person on the other end said,

PRANK CALLER

Hello, your Chinese food is ready.

ALICE

Well, this has to be a wrong number. I don't-I don't think that I didn't order any Chinese food. Oh, I'm sorry. I think I think you have the wrong number.

PRANK CALLER

No, no, no, this is for your Chinese food.

ALICE

No, I think you have the wrong number, bye. I hung up and it didn't bother me at all because I did not perceive it as a racially directed thing. Later, the principal of my school had to come find me and said,

PRINCIPAL

Hey, we found this person, one of our students, who's been calling Asian students or people of other races and asking them if they want this kind of food as a racially directed thing.

ALICE

I had to sit there for a second to be like, Oh, that's what just happened? And that's when I realized that I really had never experienced that kind of behavior targeted based on race before, and that I'm really lucky that I hadn't. But it finally did hit me that, okay, this is a thing, even though that was a very mild form of anything.

(Blackout)

Scene 4: Assimilation and Whiteness

(A living room and kitchen. Danielle is at the center with her mom preparing to leave for the store).

DANIELLE

Oh, this is so good. You're going to love this. So in the fourth grade, I, um, I didn't understand that I was not white because I went to a predominantly all white school, all Catholic school in the South because I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee. So I never really understood that I was different from any other kids. In the fourth grade my blond best friend had the prettiest blue, like, pair of blue eyes, and I was jealous of her. (To Mom) Mom can I get a pair of blue contact lenses?

MOM

Umm...sure let's go get some.

DANIELLE

And I don't know why my mom agreed to that, but for an entire year, I wore blue colored contacts because I wanted to fit in. The pictures are gnarly.

(Danielle and her mom exit to buy blue contact lenses. Alex walks to the living room.)

ALEX

I think I have a lot of internalized racial issues that I struggle with in terms of colourism and beauty standards that sometimes may make things feel more racial than they actually are. I remember one racial incident with my friend group. Essentially what happened is me and a white girl did the exact same thing that they didn't approve of. When I did it, they had a lot of interventions with me and telling me that I'm wrong and trying to convince me otherwise, like being accusatory. And then a month later, the other girl did the exact same thing that they don't approve of. And they're talking about it.

(Danielle walks past Alex with blue contact lenses. Voices are heard as Danielle walks)

VOICES

Oh, she's just so sweet and empathetic and forgiving. Oh of course, she would do that. And she doesn't-

ALEX

like it was more of a victim mentality. When I did it, I was more of the villain. So I did feel like that was a little bit racial, just because of the history of white women being protected and seen as vulnerable in society, which is, of course, a result of racial violence against black people and other people of color. The protection of white women has been very, very weaponized against people of color, particularly men of color, because there have been a lot of lynchings which has happened as a result of things like sexual assault allegations or interracial marriages and things like that. And so when something as simple as treating us differently, when we do the same thing, it does feel like it comes back to systems of oppression sometimes in just a very personal way.

(Alex exits. Elijah and his wife enter, the wife goes to do chores and other hobbies around the space while Elijah goes to the living room to tell his story.)

ELIJAH

My wife is white. That was kind of a big deal to my family, at least initially, because my mom thought I would marry somebody Japanese because I would only date people that were Japanese. And it was a very small pool at my high school. Not a lot of options essentially. And so essentially just start dating others outside of your race. But when I think about when we first got married, I got married when I was getting my masters. So I was pretty young at that time. I think I was only 23. My wife was 21, we were young. And Japanese Americans, they marry outside of their race probably at a higher rate than at least before. I don't know about the stats now. They got married quite a bit so it's not unusual for Japanese to marry outside of their race. But what was unusual was a Japanese man marrying a Caucasian female. It's usually the other way around, a lot of white guys marrying Japanese or Asian women because of the exotic piece to

that. So that was an odd piece already. But I was in grad school so my wife and I had been newlyweds finishing my last semester. You know, just being newlyweds and holding hands. We were getting looks all the time. It was always this, you know, conscientious of mixed race. Like, you know, I'm in the middle of the cornfield, like, okay, am I risking my life by being affectionate to my wife and holding her hand? This was the late eighties. It's a little bit different now. But back then, I wasn't as confident about what people were thinking? And we would get a ton of looks.

(Elijah goes to open a window, the other side are other characters wearing blue contact lenses looking at Elijah and his wife)

ELIJAH

(To wife) Hey these people are staring at us.

WIFE

No, they're not.

ELIJAH

Just, just like, look!

WIFE

Oh, oh my God. What are they staring at?

ELIJAH

They're staring at us!

(Blackout)

Scene 5: Communities

(A high school classroom. Characters take the role as students in the class, either taking notes, daydreaming, or quietly interacting with one another. Al Lo stands stage right)

AL LO

In high school we were given the option to take either Anthropology or History for our Social Studies credit. I ended up taking Anthropology but I had a lot of friends taking History. They had an assignment about the events of Tiananmen Square and were talking about it while we were hanging out. My curiosity then made the embarrassing question of “wait what’s Tiananmen Square?” I got roasted hard, I got laughed at. My friends did not let that one go. They were like “really? Seriously? I thought you would know out of all of us?” I was one of the only Asian people in my friend group, the only Chinese person, so they inherently made that connection.

Truth is I never grew up learning anything about Chinese or, in general, Asian history. My childhood education never taught it and my parents never bothered. It feels weird though, because it felt like I should have learned this or that I missed out on learning this. It was truly a wake up call that I did not know much about Asian history and culture.

(School Bell Rings.)

Al Lo changes role to a teacher and instructs the class about the Vietnam War)

EMMA

I do remember that during history classes whenever the Vietnam War came up. And if the teacher knew that my mom ran away from the Vietnam War, they'd be like: "Hey, you want to go out and say anything about it?" Some teachers were more respectful about it than others, like they would ask me after class. But other teachers would be like in the middle class, like,

TEACHER

"Hey, Emma, your mom went in the Vietnam War. Yeah. You want to say anything about that?"

EMMA

I was daydreaming, like, a second ago. I don't have any thoughts in my head. You're asking me about a war that I have a personal relation to out of the blue like that?

(Emma exits the classroom uncomfortably)

ALICE

I've always been one of the only, if not the only Asian person at a lot of schools that I've gone to. I've always grown up in environments where I'm used to being someone of color in an environment where most people are not of color. And it's weird because I don't...I'm so habituated to that. But I do find it weird when I travel to somewhere like California, where my dad's side of the family lives and everyone in the neighborhood is Asian or everyone speaks all these different languages at the grocery store. And I'm like, Wow, I really live in a very whitewashed, very homogenous kind of culture most of the time. Um, as far as I know, I don't think that my Asianness causes my, like, friendships to be different. I think that sometimes it can. The only time it can feel weird is when we're talking about a topic such as like discrimination or something relating to like Chinese culture or something. And they all kind of look at me and be like, is this-is this okay? Yeah, kind of. I also weirdly didn't grow up in that kind of culture, so they look at me like I have authority that I don't know that I have. I mean it to a certain extent, I guess I do have somewhat of an authority just going through the world looking different and looking like I possess all of the things that people stereotype me to have. But yeah, it is weird though. It's almost an imposter syndrome.

SAM

I lack so much cultural knowledge, but even when I'm learning about Asian American studies I'm like, wow where did all that cultural knowledge go? Does that make me less Asian because I don't have that? Like all my friends are students of color. I don't know if that's a subconscious decision or it's just like "you're Asian, I'm Asian, let's be friends!" I do think for me, I have certain behaviors in the classroom where I tend to sit in the corner if it's a very white classroom because I'm the only student of color there. Like where do I fit into the classroom? I would just like to pick a corner. I think I just find it hard to befriend people and I just stay very quiet. Um, so I don't know if I should say, it upholds the stereotype of Asians being quiet or homely like that. But I...I don't know.

ROBERT

I would say that both my college and my church are places that value diversity. And I feel like even being non-white, I don't want to be assuming anything, but I feel like being non-white gives me some sort of privilege in these environments that I'm in, which I'm aware that is not the case at all in many other scenarios. Because of the culture that is in these places that...people are taught or at least try to understand where I'm coming from because a lot of times not knowing the culture. I'm not sure if this is relevant at all, but...I came to the United States not knowing many of the words that people spoke, like slang words. Even the word IDK I had no idea what that meant until someone told me "I don't know." So every day I'd be asking questions in my freshman year like what does this mean? Or saying something in a way that probably was offensive to people. But I didn't know it was offensive because I didn't know it was because I was not familiar with the culture. But having an accent meant that people at least tried to understand that I may not be aware. Or interacting with some actual Asian Americans. It made me feel intimidated. Mm. I'm not sure that counts because...I don't know how to explain it, but...it's just sometimes intimidating for me to speak to and to interact with American born Asians. Or like they're looking down upon me. And like some subtle ways that I really can't exactly know what it is. But I just feel it.

DANIELLE

I will say that I am completely whitewashed. I see myself as a banana. I see myself as yellow on the outside, white on the inside, unfortunately because that's what I've been most comfortable with. I never really grew up with any other POCs around me. I went to a white elementary school, I went to a white high school. I go to a predominantly white college. When I came to college, immediately I was just like I need to make friends. Joined a sorority, predominantly white sorority, um, moved into a house with five other white people, white girls. And it was definitely not my happiest time. I could kind of feel a divide, you know? It's kind of that underlying tension. Nothing remotely wrong, it's just not somewhere I feel fully myself. Um, and then I started hanging out with this one girl from the Marshall Islands, her parents immigrated from the Marshall Islands. And we were just bonding one day because we had a class together.

And then I ended up being her roommate, I hang out with her constantly. She takes me out to POC parties-

(Girl Classmate comes and interrupts class)

GIRL CLASSMATE

Come on, POC party at ten, you've been to white for too long!

(Everyone cheers and follows her out of the classroom. Teacher panics and tries to follow them)

DANIELLE

Yeah, she's one of my favorite people on this earth. Um, I will say that I have made more POC friends now than I would ever expected. And it actually made me realize that I missed out on a community that I've always wanted to be a part of. I plan to hopefully one day go to grad school. I want to travel, I want to live in different cities. And for me, I do want to see a more diverse makeup because I lived in such a very narrow way of living and I'm just pretty tired of it.

(Blackout)

Scene 6: Familial Connections

(The living room and kitchen. A family gathering, there are beer bottles lying around and karaoke music in the background. Characters come in and out as themselves or random family members.)

ALEX

My Cambodian family sees me and my siblings as white. If you ask my grandma, my grandma was like "if you tell people at school that you're Asian, who would believe you because you look white" which obviously isn't true because it depends what perspective you're coming from. As someone who was born and raised in Cambodia, of course I probably look white to her, but for most people, I don't look white I don't think. And there's this idea that me and my siblings are white and then we're still held to colorist beauty standards in terms of...I have darker skin than my siblings. And so it's not like I'm more Cambodian than them. It's like I'm just uglier than them. I think that definitely affects that there. And then also in terms of being from an Asian family like my mom's, her second language is English and so there's a disconnect. My grandma...English might even be her third or fourth language even. And so there's like language barriers. My mom grew up in the U.S., so she's very Americanized. But there is a little bit of a cultural boundary, also socioeconomically because like, although my family wasn't wealthy growing up, it's like we, you know, have more money than her family did growing up because that's how generational wealth works. And so I think there is a separation from my Cambodian family because they will always just view me as white.

SYDNEY

I think probably the hardest thing for me is not the direct hate towards me, but the hate towards my mother and my South Korean friends and then me being grouped up with the people who are oppressing them or making fun of them. A lot of the parents, like a lot of the white parents, would gossip and say these awful things

PARENTS

Oh yeah, the Korean moms. They're always uptight and, you know, they're always like, so persnickety.

SYDNEY

I don't know how to say all these things and they would say it to me. They would confide in me, these kinds of stereotypes or racist thinking, thinking I was someone they could confide to, which was the worst thing because I was obviously like, No, this is gross, why are you saying that? That was hard because it's put a strain with my relationship with my mom, sometimes she also like, looks at me like she's said multiple times

MOM

“When I see you, you look white. Oh, you must think of me like this because I'm Korean and you're not.”

SYDNEY

That hurts a lot. I've come up with a few kind of racist things of, “Oh, you know, you're half South Korean, therefore you're this and that ,” But it's definitely not as bad as what I've seen with my mom or my friends or...I can see right away that people treat my mom differently from my dad or Americans talked down to her like, pronounce her name in a Chinese way. Because that's their idea of what Asian is, Asian is Chinese.

DANIELLE

A while back, my uncles came over for my mom's wedding. She decided to marry a white man, a Mississippi white man. And, you know, my uncles are making fun of her. They're saying “indáy, indáy” which means Gold Digger basically. But they meant it out of good love, but it was pretty funny. But, you know, they were talking to me about race and they were just like, “you have to understand that you're Filipino first.” And I got into a debate with my uncles because they're not too fond of me. They said, I'm too American. I have too many American ideals, especially when I talk back to them, because my parents taught me in more of a western way of thinking where you shouldn't have to always blindly accept what elders tell you. Because my dad and my mom are definitely the opposite of that. Growing up, they were rebellious kids. They hated listening to authority in the Philippines. They came to the U.S. and then they decided to raise their children

like them. But my older side of the family doesn't tend to like that. They say I dress too provocatively. Should have been a doctor.

UNCLE

Indáy, indáy. You have to understand that you're Filipino first. You're too American, too many American ideals. You dress too provocatively. You should have been a doctor.

(Danielle ignores the Uncle and storms offstage)

ALICE

I think most of the time what I observe in my life is effects of adaptive behavior or coping mechanisms that my parents have left over from their upbringing that they often don't talk about, but that are the product of the discrimination that they experienced when they grew up, such as my dad. When he meets new people, he speaks in a very congenial, almost southern accent, which is so odd because he never speaks like that normally. But he told me that's something that he adopted to avoid seeming like an outsider when he was growing up in Florida, which made a lot of sense. He was like:

DAD

Yeah, it was just really easy for me to be targeted. So the more I could make my mannerisms, like the people that I was growing up with, the easier it would be for me.

ALICE

But it's just so odd that even to this day, like, he will still do that. Which makes me feel like the extent of what he experienced was a lot more than he talks about.

(blackout)

Scene 7: Model Minority Myth

(A School Awards Ceremony, characters are sitting in aisles, stage right, with family members sitting in aisles stage left. There is a podium with certificates in the center stage. One-by-one the characters speak to the audience and come to the podium to receive their certificates)

DANIELLE

I'm going to start this off by saying I do love my stepdad. I do. I think he's an amazing man. But I will never forget this one conversation we had when we were talking about legal immigrants in America.

(Stepdad walks to the podium)

STEPPAD

Look at your mom. Look what she did. She came here legally. She did her work. Look at the Japanese and how they brought themselves up here. And they worked their asses off and they made a living for themselves in America and they didn't do it illegally, they did it just perfectly. You know, they're the model minority and other minorities should look up to them.

DANIELLE

White man you have no idea what you're talking about.

(Stepdad is booed and shunned away off the podium offstage)

Yeah, I...it's weird because I did get a question once. "Why are you so mad about Asian stereotypes?" You know, out of all the stereotypes. It's the nicest one. We think you're smart." And I think no, I don't think anybody wants their identity to be determined for them regardless. I don't think you want to live up to any standards, and I don't think you want to be any standards. You just want to be you. You go into a community and want the community to accept you for who you are. But, you know, the world's pretty shitty and doesn't do that.

MICHELLE

People just assume that you be good at certain things or that you know certain things and then they're disappointed when you don't live up to that. And then when you try to correct them, there's a version of gaslighting in that it's a positive stereotype. So why would you care? But I think it just all makes you question your own sense of self and your own abilities as if you're good at math because you're Asian, not because you're just good at math, right? And then I've seen it also being twisted around to talk about how Asians are family oriented and so it's about not losing face. I think what's hard to me about the model minority myth, why I hate it. Well, there's two reasons. One is that it translates things that might be cultural into the stereotype. Yes, I want to please my parents. Right. But that doesn't mean that we are model minorities. It just means that I like my parents. But there's this cultural idea that Asians must live up to their tiger moms or whatever. And then the other thing that I hate about it, too, is I don't actually fit into the model minority myth as a subgroup. And so that bothers me more and more how Southeast Asians are always the ones trotted out to say "look the model minority myth doesn't exist because we have these Asians that aren't successful." And I mean, other Asians do that all the time. And it's so unhelpful. Yeah. I just hate the whole thing and I wish it would just go away. But it's thrown at us so much that it doesn't go away. It feels very cyclical.

SAM

I went to a high school that was predominantly Asian, so I did feel that competitive spirit. And I did internalize like, oh, I should get good grades. I didn't grow up believing that I was smart or anything. I didn't really start trying in school until, like, middle school, because for me, it was a sense of guilt that my parents had to commute to take me so far. Oh, I should make it worth it for

them. I should try to get good grades. So that could be the reward. There's also this comparison thing that parents and family members do. They like to compare you to so and so and so and so. So then that also gets internalized where I'm like, I'm never good enough, but at the same time I should try to be good enough. So I think that my experience with the model minority is just trying my best to get the grades that could reflect a potentially good future. I think I'm confused as to whether the expectation to try to do your best is from the model minority or from a cultural standpoint. I think for me, I just get confused. But also recognizing that the model minority is messed up in labeling things, but I don't know if that's where my confusion is. Like what is working hard?

ROBERT

Yeah. I guess I've not really been affected by this a lot. Nor have I felt I have to live up to it. But definitely at college, people would try to think that I have all the answers to everything, but I don't. Or expecting me to know everything. In some cases, saying, "oh I thought you were Asian or something" and me responding "so what?" I don't really know what model minority is in the U.S. but I do know that mainland Chinese students who come to the U.S. to study are super smart. Maybe that is why I thought it was a minority, but I'm not one of them. Or like even super smart Chinese students come to the U.S., like that itself is a myth. Yeah. And so. Having people assume that...it's not great, I guess.

ALICE

I think a label that my dad has always struggled with growing up is the nerdy and geeky label. Like throughout his entire life. And I mean, he visually seems to fit that stereotype. Even when I just sit and I think about what a nerdy and geeky Asian person looks like, it's a dude who wears glasses. And I don't know why. That's the stereotype that I have in myself as well. But that's exactly what my dad looked like growing up. He had these huge wire rimmed glasses and was always studying. Interestingly, I think that if I was a guy, I would probably feel much more impacted by the nerdy and geek label because I mean, I do care about school a lot and I work really hard in school, but for some reason I've always felt like I could evade that label and I'm not sure if that's because I'm female presenting. Non male presenting. I'm very curious about that, about whether you can avoid being perceived that way if you're a girl, which is odd because it's functionally the same thing. I mean, you're still Asian and you're still studying really hard. I guess I don't wear glasses.

SYDNEY

A lot of my friends almost embrace that stereotype in a weird way or they're like, oh yeah we're Koreans, we're so hardworking and nerdy. That always confused me because it didn't make sense if a group of people were somehow more hardworking. I knew a lot of my friends who are not studious at all. They're not stereotypical studious. I never liked it when people said those characteristic kind of terms, like to my mom or to my friends, because it was just a blocker to

getting to know them as people. But I was more confused as to why were my friends also just kind of embracing that? It was very prevalent in my international school. There were basically just white students and South Korean students, and it was almost everybody knew if you're a South Korean, you're probably going to get better grades or whatever, or you're more hardworking, you're blah, blah, blah. The end goal even for teachers, or for parents too, was to go to the States, go to an American college, learn English. And it would be a shame to the families if your student ends up staying in Korea, it's like, "Oh no, you should have shot for Harvard or whatever." In my own personal experience, I've had periods of being studious and not studious, whenever parents would ask my mom, "How does your daughter study?" I remember my mom was laughing because one of my friend's moms was in awe of my grades or whatever and she's like, what's the secret? What do you tell your daughter to do? And my mom's like,

MOM

"She just sits in her room. She's so lazy. I don't know how she's getting good grades"

SYDNEY

Which is true. But it was this weird notion that because I was part Asian that maybe I was staying up late and being just stereotypical studious. It was really weird and complicated. And my mom all the time, she would say,

MOM

"You're lucky. I'm not like other Korean parents. I don't force you to study. You know, I don't put pressure on you."

SYDNEY

She put it in a way as if because I'm half white it was almost like I couldn't take it if she were to go full Korean mom on me. I guess I'm kind of happy about that because, I mean, I don't want to be super pressured. But again, like, it was just interesting. It's just a weird situation.

(Blackout)

Scene 8: Discrimination and Insults

(A school bell rings. It is the end of the ceremony. Characters are outside walking or standing talking with one another. Some characters are still holding their certificates that they received)

ELIJAH

When I grew up, this was right during Vietnam War time or right afterwards. The high school that I went to probably had about 25% of Vietnamese. And it was because there were some government controlled housing apartments, a ton of Vietnamese lived in because that was, you know, when you're fleeing a war torn country, you were working with the government to get

asylum and get support. And this was just their first stop and they just happened to go to high school. I remember getting into a huge argument because somebody just went-

(white boy approached Elijah with an airhorn in his hand)

WHITE BOY

Hey what's up you [BLEEP]

(It is an ambiguous Asian slur, but not a Japanese one. ELIJAH confronts the white boy by taking the airhorn out of his hands)

If you're going to be racist, call me a nip or a jap. But I'm not a [BLEEP]. I'm not a [BLEEP]. Get your [BLEEP] racist things straight.

(Elijah blows the airhorn one last as the white boy leaves in shock)

The person was just shocked because I was really quiet back then and they were just being an idiot and stuff. I remember just shocking the person and everyone around me when I just went off like that. I don't even know what the purpose of that was other than just if you're gonna be racist, be at least an educated racist.

(Elijah exits)

SAM

I recall two microaggressions and I recall them because it was pointed out to me. I didn't recognize it at that moment. One was freshman year. I was at this meeting off-campus and someone made a comment on my English and I didn't really see that as something bad. I thought it was a compliment until my friend brought it up: "hey actually that was a racist thing to do." Yeah and then another thing happened where I was talking to someone that was helping me fix something. We were just having small conversations. And then they asked where I was from and I was like, Oh, I'm from California. And then they're like, "Oh it doesn't seem like you have a Californian accent." And I think at the moment I was just confused, do Californians have an accent? At that moment I was just in my head thinking, what kind of accent do Californians have? Do I have that accent? It was later when I shared it with someone and they were like, "Oh, that was kind of inappropriate to ask that." I guess overall I just don't...I'm very oblivious, and I guess I just don't recognize it until someone points it out to me.

DANIELLE

Because I did grow up in the South, I was the token Asian or the token POC. I was on numerous pamphlets and banners. Um, the clout was amazing. My friend group, at least, they were always very supportive and never really talked about race. We got into jokes and stuff like that. I would

make fun of them for being white, they would make fun of me for being Asian. But it was also always a set line and we would always talk about it. So for close friends, it was at least very comfortable. I will say that other students, you know, I think anywhere can just have natural biases. In one case, when I would win an election in my high school, someone just goes, Oh, you know, it's just because they need that representation and it's just kind of...okay, you're a bitch for that.

ROBERT

Thankfully, I have not been caught in any of these before. Sometimes I feel if I have to listen to that, I just accept it as it is. Since I feel I can't do much about it. I guess responding to this, reacting towards this, I would have more of a passive frustration, than an active frustration. It's so ingrained already that it's not easy to root out.

MICHELLE

I think what's hurtful about the language and those types of questions or remarks is the sense that ...you don't belong here. Therefore, you're less than. And I think it's just exhausting to have to deal with, like, questioning all the time. That sense that you are an outsider or that you don't have a right to be someone, or like the things that you love. Particularly the people that you love and the people that love you the most are not human. I think that's when those terms have been the most painful is when they obviously contradict the people that I know. I think that those words when they are used towards me are hurtful. But I think it's most hurtful in their use towards my parents or my grandparents or the people who can't say something for themselves. I think the point is to make one question the value of those people who care about you and who love you. And I think the moments that I've seen my parents or my grandparents being demeaned or dehumanized, those are the most hurtful things, because I think you see them as humans, right?

EMMA

My aunt's a dentist. I call her an aunt but I guess the English culture should be, my second aunt, my aunt removed. I'm related to her. She's on my mother's generation. She's talking about this racist encounter she had in her office. This old white guy came up and she was like, okay, how can I help you today? What's wrong? And he's like, Yeah, I'm not getting my teeth done by the Chinese. That was the first time I heard that word. I was like, what is this? She's like, "it's a slur for Chinese people. I think you should know this more than me because you're half-Chinese and that guy can't tell Asian people apart from any of us." But beyond that, I didn't have explosive explicit racism and if there was bias or microaggressions, I was too old to really notice them until COVID came around.

(Blackout. A sound recording of Donald Trump using and defending the term "Chinese Virus" is played in the background)

“It’s not racist at all. No, it’s not at all. It’s from China. That’s why. It comes from China. I want to be accurate.”

Scene 9: COVID Discrimination

(Zoom doorbell sound plays and lights are up. Actors are sitting in chairs or lying down, either on their laptops or phones, as if they are in an online class or meeting.)

AL LO

The COVID-19 virus spread throughout the entire globe in 2020. With it came isolation, online class, and unfortunately a rise in anti-Asian hate crimes. In 2020 alone, FBI Hate Crime Statistics noted around 279 anti-Asian hate crimes reported, a 77% increase from the previous year. Since everything was online, I was exposed to a lot of things online. The hate crime videos, the news reports, the stories never stopped coming. It was the first time that my Asian identity became real. Or at the very least it made me aware of the implications it brings. I used to jog around my neighborhood often and I usually feel fine. This time, I recognized a lot of people were giving me this look. If you have ever been marginalized, discriminated against, even hated, you know what that look is. It’s a look of hate and danger. It was a lot to take in.

SYDNEY

I was made very aware of it during the heat of the pandemic, because everyone was online anyhow. There were even some people where I lived that thought “if you're Asian, therefore you have coronavirus because it came from China or whatever. Kung Flu or stupid stuff like that. So. Yeah, I was-I was aware that...I was scared for my mom. I wasn't necessarily scared because again at that time I thought I passed as white. I can take it because it's just me. And, you know, they're stupid. It's whatever. But with my friends and my mother, I think it's hard because I can't directly help out in those situations. I can't fully understand it even though I feel like it affects me a lot.

EMMA

I think it was...a week before we went into quarantine or went virtual. It’s where everyone's worried about it and just like, oh, no, what’s going to happen? I was walking down the breezeway, hallway without halls, and these two boys passed me and went: “If it weren't for you, we wouldn't have this virus” like to each other very loudly while looking at me. And I'm sort of like, is that intentional? Do you want me to pretend like I didn't hear that? Cause you're sort of bad at whispering. Sort of hope it's intentional for your sake. My first reaction was, um, are they intending to be malicious because they sort of suck at it? I was distanced mentally from it because I haven't experienced it before and it didn't hurt me. It was more of a...wow, racism huh. Here. That was fun.

ROBERT

I'll speak more on the topic of how when people talk about a virus and Asians. I've overheard people on the street downtown or even at church, some good natured people, but they may say things like, "Oh. He's from China. Poor thing." Or I was at a restaurant downtown when someone was saying, they were talking to themselves. I don't think it was because of me being there but they were saying something negative about the Chinese or at least saying something bad about China, which...to be honest, I don't know if the virus was actually accidental from somewhere or if it was intentional. I don't know where the origin is, but it's not nice to hear people talking negatively about my culture, the government, people in general, and...myself.

DANIELLE

COVID especially. I remember some of the girls from my graduating high school posting on their Instagram stories about how they're very Republican. Um, just reposting what Trump said about China and the jokes about what you eat started to come up. "They're just like, what are you eating? This is bringing diseases to our country" kind of rhetoric. And that made me feel more scared for my mom than anything else, because I remember when the pandemic started, she's a physical therapist. She works in a very low income place. But low income sadly also translates to low news and ignorance. So then she would receive a lot of harassment on that side because she was Asian and she was an Asian owner of this company because she owns three clinics by herself. She's a badass woman. But I did fear that she would face harassment or just any type of injury from social media, spreading misconceptions about what it means to be Asian for some reason. There are certain things that I keep myself quiet about. I do not like confrontation. I mean, all my friends make fun of me because I will let someone step on me. But when it comes to two things, and that is my family and friends and my race, I will have no problem yelling at you in the middle of a quad. It's very interesting because someone could literally slap me across the face and I wouldn't say anything. But if you start mentioning something that hurts people around me...I think my mom's the same way actually, not that different from me because the instance I showed you was involving herself. But if I can almost guarantee you, if it involved my sister or me, the woman would be taken to jail. She would have thrown hands.

(ELLA and Friend enter and everyone else exits. Scene changes to outside)

ELLA

At this point, pretty much everything was shut down. I was still on campus because I was working at that time. So my apartment was on campus. And so I was on the other side of campus visiting a friend because we were saying goodbye before we both went off to our respective summer plans. We were outside and I was just kind of hanging out. And I looked over and an individual came around the corner and, I don't think he knew I was there because we both kind of started with, Oh, you're here? Kind of like when you run into somebody around the corner.

Initially, he just kind of froze. I thought he was trying to get to the door behind me. Oh, are you trying to get behind me? I'll move. And then he just started yelling at me. My friend was right next to me. He was a white individual. So he saw the both of us there. But he was very directed at me. He just kind of locked in on me. It was very strict like it didn't make much coherent sense and like there was no progression of where his anger was coming from, but it went from 0 to 100

STRANGER

I know what you did. You have to leave. You have to get out of here. You know what you did.

ELLA

I don't know what you mean. I work here (to audience) he was saying that I had to leave and I was like, No, I work here. I'm like, supposed to be here. I work here. I don't know what you mean.

(Stranger starts towards Ella. She and Friend get in a defensive position)

STRANGER

You have to take her out of here. Take this bitch out of here.

(Stranger exits)

FRIEND

We'll go to our apartment.

ELLA

Yeah, I don't feel safe at this point. (To Audience) And then while we were walking, I just broke down in tears and I asked him, I was like, (To Friend) Do you think it's because I'm Asian?

FRIEND

I don't know.

ELLA

I think it is. I don't see what else it could be because I was standing in front of the door.

ALICE

I feel like I've seen a lot of it. Violence towards Asian Americans and specifically, most disturbingly, violence towards elderly Asian ladies, which is really horrific and super sad to me because, one, they're the most defenseless people. Two, in the context of that culture, perhaps where you really respect your grandparents, that's like a horrible affront. And three, I feel like people who are perpetuating that violence must be really, really suffering in themselves to want

to do that, because it just seems like such a...that's like the equivalent of the bully picking the smallest and skinniest kid on the playground to beat up because they can't defend themselves.

SAM

I feel like the main thing that comes to mind are the shootings and how the elders are being attacked. One news that was particularly stuck in my head is in Hawaii's Chinatown, an older man was set on fire. There was this video of this person setting the clothes on fire and the grandpa's back was on fire. I don't know. It just made me feel like that could happen to anyone that I know, particularly my family who are much older. So I'm just like, wow, cool, this is the society we live in. Why must they be afraid to go outside? But I guess that's the reality.

MICHELLE

I think part of the isolation of the pandemic was definitely feeling a lot worse for certain individuals. And that fear of the pandemic was heightened by the fear of anti-Asian violence. I mean, to be honest, I can't watch those videos because they're too painful and they're...I don't know what I gain by watching it. And I also feel the more I watch, the more I expose myself to them, the more that fear becomes very real. I think it's been very tough, and I think it's helped to talk to people about it. But I often still feel like quite helpless when I see them

(A silhouette stands center stage with a lunch box as Elijah gives his story)

ELIJAH

I remember when I was in Kindergarten. There were these second graders. I just remember standing like...just waiting in line. And my mom had me all dressed up in something fancy. But I remember these two older kids literally walking up to me. I'm just a little kid holding my lunchbox just standing there and all and...like, this is burned into my memory. Like, just walking up to me, putting their lunchboxes down and just wailing on me. Just Whack. Whack. Whack. Whack. Whack. Whack. Whack. Whack.

(The silhouette shields itself and cowers with each whack, moving closer to the ground. The silhouette lies motionless as Elijah continues talking)

And I remember being mad at my brother who wasn't even in that area, but he was a couple of years older. And I remember thinking, well, he should be kicking his ass. These two guys beat me up for no reason. I wasn't taunting them. I was just standing there with all these other white kids. There weren't a whole lot of Asians around that area. It wasn't until later that I really started questioning why did I get punched down like that? Of course, I was different. Of course they beat me up because of that. That was the earliest and most traumatic moment of my life that I think I really started thinking about that.

(Blackout)

Scene 10: Leadership

(Two podiums stand stage left and right. Al Lo stands center stage)

AL LO

While the pandemic brought many hardships, and many traumatic experiences to speak of, I can't be too mad at it. After all, a lot of my work and leadership experiences happened in the pandemic. A lot of people left their jobs or took gap years, so I was called up and ended up doing more than I expected. Yet it also opened my eyes. For the longest time I have been ignorant and blind to the injustices Asian Americans face everyday. I lacked knowledge of my culture, lacked knowledge of Asian American history, I lacked knowledge of myself. I thought about how I can do better for myself but also for whoever is in my future. I can further grow and learn more about my Asian identity but how can I lead others to do the same?

(Al Lo joins the audience. Characters take turn speaking at each podium)

ALEX

I read an article in high school freshman year about the Harvard admission process and how a bunch of Asian students who applied to Harvard didn't get in when white students who had the same test scores and the same grades did get in. They wanted to look into why that was or I think it might have been a lawsuit or something. But it turned out people who were assessing applications systematically viewed the Asian students low in leadership, even though they did have club leadership, they did have athletic leadership. All the leadership was there. But the quality that they were ranking them low on in the rubric was leadership. Because of the cultural way that is played out, Asian people are seen as more submissive and not being the main characters, being the side characters, not being leaders of things. I guess Asian leadership is resistance to that stereotype. But also obviously there's the model minority stereotype, but Asian people being good strong leaders in a way that's culturally accepted is resistance to the stereotype that we can't be leaders. Asian leadership for me is about telling my story because when I am at the forefront, when I am doing speeches, when I am in the room with administrators, my family's story about the genocide and being bombed by the U.S. and all of that, is awareness and processing. A lot of people don't even know that Cambodia's in Asia. And so leadership is also an experience to share the story, the history, the identity of being Asian. Yeah. It's resistance. It's an offer. Opportunity to share my story and it's inspiring to younger people as well.

DANIELLE

I think a leader needs to be able to understand multiple perspectives. I think sometimes in this world today, it's kind of misconstrued when people are like I lead the whole group, you follow me and this is the way. I will say, growing up with both Asian parents, I did have different ideals

from white parents and my family who'd come over from the Philippines and I would learn about what they believe and how it clashed with other people. I also had a Filipino American Association, a community in Memphis, Tennessee. We would meet every month, do dances, and watch Manny Pacquiao boxing championships together. But to the point of what I'm trying to say is...I think being Asian allowed me to see from multiple points of views and understand that not everyone has the same understanding as another person. That was not eloquently said. But, I don't know. It's just kind of...it made me respect because I also grew up with different politics around it, because my Asian parents had very different values from the people that they worked with. It kind of gave me a respect for not even tolerating, but kind of trying to empathize with others, even though I can't completely understand something.

ELLA

I mean, in a general sense, it continually adds to the overall conversation of what diversity, inclusion and justice means for...I mean whatever area the leader is impacting. It's also important to note the contexts in which, I mean, we're not the largest minority group here in the U.S., but we are a significantly growing minority group in the U.S. So to be an Asian American leader means that we could better support the trends that we see in the context of a growing U.S. For myself, what I think being an Asian American leader means...I see a greater sense of community and connectedness. I very much have reflected on how Asian culture promotes a more collectivist mindset that opposes the individualistic mindset that is more prominent in the U.S., in the white culture, and how important that is as a balance to that narrative. I consider myself a very important, reflective voice in a room. So much of the leadership that I see represented here in the U.S. is the loudest voice in the room. I would not say I'm that voice. I hope that my presence and the leadership that I bring challenges a space to be quieter so that the quiet voices could speak. Because so often the message is, Oh, if you just want to speak, then speak up. No, speak down. Why am I being asked to match your loudness because all I know you're going to do is that you're going to shout louder. So that is part of my philosophy of leadership is how do I ask spaces to be more reflective in that sense?

MICHELLE

I think for me, part of being Asian American and Asian is also being from an immigrant background, being from a low income household, comes from like refugee histories. And I think those are all intertwined with what I think of as Asian, which is particularly how I think of my own version of Asian. Um, and so I think that when I have had leadership roles or, or have like stepped into them, I think it's been about making my journey transparent. And in some ways, I always feel like, just taking up the spaces is sometimes good enough. I am definitely political, but I don't tend to be like activist political. Does that make sense? Like my reaction has always been to think and write and read. So I haven't been drawn to those positions where I would be like on a megaphone. I would much rather be the person who writes about something or who does more research on something. And that took a while to kind of come to terms with. I don't

mind gathering things and letting people have their voice. But I haven't always been at the front, the loudest person. Right. And so I think that when I am in those positions, it's really for me about making sure that people feel safe and heard. And I think I'm about that way in the classroom and with students and and with my colleagues. But I think that comes from experiences of feeling silenced and not empowered to talk, right? Um, yeah, but that comes from being an immigrant of, like, being poor and feeling like people didn't care what my parents had to say, right? Because there weren't they didn't have, like, professional jobs and they had accents and they clearly weren't raised in America. Um, yeah. So all of that I think is like wound up in that sense of just wanting to help people use their voices.

ELIJAH

For me with the stereotypes of being Asian American and what it means to be a leader, especially early on, eighties, nineties. How did people define leadership? Mansplaining, being in charge. All of the traits that women and Asians don't fit that mold. Right. You know, women are more cooperative leaders. They're more communicative. They don't interrupt. They play nicely. Same thing with Asian American men. Well, you know, you're Asian, you're quiet. You don't have a strong opinion, which isn't necessarily true. I just don't voice it the same way as you do. And so I think early in my career, there's a lot of misinterpretation about what it is to be a leader. The way that I always define a leader is...there's different ways that people define it. You could be a strong leader from the back. You just need people to follow you. Do you have to be the loudest? Do you have to be making sort of these autocratic decisions? No, that's not good leadership. It's to me really investing in your team, getting your team to buy in and trust each other, getting them to follow you, to believe in you, your vision enough to follow you. It doesn't matter how you are, as long as you have people following you that are sort of working with you, you don't have to be front and center. It's all about you, right? Those are generally the worst leaders. The best leaders are the ones that are highlighting how great their team is, all the phenomenal things that their team is doing.

Scene 11: Final Outlooks/Takes

(We return to the kitchen and living room. This time there is room for a large dining table. Characters come in and out with silverware, foods, and drinks. They are preparing a feast. They share their final thoughts, mainly to themselves. eventually sitting down and enjoying the meal with one another.)

ELLA

I've told you not only my own story but I've just brushed past so many other stories that are present day that are familiar. I mean, we forget constantly that Japanese Americans were put in internment camps. We forget constantly that Asian individuals, specifically Chinese Americans, were basically used as slaves. My own great, great grandfather has an unmarked grave

somewhere in Nevada. I highly doubt his family was compensated for that. So the stories are there. But also as a larger story. Don't let it become an oppression Olympics. That we are going to say, Oh, but at least this didn't happen to your people. No, those things didn't happen to my people. But if we have this mindset of, oh, it's an oppression Olympics, that's where the story, these stories get buried. And that's where so much of my grief is, that these terrible things have happened and they're not going to get that air time. Well, what about these stories? I'm like, we're not saying these stories don't matter. We're just trying to get our stories out there, too. But I think there's just so much beauty and the collectivist mindset that we do make room for other people. And I don't think that has happened in a white dominant culture that we have stepped aside and we're waiting for somebody to step aside for us. Okay, so consider for yourself, like what that looks like to the world.

ALEX

I mean, engage with your community. Humble yourself. There's a lot of different experiences in this country and, you know, be open minded to maybe forms of oppression that you haven't heard about before or struggles that you haven't heard about before or history that you don't know about. If you're-if you're ignoring other people's experiences or if you think that we're in a post-racial society or anything like that, then you're just doing a little something wrong and. And you're doing yourself a disservice, I think, by, you know, ignoring the stories of so many people in this country, because, I mean, that's what I say about, like, you know, not admitting students of color and low income students to like this college and other colleges is like you're literally, like doing yourself a disservice because these communities have so much to offer. And maybe you see me one way if you ignore my race or ethnicity, but then you're not going to be able to fully see me until you include that in your vision.

ROBERT

I would say if you don't know, Don't blatantly talk about it. Ask questions without making assumptions. I appreciate when they can ask me, like who, what, when, and where? Then why? I think some people are conscious of that. Because it does give me a sense of pride to talk about my culture.

SYDNEY

I think people are a lot more blatant and rude and generalizing than they think. And I understand like it's really easy to do that when you're in your own little community or bubble or if that's all you know. But like, you know, it really sucks. It seems like a seemingly little thing, but it's not. And I guess just like awareness of different ideas and different cultures and different things. And the fact that people are different, I don't know. Just that slight awareness is good.

MICHELLE

I wish they were better at recognizing their own history. Right. And would sort of step away from one narrative and one idea of what it means to be Asian American and what it means to be American in general. Yeah. I just wish people weren't so short sighted and had a much deeper understanding of all the stuff that's happened before. And then all the stuff that is ahead of us if we don't think about this.

SAM

I think there's a lot of grace in trying to learn and understand. I think there's also a lot of factors that go into it. If there's no Asian around you it's really hard for you to start learning about the Asian or Asian American experience. I don't know, I just feel like it depends. I think take your time, because I'm still figuring out how to negotiate with the diaspora and what it means to also be in conversation and be in community with other diasporas. I feel like it's a constant journey of learning. If you have questions or concerns, voice that out in a way that is appropriate. That's where the meaningful conversations could happen and that's where also learning and understanding could happen. I'm thinking about this in terms of my experience with how I can be in community with my other POC friends. I'm just like, oh are there boundaries that I shouldn't cross? I wouldn't know what I can or can't cross if I don't have those conversations with the folks that are involved. So if you do have that chance to be in conversation with someone and to feel safe to voice those concerns and to learn more and be engaged, I think take that chance.

ELIJAH

I think about my life and kind of how it's eventually worked out. I've been fortunate enough that no matter where I go, I've always tried to find places that have a diverse population, or if it didn't have as diverse of a population that I could at least be a resource for that smaller population. And part of me is thinking I probably could have more relationships and had a larger impact somewhere else. But on the flip side, I know what it's like to be one of a few and how much I would have appreciated having role models or having the ability to sit down and talk to somebody or have somebody support me because...I might relate to them or, you know, maybe we share an identity. So that's kind of where I'm making my mark with that.

ALICE

I'm coming from a very interesting combination of identity factors that does not represent all Asian Americans. So, yeah, kind of along those lines, what I would say, coming from only my own experience and like maybe desperately as an Asian American person, that it's really difficult, I think, not to make the same assumptions about all Asian American people based on appearance. I've made this mistake in my everyday life, too, as an Asian person, but sometimes I'll assume that my classmates who look Asian do speak an Asian language, but they don't. They might have been raised just as isolated from that as I have, which is totally a weird assumption for me to make, considering that that's an assumption that I don't want other people to make

about me. I make the same one. And so yeah, I guess it's difficult to approach people to ask about that. But I think approaching that with a little bit more, more thoughtfulness and to say like... there's a whole spectrum of experiences like people who, whose homes are actually in China and they are international students living here or whose homes are in Vietnam, not China. Like they're not those, quote, Chinese international students that are like maybe the biggest group that you see on a campus. For example, maybe it's like Asian people who grew up in Denver, who grew up with different amounts of integration with culture. I think all sorts of all different levels of integration of culture and appearance, not always equal in culture, although I think that this isn't unique to Asian Americans and like this is something that I also want to cultivate towards people of other ethnicities as well.

EMMA

To the people out there who don't think racism applies to them. It does, no matter what. Because one way or another, you're gonna get linked to it by secondary or tertiary effects. If you just don't be a dick, the world would be a better place. So don't be a dick. Diverse backgrounds can be a fun thing. And this isn't sarcastic, it should be fun. It should be something to be like, Yo, I'm from this place. I have this culture and this food like, Well, that's great. I'm from this place. I have this culture and this food. You want to try my food? I was like, That sounds great. I'm going to try your food. I feel like the most important thing about cultures should not be racism or like biases. I think it should be food and holidays.

DANIELLE

I would just want to take people to go eat. I don't believe in enforcing anyone to do or accept anything that I love. But, I'd be very surprised if you were able to say no to food. Um, and I think that's the biggest misconception I'd want to get rid of anyway. You know, think what you ever think. You're obviously going to think what you want to think about Asian people and about their genetics, about everything else. But I feel like food is the one thing that I can help debunk. Like I can show you what kind of good food and it's clean and it's not frozen and it's not, you know, it's fresh and it's actually good food for your body and it's just I, that would be my first and probably only tactic in trying to get someone to be more open with the Asian community. Plus. I love food. I mean, that's how I made all my friends in elementary school because I was always so jealous that they had crackers and cheese and ham, but I'd come up with a five course meal. And then I realized that all my friends wanted to eat my food, that my mom sort of packed little bowls of rice for all my friends because they would always want to eat my rice. And so I just kind of- No, I do think food is an easy way to get people to open up.

AL LO

I'm still learning what it means to be Asian American, but it can't be something you can fit into a definition in a dictionary book. At the end of the day, each person grows to be their own unique story. Their own unique identities. I have my own story and I have my own Asian identity I am

figuring out. It is comforting to know there are other people who share similar and different viewpoints of Asian America. I haven't given voice to every Asian representation in the diaspora here, and I will come across new history and cultures as I grow up. You will too. So just ask, ask nicely. Listen to our stories. Learn and grow with us. That's all I and anybody can ask for.

(Blackout)