"Where Are You From?": Using Critical Race Theory to Analyze Graphic Novel Counter-Stories of the Racial Microaggressions Experienced by Two Angry Asian Girls

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“Where Are You From?”:
Using Critical Race Theory to Analyze Graphic Novel
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by Two Angry Asian Girls

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Abstract
This article uses critical race theory (CRT) to analyze two stories about racial microaggressions from Where are you from?: Short stories about being Asian in America, the graphic novel written and illustrated by Talitha Angelica (Angel) Acaylar Trazo in fulfillment of her undergraduate honors thesis. Where are you from? visually historicizes the counter-stories of 48 Asian and Asian American students at a predominantly white undergraduate institution. In this article, we examine two stories of microaggressions in relation to institutional and structural racism and the intersections of race, gender, and power dynamics between white faculty and Asian female students. Furthermore, we propose that the graphic novel functions as a counter-space where counter-stories, otherwise overlooked or silenced by the institution, can exist, as well as a means by which two angry Asian girls voice resistance to racism on a predominantly-white campus.

Keywords: Critical race theory, AsianCrit, graphic novels, higher education, microaggressions

Introduction
Seated on the library floor, I was surrounded by a hundred sheets of paper. Comic-style stories in search of a binding: when OT (a Chinese friend from Hong Kong) and I received accolades on our English, our native tongue; when Chester (a Korean friend whose parents are Christian missionaries) revealed the silhouette of Africa inked on her back; when Woohee (a Korean friend from Seoul) felt her identity erased because her professor refused to pronounce her name. I was attempting to create a work that would add to the ever-growing history of Asian America.

— Angel (she/her)
Graduate School Application Personal Statement, 2017

Three years ago, I held up a poster that read “#ItooAmSnowy-Hill”1 in front of Snowy Hill’s admissions building. Coming to the United States for college after spending almost all of my life in South Korea, I did not

1 “Snowy Hill” is a pseudonym for the institution in which these events took place. In regard to the comic book illustrations used for this article, any resemblance to professors living or dead is purely coincidental.
completely understand the microaggressions and stereotypes I was experiencing. I did not have the language to articulate what felt like an erasure of my existence. However, standing by hundreds of other students, I felt for the first time that I was not alone in my marginalization.

—Woohee (she/her)
Graduate School Application Personal Statement

These personal statement excerpts exemplify the critical consciousness we possessed after four years of attending our undergraduate institution. However, we both admittedly began our college journeys without much understanding of our positionalities as Asian women, as well as the oppression that people of color face in higher education.

In 2014, students at Snowy Hill led a sit-in protesting the lack of inclusivity on campus, using slogans such as #ITooAmSnowyHill and #CommunityNotConformity. While Woohee, then a first-year student, immediately joined the protest, Angel, a second-year student, shied away due to a fear of appearing “too political.” Woohee read critical texts such as Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire (2005) and learned critical race theory through courses in the Department of Educational Studies. However, Angel, a biology and studio art double major, spent her time at Snowy Hill without having been exposed to critically-based curricula. Moreover, she did not know that fields such as Asian American Studies even existed. It was not until her junior year that she felt the courage to speak out about her experience as an Asian American at Snowy Hill and engage with other Asians and Asian Americans in critical conversations. These conversations inspired the creation of Where Are You From?

In 2017, Angel wrote and illustrated Where Are You From? for her senior studio art thesis in partial fulfillment of her B.A requirements in Art & Art History. Angel interviewed 48 students at Snowy Hill and compiled their stories into a graphic novel. Where Are You From? encompasses a range of identities, from monoracial to mixed-race, and domestic to diasporic, as well as representing students of various socio-economic classes, academic disciplines, and worldviews. What unites their voices is their collective racialization in the context of the nation-state and their desire to critically reflect on what being Asian feels like, particularly in an upper-class, predominantly-white microcosm such as Snowy Hill. Notably, throughout the process of creating Where Are You From?, neither Angel nor Woohee had taken an Asian American Studies course, since none were available on campus. It is important to note how this lack of formal instruction heavily influenced the creation of Where Are You From? such that neither author had adequate words nor extensive understandings of theoretical frameworks to describe the discontentment regarding our racialization on campus. Instead, our defense was to document racial microaggressions as memories preserved through graphic novel stories. Angel chose the graphic novel medium as it works to both visually and textually deconstruct the stereotypes imposed on Asian students.

Now further along in our journeys to dismantle structural oppression and advocate for justice through our scholar-activism, we return to our undergraduate experiences to analyze these graphic novel excerpts as evidence of fighting back against erasure of our existences by utilizing critical race theory’s tools of racial microaggressions and counter-storytelling. In addition, we highlight the complexity of self-imposed silence experienced by minority students when those in positions of power, such as white professors, inflict racial microaggressions. Lastly, our article provides a macro-level perspective of how microaggressions persist due to white supremacy embedded in systems of higher education, particularly within the confines of a predominantly-white institution.
In this study, we ask the following questions: How do our counter-stories of racial microaggressions illustrate institutional and structural racism embedded in higher education? How do race, gender, and power intersect in our experiences of racial microaggressions? How did the creation of the graphic novel *Where Are You From?* allow us to speak from the margins and present counter-stories? Using counter-storytelling as our method (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), we present two counter-stories of racial microaggressions perpetuated by white professors and illustrated in *Where Are You From?*. These two counter-stories from our own personal experiences were chosen as they both demonstrate the entanglements of race, gender, and power dynamics that manifest in microaggressions against Asian and Asian American female students. Woohee was interviewed for the creation of *Where Are You From?* and her story was illustrated by Angel, whereas Angel’s story was self-illustrated.

In presenting and analyzing these counter-stories, we aim to fill the gap of literature on Asian female students that has been relatively understudied in higher education research (Museus & Kiang, 2009). Using critical race theory (CRT) as our analytical lens, we present our counter-stories, both written in this text and visualized in graphic novel form, in response to call for studies that demonstrate diverse experiences of Asian and Asian American students (Poon et al., 2016).

**The Racialization of Asians in American Graphic Novels**

The visual reading of Americans as race-d is catalyzed by physical appearance and associated preconceptions. In seeing Asian characters drawn in comics, readers are confronted with what Monica Chiu (2015) terms the “look” of race (p. 2). As Will Eisner explains, comics are a “heavily coded medium that rely on stereotyping as a way to concentrate narrative effectiveness” and because of this, there is always “danger of negative stereotype and caricature, which strips others of any unique identity and dehumanizes by means of reductive iconography” (quoted from Royal, 2007, pp. 7-8). Thus, due to the often visually-reductive limitations of the comics form, illustrators turn to racialized codes and iconography when depicting race. Often indicated by facial phenotypes, race-d appearance translates to readers of graphic novels (i.e., almond-shaped eyes and small noses are seen as Asian), an understanding shared by illustrators and American readers alike (whether consciously or subconsciously) because, as Ralph Rodriguez (2015) explains, both have been “schooled well these last few decades about the biological fiction and social construction of race” (p. 89). While far from rendering perverse, caricatured images of Asian Americans, Angel employs iterations of race-d visual markers to facilitate a race-d understanding of characters in *Where Are You From?* by illustrating Asian and Asian American characters with black hair, in contrast to white characters with uncolored or blonde hair.

While employing stereotypical forms to illustrate race, the graphic narrative form simultaneously allows readers to gain a more complex understanding of Asian characters by way of sequential comics and textual devices. Gardner (2010) poses the question: Can one “deploy a racial stereotype without empowering it, reinforcing it?” (p. 133). The power of the visual vocabulary of race relies on stereotypes, and therefore, cannot be disconnected of its racist origins. However, Gardner (2010) argues that artists’ “nuanced” and “complex” portrayals of ethnic characters through the form of sequential comics allows for a “shift away from cartoon racism” to what he terms “graphic alterity” (p. 135). Thus, sequential comics, a term describing stories that develop over multiple panels, provides graphic novels with “the ability to destabilize racial stereotype” and “enhance understanding of how ethnic identity can be conveyed” (Gardner, 2010, p. 135). The stereotypes that are implicitly connected to images of Asian characters are deconstructed through dialogue, interactions,
and narrative progression of graphic narrative form, a graphic alterity which works to humanize Asian characters over time. In addition to the sequential comics form, textual devices, such as speech bubbles and thought boxes, facilitate a deepened understanding of characters. In doing so, graphic novels provide Asian characters with the agency to (re)define their identities. Overall, graphic novels challenge racial stereotypes perpetuated by hegemonic culture by showing the range of experiences of people racialized as Asian in America. As Chin, Feng, and Lee (2000) explain:

Asian American culture became a challenge to the prevalent images produced and consumed by hegemonic culture, images ranging from the “yellow peril” to the “model minority.” At the forefront of re-visioning of radical representation was the world of Asian American artists, who debunked the rigidity not only of stereotype but also of “ethnic” packaging that confined such work to the earnestly realistic and “authentically” autobiographical. (p. 271)

Contemporary graphic novels authored by and for Asians in America, such as Where Are You From?, perform this work of “re-visioning” the diverse identities included under the umbrella term “Asian Americans.” By creating visual and textual representations of Asians beyond the stagnant stereotypes and caricatures imposed by white hegemonic discourse, Where Are You From? illustrates the visual dimensions of racial micro-aggressions; centers the perspectives of Asian female women in higher education; and showcases the graphic novel as a platform by which Asians can author American counter-stories.

**Critical Race Theory, Microaggressions, and Asian Americans in Higher Education**

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) originated as a legal framework committed to the struggle against racism and has since been used widely by educational researchers to illuminate racial inequity in education (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, 1998). In bringing CRT into the field of education, Daniel Solórzano (1998) proposed five major tenets: (1) intersectionality of race and racism; (2) challenge to the dominant ideology; (3) interdisciplinary perspective; (4) commitment to social justice; and (5) centrality of experiential knowledge.

CRT has developed branches, such as Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), a form of CRT tailored to the experience of Asians in America (Chang, 1993; Museus, 2014). AsianCrit derives from the work of legal scholar Robert Chang (1993) who argued that while CRT “claims that race matters, CRT has not yet shown how different races matter differently” (p. 1248). To best address the issues in higher education specific to the stories of Asian women analyzed in this paper, we employ the tenets of AsianCrit as outlined by Museus (2014, pp. 22-28):

1. **Asianization**: Racism is normal aspect of U.S. society and Asian Americans are often monolithically racialized (e.g. model minority, perpetual foreigner, yellow peril).
2. **Transnational contexts**: Historical and contemporary contexts shape how racism impacts Asian Americans in society.
3. **(Re)constructive history**: Drawing from CRT’s revisionist history, AsianCrit is a call for “transcending invisibility and silence” to construct an Asian American narrative.
4. **Strategic (anti) essentialism**: Race is a constantly changing social construction, and we cannot view Asian Americans as a monolithic group.

5. **Intersectionality**: AsianCrit acknowledges the multiple social categories one experiences (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status).

6. **Story, theory, and praxis**: AsianCrit applies theory to the real world through storytelling.

7. **Commitment to social justice**: This framework ultimately aims to eliminate all forms of subordination.

Another pivotal aspect of CRT and AsianCrit is the centering of people of color through the telling of personal narratives. Referencing the work of scholar Barbara Johnson, Robert Chang (1993) writes, “Narrative will allow us to speak our oppression into existence, for it must first be represented before it can be erased” (p. 1267). Through the use of personal narratives, CRT creates space for people of color to speak about their realities of oppression (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013). We argue that, from an AsianCrit lens, graphic novel-style short stories serve to (re)construct history by visualizing narratives of oppression, combating erasure and misrepresentation, and illuminating structural oppression faced by Asian students in higher education.

**Counter-storytelling**

We use counter-stories, a tool of CRT, to explore the experiences of Asian women in higher education. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue that counter-storytelling serves as a form of resistance and “a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32). As such, counter-storytelling can be used as a methodology that draws from CRT to conduct research rooted in the experiences and knowledge of people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In addition, counter-stories allow people of color to: (a) build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; (b) challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems; (c) open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position; and (d) teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36).

The graphic novel, *Where Are You From?*, contains counter-stories told by Asian and Asian American students which defy majoritarian perceptions of Asian students in higher education. While not explicitly referencing CRT, other artists have used counter-storytelling in the form of comics to validate the lived experiences of Asian women. For example, Sabrina Alcantara-Tan (2000), a mixed-race Filipino American, created her zine *Bamboo Girl* because “I couldn’t find publications that spoke to me (...) I was looking for a fierce Asian woman to look up to so I could read and feel validated” (p. 159). *Where Are You From?*, like *Bamboo Girl*, fills the dearth of Asian female voices in spaces of higher education.

*Where Are You From?* also functions as a counter-space where students build pan-ethnic Asian community in resistance against a predominantly white campus culture that marginalizes them (Yosso et al., 2009). Albeit a book rather than a gathering place, the pages of *Where Are You From?* exist “without the additional pressure of being ‘on display’ (e.g. feeling the need to prove oneself, speak on behalf of an entire race) for white peers,” and thus serve as a mobile counter-space where Asian students feel valid (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 677).
The two counter-stories analyzed in this paper challenge majoritarian narratives imposed on Asian women in higher education which demand subordination and silence. For example, Byung-In Seo, a Korean-American woman in higher education, explained in her personal narrative that “Asian Americans are seen as people who follow the status quo. As a woman, I am expected to be quiet, compliant, and non-threatening” (Seo & Hinton, 2009, p. 211). Asian women remain typecast under Orientalist stereotypes such as the “lotus blossom,” “Suzie Wong,” and “China doll,” embodiments of docility, silence, and subservience (Cheng, 2019, p. 3; Hune, 2011, p. 309; Nam, 2001, p. Xxi; Chung, 1999, p. 64). As a Korean American professor, Ruth Chung (1999) explains, “My assertiveness and articulateness seem to surprise and threaten some because I don’t fit their stereotype of an Asian woman” (p. 67). In addition, Sue et al. (2007) note the “exotification of Asian women” as a category of microaggressions Asian femmes experience (p. 474). Notably, while silence is expected of Asian women in majoritarian narratives, anger is not. This imposition of silence shapes the lives of those read in society as Asian femmes by reinforcing objectification whilst stifling anger. In *Ornamentalism* (2019), Anne Anlin Cheng writes that anger is not commonly associated with Asian women, not because 'angry yellow women' do not exist, but “because jagged rage has not been in keeping with the style of her aesthetic congealment” (p. xi).

This conflicting yet simultaneous hypervisibility of Asian female bodies and invisibility of Asian female voices in majoritarian narratives shapes how Asian women were read in our undergraduate institution. Such invisibility and hypervisibility constructed us as a racial and cultural ‘other’ (Ríos-Rojas, 2018). Notably, despite Angel’s identification as Asian American and Woohee’s identification as Asian, we were both read as exoticized Asian women. As Asian-presenting, cisgendered females in higher education, our common racialization reflects studies that demonstrate how Asian American students in higher education are often misread as Asian international students (and vice versa), irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, or non-essential identity (Yeo, Mendenhall, Harwood & Huntt, 2019). The AsianCrit term “Asianization” explains that this blanket racialization as “Asian” is based on a stereotypical visual appearance and reduces Asians to a monolithic group (Museus, 2014).

For Woohee, another majoritarian narrative she faced as an Asian international student is that of assimilation into white America as a definition of ‘success’ for international students. This majoritarian narrative demands that international students adapt to the existing social order of the country where they study, deflecting attention from shortcomings of the host society (Lee & Rice, 2007). The focus on assimilation erases the neo-racism that international students encounter, which justifies discrimination against people of color for their cultural differences (Lee, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007). In presenting counter-stories of the racism she experiences, Woohee speaks against majoritarian narratives that position international students as in need of accepting the dominant ideology of white supremacy. Her counter-storytelling illuminates her resistance against Euro-centric cultural hegemony, white supremacy, and gender hegemony in academia, where whiteness and masculinity are highly valued (Chung, 1991). Woohee’s counter-story adds to educational research that disrupts monolithic perceptions about international students and Asian women through personal narratives (Rhee, 2006; Soong et al., 2015).

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1 We borrow Yeo et al.’s (2019) definition of international students as “students from countries outside the United States, especially those from diverse racial/ethnic, historical, social, cultural, political, linguistic, and religious backgrounds” (p. 41). We refer to Angel as a domestic student or Asian American and Woohee as an international student or Asian.
Racial Microaggressions

Microaggressions explain the more “subtle” forms of racism faced by minority students, with literature demonstrating the persistence of microaggressions in the experiences of Latinx, Black, Asian, and other minorities in institutions of higher education (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Yosso et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2007). Huber and Solórzano (2015) define microaggressions as:

A form of systemic, everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place. They are (1) verbal and non-verbal assaults directed towards People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic or unconscious forms; (2) layered assaults, based on race and its intersections with gender, class, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent or surname; and (3) cumulative assaults that take a psychological, physiological, and academic toll on people of color. (p. 298)

Pierce (1974) clarifies that microaggressions are only “micro” in name, as the frequency with which microaggressions occur can accumulate over time to inflict immense, chronic harm on victims. Thus, the term “micro” does not minimize the impact of microaggressions, but alludes to their everyday and often “private” nature (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274; Huber & Solórzano, 2015, p. 304).

A majority of Asian American students in college institutions encounter racism in the form of microaggressions, directed either toward themselves or their Asian American peers (Alvarez et al., 2006; Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010; Yeo et al., 2019). Themes that arise in studies on microaggressions faced by Asian Americans include: (1) alien in one’s own land; (2) ascription of intelligence; (3) denial of racial reality; (4) exotification of Asian American women; (5) invalidation of inter-ethnic differences; (6) pathologizing cultural values/communication styles; and (7) second-class citizenship (Sue et al., 2007). Several assumptions link to the “model minority” myth, a stereotype which positions Asian Americans as a successful minority in achieving academic and occupational success (Museus & Kiang, 2009; Sue, 2010; Teranishi, 2002). In doing so, the model minority myth obscures systemic racism against people of color, thus functioning as a tool to perpetuate white dominance and racial oppression (Poon et al., 2016). While this myth is upheld by aggregate statistics boasting higher-than-average levels of educational and socioeconomic attainment by Asian Americans compared to other minorities and even whites, such data obfuscates disparities amongst Asian ethnic groups (Teranishi, 2002, 2010; Yeo et al., 2019). Nevertheless, largely a result of the model minority myth, Asian Americans appear “de-minoritized” (Lee, 2008, p. 129). After all, can Asian students continue to exist as a minority in higher education if they are overrepresented?

In addition, neoliberal logics of colorblindness and meritocracy propagated in educational settings divert attention from the white hegemonic discourse underpinning curriculum, as well as the erasure of racism imposed on Asian students which Sue et al. (2007) term the “denial of racial reality” (p. 76). This logic also contributes to what Soo Ah Kwon (2013) describes as “colorblind comfort,” such as Asian-identifying students, avoiding critical discussions on race or ethnicity, despite taking Asian American Studies courses, in order to match the institution’s depoliticized narratives of diversity and multiculturalism (p. 48).

In contrast to the model minority myth and neoliberal rhetoric of institutions, Asian Americans do experience racism. For Asian Americans, negative impacts such as depression and exclusion result from campus microaggressions and the systemic oppression that makes racism in higher education permissible (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Kim, 2013; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; Teranishi, 2002; Teranishi, 2010).

Notably, qualitative research on microaggressions acknowledges the overwhelming sense of doubt Asian American students feel after experiencing microaggressions (Sue et
Such doubt manifests in personal reflections such as, “Were we being oversensitive?” and often causes “inner turmoil and agitation caused by the event” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 78). Some students reported that microaggressions caused confusion, as “it was often easier to deal with a clearly overt act of bias than microaggressions that often created a ‘guessing game’” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 78). This occurs because people of color may normalize racial microaggressions as insignificant due to internalized racism. Kohli and Solórzano (2012) explain that internalized racism occurs when people of color “accept subtle daily, racialized insults as reality” (p. 448). Thus, the institution’s denial of racism may compel minority students to internally reinforce ideals of whiteness as neutral and racism as personal, rather than see both as systematic (Kwon, 2013).

After all, when constantly told, albeit ‘subtly,’ that Asian experiences, perspectives, and histories do not matter, it is no wonder that Asian students default to self-doubt and internalized racism when confronted with microaggressions. In 2018, Woohee interviewed Angel for her honors senior thesis on pedagogies of resistance of youth activists in Korea and the United States. Angel expressed feelings of silence, internalized racism, and anger:

When I first came to college my friends were very keen on being assimilated. I was so whitewashed. In [activist group], [an individual whose name was retracted for privacy] taught me that it was okay to be angry. I wrote in my personal statement about self-silence and internalizing anger as something that was inherent to me and me alone. There was a lot of internal hate. But it was that a lot of things around me were causing me to be angry. It wasn’t about what’s wrong with me; it’s about what’s wrong with a school that is so homogenous. (Kim, 2018a, p. 72)

Angel uses the term “self-silence” to describe how institutional racism caused her to internalize white hegemonic narratives propagated by the institution and silence her experiences of racism on campus. The concept of silence is particularly salient in how it has functioned to marginalize Asian American women (Kim, 2009; Hune, 2011). While we do not dismiss the power of silence, as scholars such as King-Kok Cheung (1993) have reclaimed what was once deemed a deficit of Asian culture, we present self-silence to address the internalized stereotypes, self-doubt, disbelief, shock, or anger that prevent Asian students from speaking against injustice.

![Macroaggression Diagram](image)

**Figure 1, adapted from Huber & Solórzano, 2015**

Although racial microaggressions are often dismissed as individual and separate incidents inflicted without malice, making it difficult for students to speak about them, they are connected to larger structural and ideological forces of racism. Huber and Solórzano (2015) demonstrate that through a CRT framework, racial microaggressions can function as “tools” that help educators “identify the often subtle acts of racism that can emerge in schools, college campuses, and in everyday conversations and interactions” and the “ideologies of white supremacy that maintain racial subordination” (p. 298). By connecting the often subtle manifestations of microaggressions to larger structural forces, their analytic
framework (Figure 1, adapted from Huber & Solórzano, 2015) contextualizes racial microaggressions by identifying institutional racism and macroaggression that shape them. We also use this analytic framework to examine our counter-stories from Where Are You From? in relation to institutional, structural and ideological dimensions of racial oppression.

Background Context

The experiences analyzed in this paper took place during our undergraduate experiences at Snowy Hill, a private liberal arts college located in rural, upstate New York. In 2017, The New York Times listed Snowy Hill as one of 38 U.S. colleges with more students from the top 1% ($630K+ household income) than the bottom 60% (<$65K), and calculated the median family income at $270,200 (Aisch, Buchanan, Cox & Quealy, 2017). Upon their arrival, Angel’s incoming class of 2017 gained “the distinction of being Snowy Hill’s most diverse,” a phrase which meant 65.8% white, 9.2% Hispanic or Latino, 4.5% Black or African American, 3.7% two or more races, 3.67% Asian, 0.104% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (DeVries, 2013; DataUsa, 2016). Despite this “diversity,” Snowy Hill remains a predominantly white institution (PWI).

Counter-Storying through Art as Resistance

Woohee’s Name

Kohli and Solórzano (2012) use student of color counter-stories to argue that instances in which teachers fail to learn students’ names—in the form of mispronunciation, erasure, re-naming (e.g. replacing with a white name or nickname), or mocking—are racial microaggressions (p. 444). While their study focused on the K-12 setting, Woohee’s counter-story demonstrates how name-based microaggressions occur in higher education. In “My Name Is...,” (Figures 2a and 2b), Woohee, a Korean international student, experiences multiple microaggressions inflicted by her white, male professor. First, she experiences his mispronunciation of her name in the first panel when he mumbles “Weehoo” instead of “Woohee.” In the third panel, Woohee notes that she did not notice this mispronunciation, indicative of the subtlety by which this slight occurred. The next time she meets her professor, she notices him write down her name as “Weehoo,” a misspelling. Despite her shock, she corrects him by spelling her name letter by letter “W-O-O-H-E-E.” Relieved, she accepts his word when he tells her, “I’m very sorry. It won’t happen again.” However, on the next page, her professor re-names her “Weehoo” for a third time in a row. “I lose the right time to point him out but I am shaken with anger,” Woohee explained in her personal essay (Kim, 2018b, p. 6). Her essay quote reflects the moment of self-silence and anger that Woohee felt following this microaggression. After this moment, Woohee expresses her pain by explaining to her professor that his actions are “so offensive.” Again, her professor apologizes and says, “Call me out on it next time.” This phrase evokes his refusal to hold himself accountable for his errors, instead placing the burden of remembering and respecting Korean culture on Woohee.

Kohli and Solórzano (2012) underscore that “for many students of color, a mispronunciation of their name is one of the many ways in which their cultural heritage is devalued” and that “who they are and where they come from is not important” (pp. 443, 445). Her professor’s failure to remember her name and pronounce it correctly made Woohee feel devalued. In addition, the everyday nature of this incident demonstrates the subtle yet accumulating distress Woohee experienced in class. In the end, her professor stopped calling Woohee by any name, resorting to pointing his finger at her when she raised her hand to contribute in class. The silencing was made visible because he called out every
student by their first names in class, except Woohee. By erasing her name altogether, the professor did not even give Woohee a chance to “call him out” as he had suggested when he was confronted. The explicit erasure of Woohee’s identity, demonstrated by her professor’s refusal to acknowledge her name, led Woohee to experience racial battle fatigue.
Figure 2b. “My Name Is…”

(Smith, 2004). Woohee felt that her voice, even when spoken, went unheard. She struggled with telling stories of the microaggressions she experienced:

Telling them means that I have to challenge structures of oppression, but at a very personal level. Telling them evokes the pain I felt in each incident. These stories are hard to tell. I want to run away from them. Perhaps that is why some of my stories of
marginalization lay buried in my chest. I have grown tired of people invalidating my experiences and erasing my emotions. (Kim, 2018b, p. 2)

In this excerpt from her personal essay, Woohee describes the pain she experiences when retelling experiences of marginalization. Woohee frequently experienced invalidation as people dismissed her experiences of racial microaggressions as “a simple mistake” or “not coming from bad intent.” She was tired of pointing out to people how such reactions justify the perpetrators’ behaviors and obscure the racism she experienced. As a result, some stories of marginalization were self-silenced.

Such self-silencing can also be understood in the context of interpersonal, institutional, and structural dimensions of racism. Although Woohee made efforts to correct her professor, the unequal power dynamics between the tenured white male professor and Woohee, then a first-year student, allowed the professor to erase Woohee’s name from the classroom without facing any consequences. While Woohee tried to continue participating in class even with the professor’s blatant finger-pointing, her initial intellectual enthusiasm for the course suffered since the daily experience of being the only student the professor refused to name in class made her feel ostracized. Her otherness was simultaneously made hypervisible with the professor’s decision to single her out as the only student he would not address by first name in class, yet also rendered her invisible by the erasure of her name and cultural identity. By refusing to speak Woohee’s name, the professor eliminated further possibilities of Woohee confronting the professor about mispronunciation of her name and deprived Woohee of the chance to remain assertive. Silence is thus imposed onto Woohee, relegating her to the majoritarian narratives of Asian women as quiet and non-threatening (Seo & Hinton, 2009).

In search of stories for her senior honors thesis, Angel was in her junior year of college when she asked Woohee about her experiences as an Asian on campus. Woohee was able to share her story without feeling the need to prove the validity of her experiences to others. The graphic novel was a counter-space where Woohee’s perspectives, narrative, and emotions were reflected and honored in the visual story. In *Where Are You From?*, Woohee was not an exotified Asian female depicted through an othering lens, but rather an angry Asian student telling her story in her own voice, in the way she wanted. Angel invited Woohee to add her own Korean writings in addition to the English sentences of her first-person narratives, hoping to capture Woohee’s full self in both languages. The graphic novel centered the experiences of Woohee and other Asian and Asian Americans, enabling them to articulate counter-stories that had been silenced and to take ownership of how their stories were told. Inspired by the counter-storytelling by Angel’s *Where Are You From?* that allowed Woohee to resist the erasure of her stories and name her oppression while feeling validated, Woohee shared the ‘Weehoo’ story in a public Spoken Word performance on campus. She recited her story to an audience of over 200 during a performance titled “Collective Breathing: Stories by Women of Color” on April 28, 2017.

When disregarded or erased, cultural names often bear burdens instead of the cultural wealth imbued within them. Yet, Woohee fought erasure of her cultural identity. When Angel interviewed Woohee for her graphic novel *Where Are You From?*, Woohee explained the story behind how she was named. We quote from a personal essay Woohee wrote about the erasure of her name and performed at the aforementioned public performance, where she detailed her name story:

> When my mom was pregnant with me, one of my mom’s relatives had a dream. A tree was shining brightly on top of 북한산, a mountain that my family lived near to back then at 은평구, Seoul. This tree, 오동나무, was thought to signify a baby girl in Korean traditions. They knew it was a dream signaling my birth. The relative suggested naming me 동희, a combination of 동 taken from the name of the tree and 희, which means
bright. However, my grandmother disapproved because one of my aunts has the same exact name. So instead my parents decided to take 우 from my brother’s name, 우성, and name me 우희. 우 is the 돌림자 of me and my brother. The characters my parents used for 우 means to be helped by supernatural powers – 천지신명의 도움을 받을 우. 천지신명의 도움을 받을 우, 빛날 희. This is the story of how I was named 김우희. (Kim, 2018b, p. 9)

Despite its immense cultural wealth and family history, Woohee’s name is “rendered meaningless within a colonizing European culture” (hooks, 1994, p. 168). The Eurocentric hegemony embedded in higher education denigrates cultural identities and perpetuates racial microaggressions, including, in Woohee’s case, multiple cases of name-related microaggressions by several faculty and staff members during her time at Snowy Hill (Patton, 2016).

Utilizing Huber and Solórzano’s (2015) analytical framework, we name the microaggressions, institutional racism, and macroaggressions that shaped this narrative. The racial microaggressions Woohee faced were the mispronunciation and erasure of her name. These acts reinforce the institutional racism demonstrated by Eurocentric bias and the devaluation of non-white culture in institutions of higher education. Lastly, the macroaggression at play is the ideology of white supremacy. Woohee’s counter-story illuminates how language-based racism, in the form of microaggressions, manifests and maintains white supremacy in institutions. Woohee could have internalized these constant acts of racism. Kohli and Solórzano (2012) explain that students may internalize that a “common” or “more American” name is better than a non-white, cultural name (p. 456). However, despite the cultural hegemony reinforced by the microaggressions she experienced, Woohee continued fighting erasure by sharing her story through the graphic novel form, as well as additional mediums of counter-storytelling, such as essays and public performance. Notably, the “Weehoo” story stuck with Woohee for days, months, and years after the class had ended because of its erasure of the cultural and family roots that were deeply important to her. Her subsequent forms of resistance demonstrate multiple ways to speak out against erasure, as well as the profound, lasting impact this experience of racism has had on Woohee.

Angel’s Language

Born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, an area lauded as a hub of diversity, Angel had never experienced racial microaggressions so profoundly until she came to college. Angel did not expect white professors to constantly ask her “Where are you from?” and expect (and demand) an answer other than “California.” They did not care where Angel grew up, but wondered where they could place her foreign face on a map. In Asian American Dreams (2000), Zia writes:

There is a drill that nearly all Asians in America have experienced more times than they can count. Total strangers will interrupt with the absurdly existential question, “What are you?” Or the equally common inquiry “Where are you from?”… But when I turn the tables and ask, “And what country are your people from?” the reply is invariably an indignant, “I’m from America, of course.” (Zia, 2000, p. 9)

Zia’s quote explains the “alien in our own land” microaggression theme (Sue et al., 2007). Because Asian bodies are not racialized as white, Asian and Asian Americans continue to be read as perpetual foreigners who cannot belong to the U.S. (Museus, 2014; Sue et al., 2010). This microaggression is often articulated via phrases such as “Where were you born?” or “You speak good English” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 472). Such microaggressions
forced Angel to justify her migration, monolingualism, and her particular lived experience as an American from California (Figures 3a and 3b).

In her visual counter-story, “Office Hour,” (Figures 3a and 3b), Angel experiences racial microaggressions by a white professor who makes several assumptions about her language ability based on her phenotype. Angel is discussing a paper she wrote at the professor’s office hours when the professor starts making comments about her diction and use of certain phrases. In the last box of the first page of the visual story, the professor asks, “Is English your first language?” Her question exemplifies racial microaggressions directed at Asian Americans who are perceived to be perpetual foreigners and thus assumed to have limited English abilities (Museus, 2014; Sue et al., 2007; Tran & Lee, 2014). Angel indicates that English is indeed her first language, to which the professor responds with an awkward pause. Angel further clarifies that she is “from California.” However, in the fourth box the professor continues to ask, “Do you speak any other languages at home?” In doing so, the professor hints her disbelief at Angel’s American-ness, rejecting Angel’s answer that English is her first language and deeming Angel a perpetual foreigner who must be from outside America and speak a language other than English. The professor then proceeds to say that she “doesn’t mean to assume” but nevertheless justifies her assumption with the phrase, “It’s just that I had a lot of Asian students.” She tries to deny the fact that she has made the racialized assumptions about Angel’s ability to write in English based on Angel’s racial phenotype. Angel challenges the professor’s actions by questioning, “Then, why are you assuming? Would you have assumed this if I were white?” In this important counter-storytelling narrative, Angel points out the racialized nature of the professor’s microaggression as one she would not have had to endure if she were read as white. Asian Americans, who are not white, are constantly reminded that they are not ‘American’ (Zia, 2000). Angel finally says, “I’m sorry, but English is the only language I speak,” countering the racialized assumptions the professor made about her language ability.

In using comics to recount the story visually, Angel centered her perspective and challenged her professor’s racist assumptions and justifications by inserting her critical (yet unspoken) thoughts in thought rectangles. While Angel corrected the professor’s racialized assumptions, it is important to note how certain thoughts remained unspoken, such as Angel’s inability to talk with her professor explicitly about white privilege nor the hurt that stems from her racialization as a perpetual foreigner. In experiences of microaggressions, particularly when the event occurs between a white person and an Asian student, the minority must take on the burden of correcting the racialization they face as well as challenging the cultural hegemony subscribed to by the perpetrator. The microaggressions Angel felt derive from ideas of foreignness and white nativism upheld by the “Eurocentric bias” masked as neutral and objective by educational institutions (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). Eurocentric bias, though often unspoken about at institutions such as Snowy Hill, remains evident in Snowy Hill’s lack of Asian American Studies curriculum. This erasure of the history of Asians in America inevitably perpetuates the stereotype that Asian Americans are perpetual foreigners and aliens in America.

Additionally, the occupational power dynamic compounds the racial dynamic. Hune (2011) describes that the classroom, and by extension the institution in which it exists, is a “contested space,” while Kohli & Solórzano (2012) attest to the immense power whiteness maintains in such spaces. Angel had to repeatedly point out that she is from California and only speaks English, while the professor did not face any immediate consequences of her actions as the professor occupied a position of power in this interaction. Angel’s story resonates with that of South Asian students at a predominantly white Canadian university, whose professors spoke very slowly to the students based on the racialized assumption that the South Asians had poor English skills; however, the South Asian students spoke English monolingually (Samuel & Burney, 2003). In analyzing these experiences, Samuel and
Burney (2003) argue that “the power-dynamic between dominant faculty and minority student is often exacerbated by overt or covert racism” (p. 95). The positionalities of Angel, then a first-year student, and the white female professor who had graded Angel’s essay, as well as the private setting of this incident in the professor’s office, contribute to the unequal power dynamics that make it difficult to disrupt the situation.

Figure 3a. “Office Hour”
Figure 3b. “Office Hour”
Conclusion: Where Are We Going?

The experience of microaggressions does not end after the microaggression takes place (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). For Asians and Asian Americans in higher education, such experiences contribute to feelings of depression and the perception of negative campus climates (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Lee et al., 2009). In her dissertation, Haeyoung Kim (2013) found that Asian American participants reported significant negative impacts from having experienced microaggressions from someone of authority, and that the negative effects were exacerbated if the person of authority was familiar (p. 76). In the cases of Angel and Woohee, experiencing microaggressions perpetrated by white professors in positions of authority led to intense feelings of anger and pain that comes from reliving and revalidating our perceptions of these events in the face of constant invalidation from the institution. These white perpetrators, whose power derives from the institution, continue to oppress students of color through subtle racism that gets easily dismissed as a well-intentioned mistake. This is one way that “racism can be perpetuated while rendered invisible” (Huber & Solórzano, 2015, p. 309). It felt strange to be at once hypervisible in how white professors read us as Asian, but also invisible when microaggressions erased our cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. As Asian women in higher education, we experienced simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility (Cheng, 2019; Sue et al., 2007). These stereotypes remain systematically upheld, for as Vietnamese American Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde expresses, “Academia for women of color is toxic, laden with such a myriad of discriminatory practices and barriers for advancement that is nothing short of a miracle if one overcomes it with one’s sanity, health, and general sense of being still intact” (Valverde, 2013, p. 369; Valverde et al., 2019). It felt difficult to focus on our scholarly subjects when we ourselves felt like objects. It is no wonder so much of our work now focuses on our lived experiences. We are grateful to the legacy of ethnic studies and critical race theory in education which supported our ability to create work from our personal narratives. Today, Woohee studies youth activism as a Master’s student in Comparative and International Education, while Angel studies identity and belonging as a Master’s student in Asian American Studies. It took us years to find the words within ourselves, as well as within the works of those who came before us, to explain these experiences. We hope our counter-stories will help others fight self-silence, too.

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Acknowledgements

Angel: I would like to thank Dr. Daniel Solórzano, Magali Campos, and my peers from EDU 204: Critical Race Theory in Education at UCLA for providing the space and support as I started this project, the first iteration being my final paper for the course. Thank you to my kuyas and mentors, Reuben DeLeon and Wayne Jopanda, and my cohort bestie, Lauren Higa, for encouraging me to present on my graphic novel during our Filipino American Educators Association Conference (FAEAC) roundtable. I would also like to acknowledge the Asian American Studies Department and Asian American Studies Center at UCLA for supporting my academic growth. And of course, thank you to Woohee Kim for allowing me to illustrate her story, her enduring friendship since 2015, and her immense contribution of authorship to this paper.

Woohee: I would like to thank professors at Colgate University’s Department of Educational Studies for introducing me to critical scholarship in the field of education and showing me the disruptive possibilities of challenging dominant ideologies. I am immensely grateful to Angel Trazo for illustrating and giving voice to my experiences of racial microaggression and for being a continuous source of inspiration on our journeys of scholar-activism. I would also like to thank Organization of Asian Sisters in Solidarity and Collective Breathing for providing supportive communities and opportunities to share my name story with others.

We thank the anonymous reviewers at Intersections for their critical feedback on this article.