"RECOGNITION" AS PEDAGOGY

Finding Asian American Identity in the Midwest

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Abstract. This essay explores my pedagogical and conceptual imperatives while teaching and updating an Asian American Studies minor in the Midwest and engaging with the tension of activism and disavowal of the Asian American racial experience. I propose a pedagogy of recognition as a generative model to discuss Asian American upbringings, tensions in our experiences of being Asian Americans, and as a curricular approach on a campus like Washington University in St. Louis (WashU). The central questions that inform the architecture of the essay are: How do we comprehend and situate the lack of recognition of histories of establishment that have been so central to Asian American scholarly academic frameworks? How are we selectively recognizing national histories of struggle, such that our younger counterparts disavow, even challenge them, as parts of their own legitimate spectrums of experiences? Further, how do we recognize the diversity that constitutes Asian America itself, and how can such a recognition shift the conversation about Asian American achievements as encoded in the narrative of the model minority? How can "recognition" be a foundational goal in Asian American Studies and a method of reckoning with difference in the 21st century?

Food critic, and Asian American writer, Monique Truong, at a talk at the Library of Congress in 2019 describes how encountering Asian American literature as a Yale undergraduate at the end of the 1980s, through 'a rotating roster of adjunct instructors," provided her with "their literal bodies—in addition to their bodies of work" as physical beacons of comradeship and pleasure of existence of a relatively unknown field, experience, and literature. Truong recalls opening an Asian American "book and seeing for the first time the body—the Asian American body. It means holding a mirror in my hands, when I have never seen my reflection before." Truong's visceral reaction is a social, personal, and political "recognition" facilitated in a disciplinary setting that is newly starting to cater to student interests in the post 1960s educational institution. This moment of existential Cartesian *cogito* that Truong experiences in the 1980s is the era of the establishment of ethnic studies departments, ergo Asian American studies around the U.S.

Truong's essay revitalizes the role that disciplines like Asian American studies (AAS), African American studies, Latinx studies, etc., played in facilitating recognition and pride in one's ethnic identity. In my recent Introduction to AAS class, I encountered this moment repeatedly with my students. Pleasure, surprise, relief of recognition, and validation played out every day. "Free therapy" and "never thought or never knew others were going through this as well" rolled out in the course evaluations. These moments of recognition led the students to acknowledge and interrogate how studying Asian American literature continues to affirm modes of living that are generally thought of as individual struggles. These personal, individual, social, and psychological forms of recognition are not novel in literary studies. Works like Alice Walker's "The Importance of Having Models" and James Baldwin's "If Black English is not English, I do not know what is," have been signposts in African American studies, and by that logic in ethnic studies providing a modicum of relatable frameworks for ethnic lives, creative pursuits, and emotional spectrums.

Erika Lee's essay, "Asian American Studies in the Midwest: New Questions, Approaches, and Communities" published in the *Journal of Asian American Studies* (*JAAS*) in October 2009 outlines AAS disciplinary "recognition" in the Midwest. Arising out of the Association for Asian American Studies panel on the state of AAS in the Midwest, Lee reflects on her career in the Department of History at the University of Minnesota, acknowledging that the Midwest was a starkly different scenario than her training in AAS on the West Coast. She asserts that the "invisibility" of Asian Americans in the Midwest makes it additionally difficult to establish a Midwestern ethic that divorces AAS from what Gary Okihiro had called "California's choking grip on the throats of our historical imagination." Her 2009 essay revolves around two pressing questions: "What does it mean to *do*

Asian American studies in the Midwest? What does it mean to *be* Asian American in the Midwest?" Like Lee, this is my first appointment in the Midwest, and my first appointment in the disciplinary field of Asian American studies (AAS), at Washington University in St. Louis (WashU). I was hired to direct and revitalize the small minor in Asian American studies housed in the program of American Cultural Studies (AMCS).

The 2009 *JAAS* panel energized efforts to identify a Midwestern AAS paradigm of recognition. Scholars like Pawan Dhingra, Huping Ling, and Monica M. Trieu have conducted extensive research in the Midwest, and specifically in St. Louis to establish the "roots" of Asian Americans in the Midwest. Fifteen years after Lee's assessment of the state of AAS in the Midwest and faced with the task of establishing an academic home for AAS at WashU, I see Truong's questions of recognition and Lee's challenges of practicing AAS in the Midwest coalesce as I navigate my classes and research at WashU. All my prior teaching experience had been at East Coast institutions with very low numbers of Asian American students who never questioned the validity of Asian American literary narratives. However, students in my first cohort of Introduction to AAS at WashU, struggled with the AAS academic narrative of struggle and disenfranchisement. Here, Asian Americans comprise a significant part of the student body and over 70 percent of students in my courses self-identify as having some kind of Asian heritage. The search for an identity and point of entry into AAS remains a persistent concern on this campus and frames my major questions this paper. I address two pressing issues: Why does "recognition" continue to be a critical framework for Asian American studies? How can this framework be a critical paradigm for courses and minors in Asian American studies in the Midwest?

St. Louis is one of the first cities to host both the World's Fair and the third Olympic Games in the same year, 1904. WashU is situated on the historical site of both events, with the Filipino village at the Fair continuing to be a site of much controversy. St. Louis also had a sizable Chinese population in St. Louis around the 1880s, who settled in Chinatown, which was titled Hop Alley. Gentrification later erased Hop Alley, displacing historic infrastructure in the city. WashU was later home to Japanese American students during the internment in the 1940s. St. Louis and WashU's histories are inextricably linked to the migration of Asian Americans to this part of the Midwest. This rich history of Asian American presence and settlement in St. Louis is not a history I had encountered in my career on the East Coast. Trieu calls this phenomenon the pervasive "invisibility" of Asian Americans in the Midwest, where Asian Americans are either constructed through the West Coast "me first" mentality, or the Midwestern colorblindness beyond the Black-white dichotomy.[1]

My colleague, Linling Gao-Miles, who established the Asian American studies minor at WashU in 2016, identifies this problematic of "recognition" on the Black/white racial spectrum among Asian Americans students on campus in the background of the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri, incident.[2] Overall, in the paper, I argue that a pedagogy of recognition is a generative model to deconstruct and disengage with discourses of dichotomized racial identification while also extricating Asian American identarian theories and pedagogies from its coastal overcompensation. I analyze student's disparate reactions of astonishment and rejection of Asian American histories of struggle to question gaps in our knowledge of Asian American education in the U.S. and its agenda of pervasive reinforcing of Asian American invisibility. As a pedagogy, "recognition" embraces the capaciousness of Asian American heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity, therefore generating a robust curricular approach in the Midwest, ergo on a campus like WashU.

"RECOGNITION" AS AFFECT IN THE CLASSROOM

Asian American studies (AAS) at WashU was established in 2016, nearly three decades after the University of Michigan launched the Midwest's first AAS minor in 1989. Like programs at Midwestern institutions, such as Northwestern University and Truman State University, WashU's AAS program emerged through student activism. Demands for an academic space for AAS started in the 2010s, leading to a townhall meeting with the dean of Arts & Sciences in 2011. Robin Hattori, a long term ally of AAS at WashU, and a current staff member at WashU's medical school explains that "a number of Asian students felt that the concerns and needs of Asian students were being overlooked despite the fact that there were a lot of Asian student groups, a growing number of international students coming from Asia, and noticeable interest in Asian culture from non-Asians." This controversial meeting was followed by years of student advocacy leading up to the 2014 Black Lives Matter Movement[3]. As Linling Gao-Miles details, the 2014 Ferguson uprising catalyzed momentum, culminating in the minor's launch in fall 2016.

Despite a rich history of AAS-related student groups and advocacy, reactions in my Introduction to AAS class were sharply divided. Some students were deeply moved by seeing themselves represented while others were skeptical. At the core of both responses was a confrontation with the Asian American self. This contrast raised key questions: What does it mean to recognize oneself through AAS? How do we come to know ourselves? We shape our identities through family, schools, literature, geography, and history. It's disheartening that

many Asian American students felt a sense of recognition only upon entering college—some as seniors. Many had internalized the idea that the history of railroad labor or racial exclusion wasn't relevant to them, shaped by upper-class white public-school environments that deemphasized marginalization.

How are these extreme reactions of astonishment to rejection symptomatic of systemic educational erasure and racial learning that systemically disenfranchises non-white/Black bodies? Successive generations of race scholars have theorized around this racial binary based exclusion of Asian Americans. Gary Okihiro in his 1994 book *Margins and Mainstreams*, questions this historicized dual race construct in the progressive tradition of American history as, "Is Yellow Black or White?" invoking James Loewen's terms surrounding Asian racialization as "near-whites" or "just like blacks." Three decades later, OiYan Poon's recent 2024 book *Asian American is Not a Color* urges readers to move beyond the colorblindness surrounding Asian Americans to confront real diversity, difference, and colorblindness that ensues in Asian American differences over issues like affirmative action. Gao-Miles identifies consciousness of this two-race construct in college student arguing that, "College students of various ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds have internalized and rarely problematize, even during social crisis, this false proposition of a prefixed and overdetermined racial binary power structure"[4]. At its core, the Asian American struggle is one for recognition—of our bodies, cultures, politics, and our place in the nation's history. Why do we observe a rising trend where younger Asian Americans are disavowing parts of their own past? How can we better recognize the internal diversity of Asian America and reshape the model minority myth? Most importantly, how can Asian American studies foster a deeper sense of recognition—especially in 2025, a time of growing national division?

ASTONISHMENT AND REJECTION: PROBLEMS OF RACE, SPACE, AND CONTEXT

My Introduction to AAS course foregrounds the study of history, diversity, and stereotypes in Asian America through literature and supporting secondary materials, like historical essays, documents, documentaries and movies. We study history through narratives, literature, and firsthand accounts, presenting Asian American history as lived and felt—populated by real people who immigrated to the U.S. and endured racialization, marginalization, and severe labor conditions. Pedagogically, my course is designed to inspire discovery of marginalized of Asian Americans histories, cultures, advocacy, complexities, and silences. I push students to interrogate stereotypes, racial rhetoric, and contradictions while

developing a zeal for social justice. The course concludes by urging students to design an achievable research project with a thesis statement that questions a silence, social action, behavioral pattern, or historical gap.

The reaction of "astonishment" from in response to Asian American histories is expected. K–12 education rarely includes Asian American histories beyond Angel Island and Japanese internment. There's little emphasis on the diversity of Asian American communities, the Chinese Exclusion Act, or Alien Land Laws. The long history of Asian American labor and activism—especially pre-1965—is almost entirely erased.

This curricular omission sustains the myth that Asian Americans played no role in nation-building. Students grow up unaware of the early contributions and struggles of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Indian laborers—who were integral to early U.S. infrastructure, such as mining, transcontinental railroads, agriculture, leather and garment industries, etc., where they faced indiscriminate racism and oppression.[5] Students never learn the full extent of these narratives, hence they grow up with a very removed and deracialized idea of Asian America. The dominant "model minority" myth furthers this erasure, framing post-1965 Asian American success as the only narrative worth knowing. So, the astonishment students express upon learning this history is valid and telling. It points to a deeper absence: the lack of recognition structures for Asian Americans. What does it say about society when seeing oneself in a classroom is such a rare, powerful event?

Rejection, on the other hand, appears in several forms. First, some students argue that Asian American struggles are not as severe as African American experiences. While this is true—no history rivals the brutality of slavery—this comparison often glosses over the exploitation, isolation, and abuse Asian immigrants endured as replacement labor after abolition. David L. Eng discusses the "interpellative structure" that drives the process of certification and credentialing students "not just as good citizens for the university, but as good citizens for—and ultimately as good custodians of—the nation." In this process, students are incentivized to learn "canonical works" to bind them epistemologically to Western knowledge and to "stitch them into the ideological quilt of the university."[6] With enough rounds of this interpellative process, certain ideas of race, class, gender, and truth are ironed out while others become universal. The students in my courses reflected this method of learning. The hypervisibility of African American narratives of struggle equates Asian contributions on a comparative scale, hence glossing over the contributions of Asians in the making of what is America today. Recognizing the systemic erasure of these histories requires unlearning dominant racial narratives.

Second, some reject the history as not "their own." They point to their diverse national backgrounds and argue that Asian America is not a unified identity. This is fair—Asia is not a monolith. However, understanding the shared history of Asian marginalization allows for a capacious comprehension of the necessity of the terminology of Asian Americanness as essential for survival, quite literal survival in the U.S. Scholars Rosalind Chou and Joe Feagin very powerfully attest that the terminology Asian American arises during the "yellow Power" civil rights movement in the 1960s, because "many of our first first-generation respondents never identified as 'Asian' or 'Asian American' until they were treated as 'racialized' 'others' during their early months in the U.S."[7]

Third, some students claim these past struggles don't reflect the current Asian American demographic. Today's post-1965 immigrants are often legal, transnational, and connected to their national cultures. Many don't identify as Asian Americans because they are not culturally or legally American. Moreover, socioeconomic privilege has created a desire to assimilate into whiteness. Being called "white" or "non-stereotypical" is sometimes perceived as a compliment. This reflects a broader issue: the myth of Asian American upward mobility masks continued marginalization and discourages critical reflection.

Fourth, many students internalize the belief that striving for Asianness is regressive. Dual identities—Asianness at home, whiteness outside—become a survival mechanism. Asian American success is often framed through white norms, where cultural difference is acceptable only as tokenism. These silences, these "minor feelings," as Cathy Park Hong writes, reveal a deeper alienation. This leads to the final form of rejection: the belief that Asian Americans have no collective narrative of struggle. This is not an individual or familial failure, but a systemic one—rooted in power, representation, and whose stories are legitimized.

This brings us to a broader question: How does upbringing shape recognition? Students raised in predominantly white environments often struggle with their Asian identity, sometimes rejecting it until college. Others raised in Asian American communities express ease and confidence in their identities, while still navigating predominantly white spaces. Those in the former group may reject the idea of Asian American marginalization, seeing it as irrelevant to their lives. Yet both experiences raise the same question: Are we still grappling with our place in the racial landscape of the U.S., or are we denying that this engagement even matters?

AN EXERCISE IN RELATIONALLY TEACHING ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin's 2008 study, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*, explores how Asian Americans internalize what they call the "White Racial Frame." This frame normalizes whiteness by caricaturing and alienating anything marked as racially or culturally "other." From racist cartoons and mocking language to the commodification of broken English, the frame upholds whiteness as the aspirational norm—anything else is inferior, incomplete, and in need of correction.

Thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon have described color as a physical and psychological burden—an unwanted part of oneself. Feagin and Chou bring this concept to life in Chapter 5 "The White Racial Frame" through interviews, including one with Lara, a Chinese American business owner who considers herself successful and untouched by racism. Yet over the course of the interview, several revealing patterns emerge:

1. Her intense involvement in school clubs and activities stemmed from a belief that hard work and conformity would lead to acceptance.
2. She acknowledges that this effort is, in part, a defense: "If nobody can say... that person's less smart... or nerdier than me, then what can they say negative about the race? It is a defense tactic."
3. Despite claiming no racist encounters, she admits to living on "red alert," constructing a résumé and persona designed to deflect prejudice.
4. Lara attributes her success to hard work rather than assimilation, but Feagin and Chou point out that her choices—such as hiring assimilated staff and obsessively maintaining her firm's image—suggest otherwise.
5. Reflecting on childhood, she recalls avoiding Asian peers, perfecting her English diction, and brushing off mockery of her appearance—acts of self-erasure dismissed as unimportant.

The study reveals how deeply the desire to be accepted within white society shapes "normal" behavior—at the cost of authentic identity and mental well-being. As Monique Truong notes, this recognition by the majority carries a

"pleasure" that feels freeing, even celebratory. But it raises a deeper question: What is the transformative potential of recognizing your place, positionality, priorities, and identity within the structures that shape you? What shifts when recognition comes not from external validation, but from within?

I usually assign Chou and Feagin's chapter to students in my Introduction to AAS course while reading Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* over several classes. I intentionally juxtapose a historical text with this more contemporary essay to bridge Bulosan's racialization of his protagonist Carlos with the racialization that Chou and Feagin elicit from their contemporary interviewees. Students are then tasked with conducting interviews with their family and friends over spring break with a set of four to five questions that they collaboratively brainstorm in class. I time this exercise around fall break so that students have an opportunity to see their family or a different group of friends so that they can approach this exercise as a friendly conversation rather than just a classroom exercise.

Student responses to this exercise were surprisingly validating and transformative for the class. Students reported that they say they could clearly see their parents or friends confirming to the model minority myth while also comprehending the underlying reasons for their beliefs. Friends and family who had resisted conversations about race in the past or had denied any racialized experiences opened up and had heartfelt conversations about issues they had ignored. The overall exercise led students to practice anti-racist strategies outside the classroom, practice interacting about race with non-specialized audiences, and assess impacts of race on their families and peers while reflexively comprehending their own experiences of racialization. This interview felt like a moment of recognition as students were able to connect their theoretical readings with their everyday lives.

THEORIZING RECOGNITION FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

Recognition is a social paradigm we experience daily. Many of us remember being bullied or excluded in school, prompting us to reject our languages, customs, or friendships. But recognition is also a theoretical concept, developed by thinkers from Kant to Hegel, Rousseau, Derrida, and Foucault, and extended by contemporary philosophers like Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth, and Nancy Fraser. Taylor emphasizes, "Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people, it is a vital human need" while "nonrecognition or misrecognition... can be a form of oppression."[8] Many twentieth- and twenty-first-century social movements—feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, Black Lives Matter, Stop Asian Hate, Me Too—are

fundamentally about restoring dignity and visibility through recognition. In "*Rethinking Recognition*," Nancy Fraser argues that claims for recognition now drive global social conflicts—from demands for sovereignty and multiculturalism to international human rights campaigns.[9] These efforts, she explains, aim to ensure both universal dignity and respect for cultural difference. Fraser links recognition to systemic equity by connecting it to *participatory parity* and *distributive justice*, reframing recognition as key to achieving broader goals of social justice and civil inclusion.

Asian American studies emerged from this same justice-oriented consciousness. Rooted in civil rights activism, the first AAS department at UC Berkeley galvanized student demands for recognition, including reparations for Japanese internment—granted nearly thirty years later. Japanese American advocacy extended post-9/11 to support Southeast Asians facing new discrimination. Globally, postcolonial thinkers like Fanon and Césaire also emphasized recognition—of colonial trauma, human dignity, and marginalized communities.

This theme is central to Asian American art and literature. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* demanded recognition for pan-Asian gender and identity struggles. Though initially controversial, the text has since shaped conversations about authenticity in Asian American life. Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* challenged harmful racial stereotypes by confronting the figure of the "Chinaman" as a reflection of American fear more than Chinese identity. Other works—Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, John Okada's *No-No Boy*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*—have continued this work of reclaiming complex, nuanced Asian American narratives. Contemporary authors like Amy Chua, with her "Tiger Mom" essays, and Ocean Vuong, writing on Vietnam War legacies, have expanded this conversation. Their works resonate deeply with students, who recognize their own upbringing, parents, and histories in these representations—validating childhood experiences that may once have felt harsh or isolating.

CONCLUSION

Asian American studies departments across the U.S. have long carried the work of recognition. Sucheng Chan, a pioneer in the field and key figure in establishing the first Department of Asian American Studies at Berkeley in 1969, wrote that the goal was to create spaces not just for studying canonical literature, but for accessing overlooked writings and producing new ones—especially by students. She emphasized that even nonprofessional writings from marginalized Asian Americans offer deep insight into their inner lives, emotions, and

struggles. These works, she argued, are "humanistic in the best sense" and vital to understanding Asian American social and cultural history.[10] Asian American studies was built to validate the lived experiences of the often overlooked and oppressed. Today, however, we face a troubling gap—students sometimes feel disconnected from the broader racial and justice-oriented conversations that the field emerged from.

So, what now? How can the paradigm of recognition guide how we see ourselves, others, and our collective place within race, justice, and nationhood? Recognition is more than a personal need—it's structural. It brings inclusion, civic visibility, and social validation. It helps groups organize, affirm their histories, and advocate for their rights. The absence of recognition leaves Asian Americans vulnerable—isolated by the model minority myth, detached from larger equity movements, and susceptible to the same systemic exclusions we've seen before. These tensions are central to Asian America.

Monique Truong writes, "Asian American bodies and spirits have found a way to defy, to deny, and to breach the barriers of this land." Let us carry that spirit forward. I close with a final question: What should an Asian American or ethnic studies curriculum ultimately provide? Beyond survival skills and cultural knowledge, it should offer recognition—for oneself and for others. This means cultivating historical understanding, critical self-awareness, and a sense of political and ethical agency—toward living meaningfully.

NOTES

1. Monica Mong Trieu, *Fighting Invisibility: Asian Americans in the Midwest* (Rutgers University Press, 2023).
2. Linling Gao-Miles, "Narrating Race and Identities from the Periphery: Diversity, Dilemma, and Discourses," in *The Crisis of Race in Higher Education: A Day of Discovery and Dialogue* (Emerald, 2016), 44.
3. I obtained information about the establishment of the AAS minor from a variety of sources, including conversations with colleagues and peers, email correspondences, and through Linling Gao-Miles's essay "Narrating Race and Identities from the Periphery." The details in this paragraph are from my email correspondences with Robin Hattori, longtime ally of AAS at WashU and member of the JACL chapter in St. Louis. Robin also sent me recollections from Rob Wild, associate vice chancellor for student affairs and dean of students, and Jen Smith, vice provost of educational initiatives. I detail the establishment of the AAS minor at WashU and my role in it since my appointment in 2023 in my upcoming paper "The Pleasures and Surprises of Establishing a Minor in Asian American Studies in the Midwest."
4. Gao-Miles, "Narrating Race and Identities from the Periphery," 47.

5. Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History Asian American*, Little, Brown and Company, 1998.
6. David Eng notes, "Under such a homogenizing imperative, increasingly heterogenous, "multicultural" student populations are encouraged to forget their particular material—political, economic, and cultural—histories by the attractive proposition of one all-purpose and unifying *cultural* umbrella dubbed the "Western canon." Hence what I note here is a problem of canon formation that underlies student rejection of their own narratives and beliefs. See David L. Eng, "Queer/Asian American/Canons," in *Teaching Asian America: Diversity and the Problem of Community*, ed. Lane Ryo Hirabayashi (Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).
7. Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin, *Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism* (Routledge, 2008), x.
8. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Edited by Amy Gutmann, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, 25-73.
9. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," *New Left Review* 3 (May/June 2000): 107.
10. Sucheng Chan, *In Defense of Asian American Studies: The Politics of Teaching and Program Building* (University of Illinois Press, 2005), 8.