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# "I Just Want to Exist as Me": Reflexivity and Our Duoethnographic Journey to Understanding the Self as Asian American and Asian Critical Scholars

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**Abstract:** Critical research, such as that involving the deconstruction of monoracialism, aims to empower and elevate the voices of marginalized populations. When we engage in critical research, whether it be quantitative or qualitative, scholars must recognize how our own lived experiences might shape each stage of the research process. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we present scholars with a structured method using a conceptual mapping of social identities combined with written reflection and regularly scheduled debriefings to begin their own explorations of identity. Second, we present our experiences negotiating with monoracialism as we worked to understand our identities as Asian scholars. Through this process we discovered new perspectives on how we, along with our participants, have grappled with socially imposed notions of who we are as Asians.

Keywords: Asian; identity; reflexivity; social identity map; monoracialism; duoethnography



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#### 1. Introduction

Deconstructing monoracialism and its inherently limiting and oppressive processes (Johnston-Guerrero et al. 2020) requires engaging in self-reflective exercise to gain insight into how our own relationships and understanding of our racial identities might shape the research process. The importance of understanding researchers' own positionalities has been highlighted by many scholars, who argue that it is impossible to separate the person from the researcher. We need to be aware of who we are as researchers in order to be critical scholars. Without critical awareness and challenging of the status quo, we will only be perpetuating the White, Euro-centric ideas that are embedded in the academia (Mählck 2013). Therefore, we maintain that all researchers, regardless of whether they engage in quantitative or qualitative inquiry, must engage in critical self-reflection to reimagine and reframe their research. As scholars who identify as Asian American and Asian, respectively, we were compelled to address this call to challenge monoracialism by engaging in reflexive exercises to examine the role of race in our research.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we present scholars with a structured method framed by Jacobson and Mustafa's (2019) Social Identity Map (SIM) combined with written reflection and positionality briefings (Kapinga et al. 2020) to begin their own explorations of identity. Second, we present our experiences of engaging in the abovementioned reflection process, in which we negotiated with monoracialism as we worked to understand our identities as Asian scholars. Through this process, we discovered new perspectives on how we, along with our participants, have grappled with socially imposed notions of who we are as Asians.

# 2. The Why of Our Work: Contextualizing Our Duoethnography in Response to Monoracialism

Empowering and elevating the voices of marginalized populations while simultaneously challenging oppressive systems is a hallmark of critical research. Critical theorists

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of both race and gender emphasize that systems of oppression are embedded in the very fabrics of our society and the importance of acknowledging and examining the role of the self as researcher in efforts to promote social justice. As feminist scholars would argue, such non-reflexive research would be biased, incomplete, and potentially harmful (Beetham and Demetriades 2007; Nencel 2014). When we engage in critical research, whether it be quantitative or qualitative, scholars must recognize how our own lived experiences might shape each stage of the research process. Freire (2005) pointed out that "Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" (p. 88). This is evident in the push for critical research to center the voices of the oppressed. As Delgado and Stefancic (2012) note in their work on Critical Race Theory, the voices of the oppressed offer counterstories to systems. By engaging in a duoethnography using a reflexivity tool, we center our voices and our counterstories to those of monoracialism.

#### 2.1. A Word, or Two, on Critical Quantitative and Qualitative Research

A critical component of qualitative critical research is the role of researcher-as-instrument (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2014; Creswell 2013; Denzin and Lincoln 2017) and how our intersecting and complex identities are woven throughout the study (Yoon and Uliassi 2022). While objectivity has been the de rigueur of scientific research, we can no longer ignore how the analysis of our participants' lived experiences is filtered through those of our own. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2017), research is a "personal biography of the researcher who speaks from a particular class, gendered, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective" (p. 16). Thus, it is critical we engage in reflexivity to recognize how our identities might shape our work. Reflexivity, however, has had fewer applications in the field of quantitative research.

Self-reflection has traditionally been less emphasized in quantitative research compared to qualitative research. Running statistical analyses and working with numbers often give a false sense of objectivity. However, it has been pointed out that no researcher, however objective and neutral they aspire to be, can never be free of biases or blind-spots. Biases are human condition, even in research (Baldwin et al. 2022). From the very early stage of coming up with research questions (e.g., what topics are worth studying? What data will be collected to test what claims?) to interpreting the results, our identities as cultural beings come into effect. As Carter and Hurtado (2007) argue, there exists an "intersection of autobiography and research for quantitative researchers" (p. 26). The products of statistical analyses might be best understood as "ficts," neither concrete facts nor arbitrary fictions (Olsen and Morgan 2005). Therefore, it is unrealistic to assume that true objectivity is attainable. However, despite increased interest in critical research (as shown in efforts to operationalize and measure constructs such as critical consciousness; Diemer et al. 2016), not enough attention has been paid to researcher as a cultural being. Only a few, if any, quantitative research papers include a section on positionality, which is a common practice in qualitative research. That is, even in critical research, the researcher still appears (at least on paper) detached from the research process. It would be important to recognize the inherent and inevitable subjectivity of research and address it, rather than pretending that we are completely logical, culture-free agents of science.

#### 2.2. Focus on Racial Identity

We recognize and acknowledge the complex intersections of social identities. For example, Kimberle Crenshaw, in her seminal work, laid out how racism and sexism intersect to create a uniquely oppressive experience for Black women, which has important legal implications (Crenshaw 2013). For the purposes of this paper, however, we chose to center our discussions on our experiences as Asians living in the U.S. The focus on our racial and ethnic identities as Filipino and Korean scholars emerged through our discussions while other identities were considered tangentially connected to our lived experiences as Asians. We do not aim to diminish the role of the intersectionality between our racial and gender identities. Rather, we spotlight race as a starting point to introduce novice and

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veteran scholars to the reflexive process of the SIM. Freire (2005) pointed out that authentic reflection considers human's relationship with their social worlds. He argued that when we engage in reflection, or in this case reflexivity, we "begin to single out elements from their 'background awareness'" (p. 81). We chose to bring into consciousness our racial identities and in so doing made it an object of consideration as it relates to our work as critical scholars.

Our choice to delve into our racial identities and their influence on our work is a direct address to the notions that critical work is not value free (Pring 2003). In 1969, Carol Hansich wrote a memo responding to the argument that consciousness raising during the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) was a form of therapy, which was titled, "The Personal is Political." We hazard to state that the personal is research and we argue scholars rarely pursue a line of inquiry without a vested interest in the topic or population. Never is this more evident than in our work toward understanding the sociohistorical forces influencing the construction of racial categories in the U.S.

Our readers will note how our understanding and focus shifted as we revealed more of ourselves through the SIM, in our reflections, and through our meetings. Our original intent, to understand how monoracialism as immutable, socially constructed physical boundaries has shaped the way we view, understand, and live our Asian and Asian American identities, evolved to examining the inextricable links between race and culture and the expectations imposed by White society's narratives and those of our own respective communities.

#### 2.3. Monoracialism and Deconstruction Defined

In identity discourse, a prevailing expectation is that you belong to a clean-cut identity category. This is shown in the common notion of gender binary, where individuals either belong to the category of men or women. Just as this restrictive view on gender has been challenged (Hyde et al. 2019), we need to confront the idea of monoracialism. The mainstream view on race is similar to that of gender binary in that we are asked to identify with one race and one race only. Those who do not meet such expectations, such as multiracial individuals, are met with resistance and discrimination (Harris 2016). However, even within one race, significant heterogeneity exists. This diversity is often overlooked by mainstream society that assumes a race to be a monolith. In this paper, we challenge this notion of monoracialism by trying to deconstruct what being Asian or Asian American means. This includes acknowledging the role of ethnicity and culture in how we understand the limitations of monoracialism. By focusing on one aspect of monoracialism, that of the physical characteristics associated with race, we risk essentializing our process of deconstruction, confining us to the binaries inherent in White vs. Other (Lowe 1991), and limiting discourse on the impact of monoracialism. The heterogeneity that exists in the Asian monolith involves the negotiation of generational, immigration, national, ethnic, and cultural experiences across and within Asian communities. Thus, our readers will note the fluidity involved in discovering the self through reflexivity and the meanings we create around our racial identity through this process.

Deconstruction, a term introduced by the philosopher Jacques Derrida, challenges the notion that truths can be claimed (American Psychological Association n.d.). Ahsan (2020) described the process of deconstruction as "[dismantling] the master's house" using "master's tools (p. 45)," quoting Audre Lorde, who criticized the White American theorists from excluding the voices of Black women and other underrepresented individuals (Lorde 2003). That is, the tool of deconstruction still belongs to the same system that we are trying to dismantle. Chang (1993) stated "in no way does deconstructing the category 'Asian American' change the fact that I am an Asian American. My context has constructed me as Asian American," (p. 1322). As such, we recognize that complete deconstruction is out of our reach. Nonetheless, we attempt to deconstruct "Asian Americanness" by reframing and reconceptualizing it, in the hope of reclaiming this racial identity as our own. In other words, we seek to redefine our relationship to our racial identity.

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#### 2.4. Asian American Experiences

Asian Americans occupy a curious space in the American society. Neither White nor Black (and sometimes not even brown), Asian Americans, historically called "Orientals," are seen as a hardworking, modest, harmless, and powerless group that is quite a distance away from "Americanness (Whiteness)." Kim (1999) referred to this positioning as racial triangulation whereby Asians in the U.S. are positioned according to their insider status (civic ostracism) and inferiority (relative valorization) in relation to White and Black populations. According to Kim, "Triangulated between Black and White, Asian Americans have been granted provisional acceptance for specific purposes, but they have never been embraced as true Americans" (p. 129). Kim's work pointed to the two most pervasive stereotypes facing Asians in the U.S., the model minority and the perpetual foreigner, which are inextricably bound to narratives of Asians.

The model minority stereotype depicts Asian Americans as an exemplar group that has overcome the minority status to achieve academic and occupational success and therefore does not require any special consideration. During the civil rights era, success stories of Asian immigrants were heralded as paragons and used to dismiss the concerns of systemic racial injustice in the U.S. Simultaneously, yellow peril fears made sure that Asian Americans could never rise to a position of power or truly be accepted into the mainstream society (Wu 2014). The paradoxical nature of model minority applies in academia as well. The stereotype that Asian Americans are intelligent can appear positive at the face value. However, it disregards the efforts they put in to be academically successful. Genetic gift, after all, is not an earned quality. Research shows that Asian Americans are aware of these "positive" stereotypes that are bestowed on them and are often frustrated by them (Oyserman and Sakamoto 1997). Awareness of such stereotypes (named stigma consciousness; Pinel 1999) can even lead to anxiety (Son and Shelton 2011).

The perpetual foreigner stereotype denies the American identity of Asian Americans, casting them as inherently foreign (Lee et al. 2009). This exotification leads to fetishization of Asian women in particular, projecting an overly sexualized image onto them (Azhar et al. 2021). Relatedly, heightened xenophobia led to increase in anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals with East Asian phenotypes were seen as "others" and threats to society who needed to be removed from the country (Gover et al. 2020). Both perpetual foreigner and model minority stereotypes strip away humanness from Asian Americans. They turn them into objects for the majority to exploit, whether in the forms of fetishized, exotified objects, gears that keep society running, or tools to push down on other people of color. In his work on Asian critical race legal scholarship, Chang (1993) emphasized the need to acknowledge how different groups have been discriminated differently. For Asian Americans this points directly to their liminal status as both the model minority and perpetual foreigner.

The term "Asian American" stems from the civil rights era, when it was proposed by Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka as a pan-ethnic identity, a banner under which individuals whose heritage traces back to Asian countries could rally together (Kang 2021). In other words, Asian American identity is rooted in the social justice movement (Wei 1993). However, this identity, just like any other socially constructed identities, carries a sense of essentialism. Lowe (1991) remarked upon this essentialism to highlight its dangers, pointing out that the monolith label and by extension the monoracialism of Asians supports the racist systems that restrict Asians to a homogenous group. Too often, unique experiences of Asian Americans are erased as they are all lumped into one racial category. Monoracialism ensures that Asian Americans are seen as a homogeneous group, despite research evidence that shows significant variances within this group (McGee et al. 2017; Sadler et al. 2003). As mentioned above, our work recognizes the heterogeneity of the Asian monolith and that deconstructing monoracialism is itself a fluid process where we must acknowledge the diversity within our communities. This may include considerations of ethnic and cultural traditions that have been constructed internally to inform our identities.

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# 3. The Who of Our Work: Centering Our Narratives

I, Chadrhyn (Chad), identify as Filipino American and while I type the label without modification, more often than not it feels as if I should write it as Filipino. American. I was born in Illinois and raised in California where I was one of many shades of brown. My experiences with my racial identity centered more on my experiences with my ethnic identity. Having lived in a predominantly Latinx neighborhood I was singled out not for what I looked like, but for the traditions my family practiced. I was often told (not asked), "You eat dog, huh?" Other comments highlighted the reach of the model minority myth where my successes were devalued and attributed to my racial identity. When I left for college, I was faced with a new environment where suddenly I was surrounded by Asians. I had no idea what to make of such a situation. I found myself on the outside again, not feeling Asian or Filipino enough to fit in. I felt like an imposter. Over time, I felt comfortable sharing parts of my Filipino culture, especially as my circle included more and more of us. I started to feel as if I were whole, and I could exist as both Filipino and American and no one would question either identity. Then I left and my world and my racial identity has been one big question ever since.

Moving to the East Coast, I was faced again with existing as an outsider. I was not Asian looking like my friends, but neither was I Latina, Black, or White. I was somewhere in between. I started questioning my identity again and felt the sting of being a person of color as I navigated the community outside of the university's walls. I learned then that I had to "act White" to survive and have been doing so ever since. I now occupy a space where American traditions hold strong. I have had to navigate the military world in ways I did not expect yet was "trained" to do during my lifetime having to negotiate the in-between spaces of being not Filipino, not Asian, not American enough. There are moments when I feel like a traitor and other times an imposter. Most of the time I feel tired having to preface or modify my identity with either Filipino or American because neither will accept me whole.

I, Chan Jeong (CJ), identify as a Korean, heterosexual, cisgender woman in early 30s and a counseling psychologist by training. I was born and raised in South Korea until I was 12. After that, my father's work brought my family to China, where I attended a small American international school. There were students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds (my graduating class had 12 students from 7 different countries), with Koreans forming the largest ethnic group. The teachers, who mostly came from English-speaking countries like the U.S. and Canada, were predominantly White. This was my first encounter with the construct of race. However, because I was in an international community, there seemed to be a greater emphasis on ethnicity and nationality than race. Nonetheless, I could easily pick up the preference and favor toward White students. After getting my undergraduate degree in Hong Kong, I returned to South Korea for my master's, where I stayed and worked until I came to the Midwestern U.S. in 2016 to start doctoral training. Living in a predominantly White society was a very different experience, even compared to my experience of attending an American international school. I was given this label of "Asian" and since then have been wrestling with the meaning of this label, both personally and professionally. I recognize that my experience as an "Asian international" in the U.S. does not grant me right to represent everyone who claims this identity. My experience is further distanced from those of Asian Americans, especially those who were born and raised here. Additionally, as a heterosexual, cisgender, non-disabled person, I recognize that I hold power and privilege in multiple identity domains and cannot speak for those whose intersectional identities differ from mine. My fundamental identity as a Korean woman and a newly given identity as an Asian international, as well as my experiences of navigating the academia with these identities, laid the foundation of my approach to this duoethnography.

As a quantitative researcher, I have limited experience in qualitative research. Engaging in this project has been a new, refreshing challenge for me on many levels. At times when I was working on SIM, I caught myself thinking in terms of quantitative language

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(e.g., thinking about how lower-tier items "load onto" higher order factors). My professional identity as a counseling psychologist also came into play, as evident in my tendency to think about the past experiences and their connection to the present in my reflections.

# 4. The What of Our Work: Choosing Our Process

Reflexivity is an active and ongoing process extending beyond reflection to a bending back (Archer 2009) in critical self-examination of how our identities (Jacobson and Mustafa 2019), experiences (Corlett and Mavin 2018; England 1994; Holmes 2020; Patnaik 2013) philosophical paradigms (Miller et al. 2015), and emotions (Hordge-Freeman 2018) shape the whole of the research process. At its core, reflexivity provides an opportunity to interrogate our social positions and our systematic beliefs about society, allowing us to gain deeper insight into the worlds of those we research.

Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) examined the utility of the SIM through a workshop with novice and veteran scholars. During this process, they found the benefits of researchers engaging in discourse regarding their process. As such, we chose to employ a duoethnographic inquiry strategy to expand our reflexivity to include a dialectical process where we discussed our thoughts on how completing the SIM shaped the way we view our racial identities. As critical researchers, we recognize the importance of addressing our relationships with our Asian identities and how in failing to be explicit about our assumptions and experiences, we reinforce the power dynamic between researcher and participant. Wiant Cummins and Brannon (2022) argued that reflexivity must be an intentional process. Duoethnography as a collaborative effort creates a space for accountability and intentionality when examining our lived experiences and identities. They stated, "Reflexivity neither just happens, nor is it a fixed process to apply to a project. Rather, reflexivity requires researchers' continued, intentional efforts to uncover the layers of power and influence their positionalities have over their research projects" (p. 86). Sawyer and Norris (2012) argued that duoethnography is grounded in social justice and aims to promote change. Through dialogue with one another, scholars have the opportunity to critically examine their narratives and experiences.

#### The Social Identity Map

Understanding one's positionality and biases involves honesty and vulnerability. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) refer to this as explicit reflexivity where scholars "must reflect on how our own unique perspectives which are made up by, but not limited to, each facet of our social identity, impact how we approach, conduct, and interpret our research" (p. 2). They offered the Social Identity Map (SIM) as a tool to aid novice researchers in visualizing their social identities with the hope of making our abstract conceptualizations of identity more tangible. The major theme in Jacobson and Mustafa's work with the SIM was that of fluidity. Holmes (2020) recognized how engaging in reflexivity "can be a complex, difficult, and sometimes extremely time-consuming process," (p. 3). The authors argued the SIM allows scholars to "work through" facets of their identity, stressing how one's identity develops over time. As such, Jacobson and Mustafa emphasized the map itself was merely a beginning to understanding ourselves and our research and not an end.

The visual nature of the SIM allows scholars to understand the complex interconnections between facets of their social identities and the research process through a structured, yet flexible tool. Consisting of three tiers, the SIM encourages scholars to add to and take away from each level as they consider which aspects are most important in composing their overall identity. From broad socially constructed identities like gender and race to the emotions tied to the impact of these identities on one's life, the SIM creates an opportunity for scholars to think deeply and critically about their positionality. By starting with broad social categories such as gender or race, scholars are encouraged to consider those identities that best express how they view themselves in their social world. The authors acknowledged novice scholars may find this step challenging at first, questioning how they might best refer to aspects of their identity. It is for this reason Jacobson and Mustafa encouraged

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scholars to remain flexible while listing their identities. Once scholars are content with the identities listed in this first tier of the SIM, they are asked to consider how these identities have impacted their lives. This is a critical step in the process as Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) stated,

Recognizing how our social identities impact our lives is a first step in developing our recognition of, and reflection on, how our social identities impact our research. This may include positions that one may hold within each facet of social identity, values intrinsically attached to these identities, or even interpretations of events or interactions because of the learner's social position. (p. 4)

The final tier requires vulnerability in exploring the emotions tied to the impact of these identities on one's life. The authors noted it is essential to detail our identities through emotion as it reveals how scholars approach the world and, in critical qualitative research, how one might approach participants. While the SIM was aimed at providing novice scholars a tool to begin to examine their positionality via their social identities, it remains helpful to veteran scholars who must continue to interrogate how their identities and the social forces that shape them influence their approach to the research process. A key component to reflexivity and critical research is its ability to bring to the forefront the dynamics of power and privilege in the researcher and participant relationship (Jacobson and Mustafa 2019). Employing a duoethnographic inquiry strategy allows scholars to engage with one another and identify areas where this dynamic may be problematic.

#### 5. The How and When of our Work: Engaging in the Reflective Process

Our paper would not be complete without a description of the process in which we engaged. A primary purpose of the study aimed to present to scholars a structured way to engage in reflexivity using the SIM (Jacobson and Mustafa 2019). Second, by engaging in our own reflexive duoethnography, we sought to understand ourselves as Asian Americans, how we negotiate monoracialism, and how our racial identities have informed our work as critical scholars. This section outlines our process.

# 5.1. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How can quantitative and qualitative researchers explore their biases/positionalities to become more critical scholars?
- How can we begin to deconstruct monoracialism through engaging in a structured process of reflexivity?

We chose to employ a duoethnographic inquiry strategy to understand how our racial identities as Asian scholars has shaped the work we do in critical research on race in the U.S. A major advantage of duoethnography is its role in creating a space to move beyond the dialogue between two scholars to one where new meanings and insights are generated through the examination of perceptions and cultural artifacts (Sawyer and Norris 2012). As noted by Haug (1999), the construction of meaning is continuous and involves an agreement with others. The duoethnographic process enabled us to engage in the construction of meaning through the dialogic process of writing, meeting, and reflection. Our duoethnography was framed by Jacobson and Mustafa's (2019) SIM which provided a visual and tangible representation of the intersections of our social identities. We combined the SIM with written reflections and positionality meetings (Kapinga et al. 2020), which added additional opportunities to engage in discourse about our Asian identities.

The completion of each SIM tier was accompanied by a written reflection. We did not create guidelines for reflections, choosing instead to allow for the free flow of ideas, thoughts, and emotions regarding each stage of the process. We often included new musings in between our research meetings to encourage further reflection of the process. By using written reflections, we were able to understand how our realities have been constructed (Cunliffe 2004) and link our experiences to the perspective of monoracialism

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and what that has meant for us both as individuals and scholars. As mentioned above Sawyer and Norris (2012) stressed the importance of enhancing dialogue with artifacts such as stories, memoirs, and text. They argued "duoethnographers excavate the temporal, social, cultural, and geographical cartography of their lives, making explicit their assumptions and perspectives," (p. 2). Making our perspectives and experiences explicit became a critical part of our process and was expanded during our scheduled meetings.

Positionality meetings or briefings were included as part of the dialogic process of duoethnography. Kapinga et al. (2020) argued for positionality meetings as a part of a collective effort to interrogate our positions throughout the research process. They highlighted how meetings are beneficial for instances when researchers do not share "similar positions as those researched" such as a White female interviewing Muslim men and women as was the case for one of the researchers in their study. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) pointed out the benefits of the SIM in identifying the overlapping and different identities between the researcher and participant which can lead to issues with power dynamics. Making time to meet with one another became an investment in learning, revealing themes of shifting perceptions and understanding of our identity. Furthermore, Kapinga et al. (2020) argued, engaging in reflexivity as a group offers checks and balances of individual reflexivity and allowed us to identify blind spots.

#### 5.2. Data Collection Schedule

Data were collected through completing SIM, journaling, and conversations. We met weekly for three weeks. Prior to each meeting, we completed one tier of SIM, journaled about the process on our own, and reviewed one another's map and journal entry. Chad drew and wrote on paper first, which she later transformed into an electronic format. CJ used computer software from the beginning. During the one-hour meeting, we discussed our SIM and reflection, as well as reaction to reading each other's works. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim.

#### 5.3. Data Analysis

As discussed previously, we used SIM as the foundational framework to organize our data. Thematic analysis informed our data analysis process. Thematic analysis involves systematic identification and organization of themes in a data set, which lends insight into the defining patterns that emerge across multiple data sources (Braun and Clarke 2012). We adopted an inductive approach, creating in vivo and summary codes from the bottom-up.

The first stage of data analysis involved us separately conducting initial coding to capture the essence of what was depicted, written, or spoken. We coded each other's journal entries and split the transcribed conversations. Dedoose, the qualitative research program we used for data analysis, allowed us to view each other's codes. As such, we were able to use and build on codes created by each other. During the second stage of data analysis, we reviewed the initial codes and organized them into broad domains, which became our major themes, and corresponding subthemes. The process was collaborative and happened across two weekly meetings.

# 6. Uncovering and Discovering

The purpose of our duo-ethnography was twofold. First, we aimed to offer novice and veteran scholars a structured process to begin engaging in reflexivity through a combination of Jacobson and Mustafa's (2019) SIM, written reflections, and positionality briefings. Second, we sought to gain deeper insight into how our identities as Asians have shaped our research, how we have come to understand our Asian identities, and how we have negotiated monoracialism. Two major themes and seven subthemes emerged through the analysis of the data. The first centered on the discomfort we experienced completing the SIM from which emerged our inclination to "play it safe" and conversely a sense of liberation in the vulnerability we expressed to one another. In addition, we discovered how our Asian identities have informed the research interests we pursue. The second major

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theme involved the relationship with Asian identity, which centered around our making sense of the label of Asian or Asian American, contesting with the idea of performing an identity, and processing our emotional reactions to our Asian identity.

#### 6.1. What Our Work Uncovered about the Reflexive Process

#### 6.1.1. Discomfort during the Reflexive Process

The first major theme emerging from our analysis of the data discomfort during the reflexive process. This theme represented the emotions and mental processes we underwent during the completion of the SIM, our reflections, and our meetings. Completing each tier of the SIM revealed the challenges we faced in "naming" our identities and the impact they have had on our lives. While tier one appeared, on the surface, the easiest to complete, it turned out to be one of the most difficult. Chad had tried on one other occasion to complete the SIM but never made it past her identity as a female and found herself "stuck" when reflecting on race. She wrote in her reflection, "Completing Tier 1 was more difficult than I expected. I had tried once, prior to this project and found myself overwhelmed." When working with CJ however, she recognized how working alongside a trusted colleague could present the opportunity to engage in deep reflexivity. After completing tier one, Chad noted,

Knowing I was accountable made it more "official." It was no less difficult. I had to remind myself that this project is part of deconstructing monoracialism and I had to ask myself repeatedly, how can this project help us deconstruct these ideas. Looking at just my racial identity, I realize this will be more difficult as we dive into the other two tiers. For now, I may simply list "Filipino." But it may change.

Understanding the implications of completing this duo-ethnography helped her to frame the importance of the study for scholars and their positionality and for Asian Americans. CJ, on the other hand, discussed the challenges of navigating "head space" and altering her natural inclination to approach research from an intellectual, more cognitive perspective. During our third meeting, she mentioned,

So I know that we're supposed to talk about feelings and emotions but actually I found myself still being in the intellectual space where I'm analyzing things instead of really focusing on my feelings and emotions. So that was kind of interesting for me. I mean, I know that I'm a lot more cognitive person than an emotional person in general. So it could just be me, my natural personality coming off like that. And at the same time, I also wonder, am I feeling uncomfortable, really, connecting with the sense of discomfort that I have with this label of Asian and things like that. So that was interesting.

Analysis of these experiences with discomfort revealed inclinations to play it safe, that is to write our reflections with scholarly publication in mind, and the liberation that accompanied the honesty and vulnerability of sharing not only our lived experiences, but the thoughts and feelings associated with certain events.

# 6.1.2. Playing It Safe

Observations of refraining from fully expressing our thoughts and feelings emerged throughout the research process. Whether it was through our written reflections or during our meetings, we attributed our hesitancy or inclination to play it safe to the function of scholarly work. Knowing we planned to share our process often resulted in a bridling of our reflections. During our second meeting, Chad admitted to holding back stating, "I know I am. I know what I'm reflecting. I know when I'm picking, because I am, we're picking the way we're impacted." Going further, Chad expressed her mixed feelings toward the project. For her it was exhilarating to explore her identity, but even given the safe space between created between her and CJ, she knew too that other researchers would be analyzing and reading her words. She stated, "And so it's exciting but it's also maybe not as freeing as I thought it was going to be. This process." Echoing Chad's sentiments,

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CJ attributed refraining from fully sharing her experiences and emotions to the scholarly process stating,

I also find myself censoring a lot. And a part of that comes from the fact that this is a research study. If this was just you and me talking, just randomly, I think I would have been more open. But since this is something that we are studying about and then it's going to be published later for everyone to see. I'm like, yeah I don't know what parts I'm willing to share with everybody in the world and what parts I'm not.

While the scholarly process was a motivating factor in creating barriers to sharing our experiences, we also noted how this process would be difficult should we have engaged with scholars from other racial backgrounds. Regardless of how safe and comfortable we felt with one another the impending publication continued to restrain us and we considered how working with others might have shaped our conversations further. Chad noted, "And I mean I don't know what this process would have been like if we'd had Black, Latino, white scholars with us engaging. I feel I know I would have held back more in the conversation." Recalling a situation in which she was discussing race and racism with other scholars of color, CJ noted how her contribution to the discussion was met with dismissal as she tried to connect through shared experiences with discrimination and racism. She recalled, "After someone spoke up, I wanted to share that I resonated with that. So I said like, yeah we people of color, or something like that, and I saw this look on her face, it was like, no you're not." Experiences such as these added to our vulnerability when sharing this experience with others.

#### 6.1.3. Liberating Vulnerability

While a central theme across the duoethnography was discomfort and restraint, there were also moments of liberation. By discussing our experiences as Asians and how we have come to understand our racial identities, we found the beginnings of freedom and ability to reconcile who we are with who society expects us to be. This process allowed us to discuss our race in ways we hadn't previously done. Recognizing how important this is to the research process, CJ likened our lack of personal exploration to hiding behind our participants. She stated, "If you just study about other people who experience this, you're going to hide behind their experiences and you're not really facing your demons yourself." Acknowledging the power and privilege in hiding, Chad agreed with CJ regarding her attempts at understanding the Asian identity and admitted, "I think I've looked at it through the eyes of my participants and through others instead of through myself."

Completing the duoethnography was a pivotal moment in both our careers as scholars. Although CJ has a close network of Korean scholars and friends, she had not previously engaged in these conversations. Commenting on the duoethnography, she stated, "I really love this conversation and it's so refreshing. I rarely ever get to have such conversations with people outside of my Korean friends." We found that, while we do not have an established definition of what it means to be an Asian American, we found the process freeing in our quest to understand ourselves. Chad felt,

Just us doing this work is part of the deconstruction, because it seems like neither of us fits nicely into this box of Asian American. And we're challenging that it and we are trying to see that, yes we may not fit in this box perfectly, not what society expects of us, and still we can claim this identity. And that deconstructs what society sees as Asian American.

#### 6.1.4. Choosing Our Research

One purpose of this duoethnography was to understand how our racial identities have shaped our research. For Chad's work, studying the experiences of Asian Americans has become a quest for understanding and meaning. She has sought to feel connected to her Filipino identity and acceptance in being Filipino American. She asked,

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Had I grown up around this world, not that I don't feel pride, would I feel more connected to it. And would I fit in with the Filipino society. And I think that's where doing this kind of work I need to start defining it. And if that means I can speak their language, barely, and make some of the food then that should be good for me in who I am. And I think that's where and why I do the work that I do. In a way, maybe a part of me is hoping that one of my participants can tell me what it means and maybe I'll know what it means for me too.

CJ's process centered not on meaning, but the tension between the push toward studying our communities and the desire to pull away. She found that completing the duoethnography allowed her to explore these ideas more. During our third meeting, CJ considered her motivations for including other students of color in her studies along with studying Asian Americans. While discussing our motivations for research, CJ noted,

I'm feeling really uncertain about this whole Asian population, Asian group. Maybe that's why I feel like I can't really commit to studying this population in specific, and maybe I'm also internalizing this message that we don't matter. And maybe that's why I'm trying to always look at Asians in relation to other groups such as, like what I did for my dissertation where I first started to just look at Asian women and then ended up including Latina and Black women as well. Which is awesome and good, but at the same time I kind of wonder, why did I do that? And is that going to keep happening to me? Like, whenever I come up with a research idea, am I going to try to make it not too Asian? Is that what I'm going to do?

Questioning our motivations for research were related to how we perceived our Asian identities and the impact it has had not only on our work as scholars, but in our lives as well.

#### 6.2. What We Discovered about Ourselves

#### 6.2.1. Relationship with Asian Identity

The second major theme emerged from our data was relationship with Asian identity. This theme represents the meaning that we actively create about our Asian identity. In addition to the broader Asian identity, we also discussed more specific identities based on our cultural backgrounds. Chad examined her relationship with Filipino, (White) American, and Filipino American cultures and CJ reflected on her identity as Korean and Asian international.

#### 6.2.2. Label and Belonging

Both of us struggled with the label of Asian or Asian American in different ways. This struggle primarily stemmed from the sense of uncertainty about our membership in this racial group, coupled by how others see or not see us as belonging to this category. We both reported a higher sense of connection to our ethnicity-based identity (Filipino American for Chad, Korean for CJ), while feeling ambivalent about Asian American identity.

Growing up in a predominantly Latino community, Chad saw her identity as "brown." However, this did not mean that she was accepted into the other brown communities. Rather, she often experienced othering and overt and covert microaggressions. She was often mistaken as a Latina: "I mean people just automatically assume I'm Hispanic and if I don't speak Spanish they get mad at me. I'm not. And so in those instances I want to be more Filipino, I wish and I had more features that would scream to the world." This racial ambiguity led her to question whether she can really claim Asian American as her identity, because she does not fit into a stereotypical image of an Asian American. This was compounded by the fact that she was born and raised in the U.S. She stated, "I question my right to claim Asian American as my identity both because Filipinos feel like the red-headed stepchild of the group and because I have been raised in America." She also reported ambivalent connection with Filipino culture, which her parents feel strong ties to. These identities appeared defined by others, not by herself, as she shared, "I state my

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race because I wasn't sure what I wanted to write. I could state Asian American, which the government says I am. I could state Filipino, which my parents say I am. I could state 'brown' which my social context says I am." Chad felt most in line with Filipino American identity and felt like she belonged to Filipino American community, as its members shared many of her lived experiences and values.

CJ, on the other hand, received the label of Asian later in her life, having lived in Asian countries up until she was in her mid-20s. Upon arriving to the U.S., race suddenly became a prominent identity for her. She initially reported a sense of detachment from this label, seeing it as something originating from with-out and not strongly tied to her sense of self. She stated, "I just put 'Asian' [on SIM] and I didn't really, actually think twice about it. And I guess that's because for me, even the concept of race is very foreign. So I'm like, if this is what people who are not in my community call me, then, whatever. You guys call me that, that's fine." CJ was unsure if she could claim Asian as her identity, especially due to her international background. Chad's proposal to collaborate on this duoethnography felt like an invitation to the Asian community in the U.S., which increased her sense of belonging to the label of Asian. She said, "I also really appreciate how you invited me to the study, because it almost felt like an invitation to be a part of the Asian community, the formal invitation that I never got."

# 6.2.3. Coping with Stereotypes and Othering

In spite of our ambivalence toward our Asian identity, when we were perceived as Asians by others, we were seen through the lens of stereotypes. In other words, the application of stereotypes were largely determined by how others perceived us, not by how strongly we identify with being Asian. Chad described a complex relationship with model minority stereotype. While she recognized how it devalued her hard work, she could also use it to her advantage. She mentioned, "And then it was, of course, because you're smart. That's why you're getting good grades. It's like, no, I work hard. That doesn't automatically make me smart, it devalues the work that I put into it. But at the same time, depending on who I'm talking to, yeah, I'm smart. Well, if you see me and you automatically assume that I am smart, then more power to you. Because then I can hide behind my BS and you will just think it's smart."

Upon receiving the label of Asian, CJ had to learn stereotypes and norms of what being an Asian meant in the U.S., which was a disconcerting experience. She found it discomforting that some aspects of her seem to fit into Asian stereotypes and felt a pull to reject them. She stated, "Because I'm naturally a quiet person, I feel like I really fit into this Asian stereotype and I don't really like that. So there was a time when I felt like I should start to be more outgoing and all that because I don't want to conform to that stereotype. And at the same time, that's just who I am as a person."

In addition, both Chad and CJ experienced othering experiences that were tied to perpetual foreigner stereotype, which casts Asian Americans as exotic others. Chad noted, "Rather when I say exotic, I think of it as another form of my othering. The 'you eat dog, huh?' exotification. The 'one of these things is not like the other' exotic tied with a person from the islands or rather lands far away." CJ described two incidents where she was approached by elderly White men who wanted to "be her friends," which left her wondering, "What [do] they see in me? Are they seeing a docile, harmless woman who can cater to their needs? Would they have approached other women in a similar way?" These experiences demonstrate the pervasiveness of Asian stereotypes, as well as nuanced ways in which they can manifest.

#### 6.2.4. Doing vs. Being

We attempted to deconstruct Asian identity by redefining what having a certain identity meant. We discussed the importance of rituals or "doing" of identity for many Asian communities. For example, Chad shared how her parents, who are first generation immigrants, often expect her and her children to follow Filipino customs (e.g., cooking

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Filipino food, finding and joining Filipino community, using Tagalog terms). In other life domains, there is a constant expectation to perform our cultures, such as doing traditional dance for a school event or cooking exotic dishes for a potluck. In other words, we feel pressure from both within our immediate cultural groups and from mainstream society to perform our Asian identities. Chad stated, "Because my parents, when we're rooting the pride in ritual and task and the doing if they want me to do the Filipino things, in my head that's just more dance monkey dance. And I don't want to do that for you. I don't want to do that for non-Asian society. I just want to exist as me." We recognized the value in such rituals (e.g., expression of cultural pride), but questioned whether we need to engage in them to claim Asian identity.

In contrast to the doing of identity, we proposed the being of identity. CJ noted, "We have all this pressure to perform in one way or the other. We can lose our sense of agency when we are just following those instructions. So reclaiming agency is a big step in figuring out who we are as Asians or Asian Americans." We explored cultural values and ways of being with others that we align with. Chad shared that she aligns with showing her elders respect and CJ talked about valuing family and familiar relationships. We discussed how simply aligning ourselves with the identity could be enough for us to claim it as our own. We expressed the desire to be accepted for who we are, regardless of how we express or not express our identities.

#### 6.2.5. Emotional Reactions

Several emotions came up for us as we reflected on our Asian identity. Most of them were negative in valence. For example, there was a fear of not being enough, not being Asian enough. This was related to a sense of being an impostor or a traitor because we are not performing our identities to meet the standards of our community and mainstream society. For Chad, her identities as Filipino and American conflicted with each other, instead of being a seamless whole (Filipino American). Referring to a scene from the movie The Debu, she noted, "They gave out t-shirts that said "Filipino. American." Implying the separation of the two identities. I thought of myself that way for years. Filipino. American. Today I think I think of myself as Filipino American... maybe American Filipino... yes, that's more like it. But I feel betrayal and imposter when I say that." There was also fear of being too Asian, as that was often not welcomed or accepted. CJ mentioned, "As a group that takes up only 6% of the population, we are dismissed because we are just too small of a group or because we are 'overrepresented' in higher ed. So I feel like I need to find research topics that are not 'too Asian.' In a similar sense, I feel like I myself need to be not 'too Asian' to build my career."

In response to the pressure to perform our identity, we experienced shame and rejection. CJ stated, "Because there's all this, I guess even shame, when you're not performing as you should be." Chad felt a similar sense of obligation to perform, which led to a sense of rejection. She shared, "When I told you (CJ) that I rebelled I was wrong, what I felt, what I feel is rejection. Wanting to reject those aspects of being Filipino that do not align with who I am. I feel obligated to perform my identity. No, when I talk about race, I talk about my cultural background the pressures I feel to behave in the way my parents, immigrants to America, expect me to behave. I reject that."

We struggled to identify positive emotions. Whereas negative emotions emerged readily, we had to intentionally look for positive emotions. This led us to realize that as a culture, Asians are not often taught to express positive emotions such as pride about our identities. These positive emotions are indirectly expressed through rituals, as Chad mentioned, "We focus on the rituals, we focus on the doing and showing of the pride versus the explicit expression of, like I am proud you know. Asian pride, I can't even say that." Again, heavier emphasis seems to be on the doing of things, rather than being and experiencing the identity.

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# 7. The Meaning of Our Work

# 7.1. Self-Reflexivity in Research

Commenting on the process of critical research, Malacrida (2007) reminds us, "In many ways, qualitative research with vulnerable and marginalized people is akin to witnessing," (p. 1337). As scholars we witness our participants' lives unfold during the research process be it through surveys, interviews, or other forms of data collection. In so doing, we leave them exposed. It is our commitment to social justice that requires us to acknowledge this power and submit ourselves to the same level of vulnerability found in reflexive exercise. England (1994) pointed out how reflexivity could reveal new insights into our presuppositions. Our duoethnography revealed our own vulnerability at examining our Asian identities, thus reminding us of the discomfort our participants must endure as we question them about their lived experiences. Our written reflections demonstrated levels of restraint as we held back from discussing aspects of our experiences and identities that we may have felt were deeply personal or too emotional to consider. To open ourselves to this discomfort placed us in the position of the researched who are asked to recall potentially traumatic events in their lives. Critical work with marginalized groups necessitates a sort of community building, to see how our participants might seek to identify shared experiences while remaining wary of researcher privilege. Brisbois and Almeida (2017) referred to this as "evoked geographic imaginaries" (p. 195). Their work with Banana workers highlighted the ways researcher identity could shape the research interaction. The authors found that gender and presumed social class influenced the ways participants responded to interview questions. By engaging in this reflexive exercise we observed, first hand, how our positions as researchers privileges our knowledge and the knowledge we choose to include in our research. Hordge-Freeman (2018) discovered this during her work with nannies in Brazil. Her reflexive exercise revealed the assumptions she held about justice and the contrasting beliefs of her participants with which she had to reconcile.

Wiant Cummins and Brannon (2022) argued that to engage in deeper reflexivity, we must also position ourselves as the sites of research. Alcoff (2005) stated, "The concept of identity politics does not presuppose a prepackaged set of objective needs or political implications but introduces identity as a factor in any political analysis and argues for a reflexive analysis of how any given identity may affect one's action, beliefs, and politics" (p. 147). We took this statement further to explore how identity, in particular our Asian American and Asian identities shaped our research. The duoethnography was our opportunity to position ourselves as sites of research. When framed by the SIM, written reflections, and positionality meetings, we discovered a new level of consciousness raising (Korth 2002). This enabled us to feel the discomfort our participants may experience, observe the mitigation of honesty as participants navigate the power dynamics of the research relationship, and how research is a quest for personal understanding. This repositioning, if you will, heightened the connections and community we have with our participants as we conduct critical research on Asian racial identity.

# 7.2. Challenging Monoracialism

Is there an end point in Asian American identity development? Identity development theories seem to suggest that there is an ideal, healthy Asian American identity that we should all strive for (Poston 1990; Sue and Sue 2003). Likewise, society measures us against an ideal Asian American stereotype. When we fail to meet these standards, we not only experience pushback from others but also question our right to the Asian identity. Serving as a witness to each other's struggles, self-doubts, and hopes gave us courage to redefine what this identity means for ourselves. In a way, we invited each other to claim full membership in Asian community. This shows that identity development is not a purely intrapersonal process. It is a social, interpersonal process.

We shared similarities in how we wrestled with the label of Asian or Asian American, navigated internal and external pressures to perform our identity, and grappled with emotions attached to it. We were both subjected to Asian stereotypes, such as model

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minority myth, and exotified and othered by society (Wu 2014), demonstrating that despite the term Orientals becoming largely obsolete, what it encapsulated is still very present today. Our stigma consciousness (Pinel 1999) shaped how we perceived ourselves and connected with others. It is also important to note that despite sharing broad themes, our specific experiences were distinct. Such differences may stem from our differences in terms of ethnicity, place of origin, and life spaces we occupied. This demonstrates heterogeneity of Asian experiences, recognition of which does not prevent but rather promote community building.

We felt similar to Hanisch's (1969) reflections of consciousness raising sessions during the WLM where she stated, "I am getting a gut understanding of everything as opposed to the esoteric, intellectual understandings and noblesse oblige feelings I had in "other people's" struggles," (para. 5). bell hooks' (2003) work on communities of hope reminds us how reflexivity can expand our social worlds to build communities of resistance. To engage in reflexivity is to risk vulnerability and according to hooks (2003), this vulnerability is preferable to the oppression of safety. Specifically, she noted, "Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community" (hooks 2003, p. 197). Mählck's (2013) work on migrant women also speaks to the value of building community and the critical component involved in reflecting on our lived experiences as scholars. Her work pointed to the building of a support community was a form of resistance against the dominant norms of Swedish academia. Thus, our work in part contributes to building communities of resistance as we deconstruct monoracialism through our examination of our own varied but shared experiences as Asian American and Asian scholars.

# 8. Self Discovery: Re-Centering Our Narratives

# 8.1. Coming Full Circle

We began with a question asking, "Who are we" and while our idea of who we are as Asian American and Asian remains unanswerable, the reflexivity process opened us to new insights into how we negotiate monoracialism. Our findings demonstrated how challenging it can be to honestly engage in reflection regarding the experiences we have had as Asians in the U.S. We recognized how our research is informed by our quest to understand our identities through the experiences of our participants. Stories are an essential part of critical research, especially counterstories. While scholars are encouraged to remove themselves from the process, we cannot ignore how we weave in our experiences in our interpretations. To challenge monoracialism, we must, as Chang (1993) argued, speak out our oppression. For too long, we have in some ways hidden behind the stories of our participants. By engaging with the reflexivity process through the SIM, we centered ourselves, we highlighted our stories, and we spoke out our oppression. In so doing, we discovered more about our relationships with our Asian American and Asian identities.

# 8.2. Who We Are

I (Chad) found that I engaged in my work exploring Asian American identity through my own quest to find meaning and understanding of who we are supposed to be; who I am supposed to be. Through this reflexive process, I learned that I exist in compartments and that this is the current iteration of who I am. Where once I thought I could not exist as a whole, I have instead found that I am whole, but have lived showing only pieces of myself, choosing when I am Asian, when I am Filipino, when I am American. I thought, once, that in choosing only to show parts of myself that I might betray my people and while I do not know if I can ever overcome this, I have realized through this work that I can define for myself what my Asian American identity is. Chang (1993) urged us to emancipate ourselves from the Asian American racial label and in doing so we could claim what is rightfully our identity. His words bring comfort as I am reminded that he viewed

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deconstruction as a revision and reinterpretation of our experiences. Chang (1993) stated, "To reiterate, in no way does deconstructing the category 'Asian American' change the fact that I am an Asian American. My context has constructed me as Asian American" (p. 1322). This for me includes how my familial narratives and expectations combined with those told by others at the macro-social level have created the parameters from which I was to construct my identity. Yet, the idea of reconstruction and knowing that I will continue to revise and reinterpret who I am means there is room to question, room to challenge, and room to continue to become the Asian American I want to be.

Before starting this process, I (CJ) had assumed that I had more or less made peace with the Asian identity that was given to me. I felt a sense of detachment from the identity, seeing it as something foreign. Now I wonder if it had been my resistance to being seen as a perpetual foreigner; that I rejected such marginalizing stereotype by seeing it as something foreign. Nonetheless, through the process I have come to realize how my self-concept has already shifted to make room for this new identity. Also, it lent me insight into how my Asian identity (or lack of confidence in it) has shaped my research. For instance, I have felt both a pull and push against studying Asian experiences. This unconscious conflict was made conscious through engaging in the SIM journey. In other words, I came to recognize the intersectionality of my identity and research (Carter and Hurtado 2007). Another gain from the journey is that by accepting Asian identity as my identity, I have found myself a new community. Although a part of me is still hesitant, I am excited to join this vibrant and wonderfully heterogenous community. It is my hope that we can continue to challenge the monoracial view of Asian or Asian American identity, focus on the being rather than doing of identity, and be at peace with our constantly evolving identity.

#### 9. Conclusions

Asian American identity began against the backdrop of civil rights movement (Wei 1993). Creating a large tent was important, as it created a community where Asian Americans, who were often left out in racial and political discourses, could belong. However, this inevitably strengthened the idea of monoracialism, that there is one right way to be (or rather, perform) Asian. Through our work, we challenged this belief. We argue that Asian American identity is never fully made. It is an ever-changing, dynamic state that can and should be defined by each individual. We call Asian Americans to challenge the idea of having to fit into boxes, regardless of whether they are from our immediate cultural groups or mainstream society, and engage in the reinvention of our identity. Freire (2005) stated, "in contrast to other animals who are unfinished, but not historical, people know themselves to be unfinished; they are aware of their incompletion." Did our work in reflexivity allow us to become finished? No, in fact it served to highlight our incompleteness, but in that incompleteness, we recognize how monoracialism can be limiting and how we might work to transcend it.

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